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Research Paper

Access to Justice for Child Victims of Sexual Violence in Indonesia: A Sociolegal Analysis of Legal Assistance and Secondary Victimization

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child sexual violence remains a major public health, legal, and human rights concern. Secondary victimization may occur through repeated procedures, fragmented institutional responses, and insensitive interactions with the justice system. This study examined the role of legal assistance in facilitating access to justice and reducing the risk of secondary victimization among child victims of sexual violence in Batam, Indonesia.

Methods: An interpretivist, qualitative, socio-legal study using an explanatory case study design was conducted in Batam. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with professional stakeholders involved in child protection and legal assistance, as well as with family members of child victims, and were complemented by institutional records and relevant legal and policy documents. Data were analyzed thematically and interpreted using a socio-legal framework.

Results: Legal assistance facilitated procedural navigation, improved communication between families and justice institutions, and provided continuity of support throughout legal proceedings. Participants perceived legal assistance as reducing procedural uncertainty and the risk of repeated or unnecessary institutional encounters. However, limited interagency coordination, inadequate specialized human resources, and inconsistent communication remained barriers to effective assistance. An integrated legal assistance pathway was conceptually developed based on the findings.

Conclusion: Legal assistance plays an important role in facilitating access to justice and reducing the risk of secondary victimization. Integrated, trauma-informed collaboration among legal, medical, psychosocial, and child protection services is essential for continuous and child-sensitive support.

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Introduction

Sexual violence against children is a major public health, legal, and human rights issue with profound physical, psychological, and social consequences. Beyond the abuse itself, child victims frequently experience additional distress during interactions with criminal justice, healthcare, and social service institutions. These institutional responses may unintentionally inflict further psychological harm, reducing victims' willingness to participate in judicial proceedings and limiting effective access to justice [1, 2].

Secondary victimization refers to harm caused by institutional responses rather than the criminal act itself. Repeated interviews, fragmented procedures, inadequate communication, and limited psychological support may exacerbate trauma and undermine confidence in the justice system[1]. Preventing secondary victimization has therefore become a key objective of victim-centered criminal justice, particularly in cases involving child victims of sexual violence.

Access to justice extends beyond formal access to courts, ensuring that victims can effectively exercise their rights throughout the legal process [3, 4]. Victim-centered justice promotes dignity, meaningful participation, protection from further harm, and recognition of victims' experiences during judicial proceedings [5, 6]. These principles are particularly important for children, whose developmental vulnerability requires institutional responses that prevent retraumatization while safeguarding their legal rights.

Legal assistance is a key mechanism for improving access to justice for child victims of sexual violence. In addition to legal representation, it facilitates communication with justice institutions, provides procedural guidance, and supports victims throughout criminal proceedings. Previous studies have shown that legal assistance reduces secondary victimization and strengthens victims' confidence in the justice system [1, 2, 7].

Despite strengthened legal protection for child victims in Indonesia, empirical evidence on how legal assistance prevents secondary victimization remains limited. Previous studies have focused primarily on legal frameworks and victim protection policies rather than on institutional practices during judicial proceedings [3, 4, 8]. Therefore, this study explored the role of legal assistance in reducing the risk of secondary victimization and strengthening access to justice for child victims of sexual violence in Batam, Indonesia.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm using a qualitative socio-legal approach with an explanatory case study design to examine the role of legal assistance in facilitating access to justice and reducing the risk of secondary victimization among child victims of sexual violence. The socio-legal approach was used to examine the relationship between applicable legal norms and their implementation in institutional practice, while the criminological perspective was used to analyze victimization within the criminal justice process.

The study focused primarily on the practices of institutions and professionals involved in the protection and legal assistance of child victims of sexual violence, complemented by perspectives from family members of child victims who had experience with the assistance process. This approach enabled the study to examine both institutional practices and the experiences of those interacting with the legal and protection systems, without directly interviewing child victims.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Batam, Indonesia, with a particular focus on the services provided through the Integrated Service Center for the Empowerment of Women and Children (UPTD PPA) of Batam City. Batam was selected as the study setting because UPTD PPA provides integrated protection and assistance services for women and children and coordinates with other relevant institutions, including law enforcement agencies, health services, psychological services, social workers, and legal assistance providers.

The setting provided an appropriate context for examining how legal assistance is implemented in practice, how inter-institutional coordination is conducted, and how these processes may influence access to justice and the risk of secondary victimization among child victims of sexual violence.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct knowledge of or experience with the legal assistance and protection processes provided to child victims of sexual violence. The participants included professionals involved in providing protection and assistance services through UPTD PPA Kota Batam and family members of child victims who had experience with the reporting and legal assistance process. These participants were

considered appropriate sources because they had direct knowledge of or experience with the institutional processes surrounding the protection and legal handling of cases of sexual violence against children.

The study did not involve direct interviews with child victims. This decision was made to minimize the potential risk of psychological distress associated with recounting traumatic experiences. Information concerning the experiences and conditions of child victims was therefore obtained through family members, professional informants, institutional records, and relevant documentation.

Interviews were conducted by the first author (Jasa Nita Listiana), a medical doctor and doctoral researcher with training in qualitative interviewing and forensic medicine. No prior professional or personal relationship existed between the researcher and the participants. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the data collection and interpretation processes to identify potential researcher influence and enhance the credibility of the findings.

Some family members or potential participants declined to participate because of concerns regarding psychological distress, discomfort with recalling the events, or the potential emotional consequences of discussing the cases. Their decisions were respected, and participation was entirely voluntary. No participant was pressured to participate or to provide information that they considered distressing.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, document review, and analysis of institutional case records. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected professional informants involved in the provision of protection and assistance services and with family members of child victims who had direct experience with the reporting and legal assistance process. The interviews explored participants' experiences and perceptions regarding access to legal assistance, institutional procedures, interagency coordination, barriers encountered during the legal process, and measures to reduce the risk of secondary victimization.

The interviewer used a semi-structured interview guide developed based on the research objectives. The interview guide covered access to legal assistance, institutional procedures for reporting and case handling, interagency coordination, barriers encountered during the legal process, and measures to reduce the risk of secondary victimization. Participants were also encouraged to elaborate on relevant experiences and issues that emerged during the interviews.

Interviews were conducted in Indonesian in a private setting that allowed participants to provide information confidentially and without unnecessary interruption. Interviews were documented through field notes and, where consent was provided, audio recording. The collected interview data were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Document review was conducted to complement the interview data and strengthen the socio-legal analysis. The documents analyzed comprised four categories: (1) UPTD PPA Kota Batam case records for 2023–2025, including case numbers and case characteristics; (2) institutional service and assistance records documenting reporting, initial assessment, referral, medical and psychological assistance, legal assistance, and follow-up services; (3) institutional standard operating procedures (SOPs) and service-related documentation concerning the handling and protection of child victims; and (4) relevant Indonesian laws, regulations, and policy documents governing child protection, sexual violence, legal assistance, and victim protection. These documents were reviewed systematically to identify the procedures implemented by UPTD PPA, the forms of assistance provided, referral and coordination mechanisms, and potential gaps between the applicable legal framework and institutional practice.

Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed iteratively through initial coding, categorization of related codes, and development and refinement of themes. Data from interviews, institutional records, and documentary materials were compared to strengthen the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

Data collection continued until sufficient information had been obtained to address the research objectives and no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Particular attention was given to minimizing retraumatization and protecting the confidentiality of information concerning child victims. Identifying information was excluded from the research dataset and from the presentation of findings.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to access to justice, legal assistance, institutional coordination, and secondary victimization. The analysis was conducted iteratively through several stages. First, interview transcripts and field notes were reviewed repeatedly to obtain an overall understanding of the data. Second, relevant statements and meaningful

segments of the data were identified and assigned initial codes. Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories and potential themes. The emerging themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure their consistency with the research questions and the underlying data.

Thematic analysis was complemented by a socio-legal analysis of institutional practices and relevant legal documents. The empirical findings were compared with the applicable legal and policy framework governing the protection of children and the provision of legal assistance to victims of sexual violence. This comparison was used to identify areas of alignment, gaps, and practical challenges between normative legal provisions and their implementation in institutional practice.

The analysis also examined the potential mechanisms through which legal assistance may facilitate access to justice and reduce the risk of secondary victimization. Particular attention was given to participants' experiences with reporting procedures, police examinations, medical and psychological services, inter-agency coordination, communication with victims and families, and continuity of assistance throughout the legal process.

Data obtained from interviews, institutional records, and document review were triangulated to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Where differences or inconsistencies emerged between sources, these were examined in relation to the case context and the respective informants' perspectives, rather than being automatically treated as contradictory evidence. The final themes were organized according to the study objectives and used to develop an integrated interpretation of legal assistance and access to justice for child victims of sexual violence in Batam.

Results

Thematic analysis identified three interrelated themes describing the role of legal assistance for child victims of sexual violence in Batam: (1) legal assistance as a procedural mediation mechanism, (2) legal assistance in preventing secondary victimization, and (3) structural barriers affecting its effectiveness. Together, these themes demonstrate how legal assistance strengthens victims' access to justice while highlighting institutional challenges that continue to hinder victim protection.

Contextual Characteristics of Child Sexual Violence Cases in Batam

Document analysis included UPTD PPA Batam case records for 2023–2025, relevant Indonesian legislation governing child protection and sexual violence, applicable standard operating procedures, and institutional documents describing child protection and legal assistance services. The UPTD PPA records were examined to characterize the local case context, while legislation, SOPs, and institutional documents were reviewed to compare formal legal and institutional procedures with participants' practices.

Analysis of UPTD PPA records showed an increase in reported cases of violence against women and children in Batam, from 132 cases in 2023 to 266 cases in 2024 and 338 cases in 2025. Children accounted for approximately 84% of the cases handled during the study period. Sexual violence represented the predominant form of violence reported among the cases involving children, with reported cases including sexual abuse, sexual intercourse involving children, sexual exploitation, and other forms of sexual offenses.

Legal Assistance as a Procedural Mediation Mechanism

Participants consistently described legal assistance as facilitating navigation of procedures throughout criminal proceedings. Legal assistants explained legal procedures, accompanied victims during administrative and judicial processes, and coordinated communication between victims, families, and relevant institutions.

Participants reported that legal assistance improved understanding of procedural requirements, reduced uncertainty, and minimized confusion during investigations and court proceedings. By reducing information asymmetry between victims and institutions, legal assistance enabled victims and their families to participate more confidently throughout the justice process.

Legal Assistance in Reducing the Risk of Secondary Victimization

Participants identified repeated interviews, multiple institutional encounters, and procedural uncertainty as the main sources of secondary victimization. Legal assistance mitigated these risks by preparing victims for each procedural stage, reducing unnecessary interactions with institutions, and providing continuous guidance throughout judicial proceedings. Participants also emphasized that sustained communication with victims and their families reduced anxiety and encouraged continued participation in legal processes despite their psychological burden.

Structural Barriers Affecting the Effectiveness of

Legal Assistance

Despite its perceived benefits, participants identified several barriers limiting the effectiveness of legal assistance, including inadequate interagency coordination, limited specialized human resources, and insufficient public awareness of available legal services.

Participants noted inconsistent communication among the institutions involved in child protection, which occasionally delayed multidisciplinary responses. Limited public awareness further restricted early access to legal assistance, particularly during case reporting.

Overall, participants considered institutional capacity, multidisciplinary coordination, and specialized resources essential for effective legal assistance and reducing the risk of secondary victimization.

Development of an Integrated Legal Assistance Pathway to Reduce the Risk of Secondary Victimization

Based on the findings, this study developed an integrated legal assistance pathway to strengthen access to justice and prevent secondary victimization among child victims of sexual violence (Figure 1). The model addresses fragmented institutional responses by integrating early identification, coordinated case management, multidisciplinary intervention, continuous legal assistance, and systematic monitoring.

The pathway begins with case reporting and initial assessment, followed by coordinated case management tailored to victims' needs. Three integrated service components are included: (1) medical and psychological services, (2) legal assistance, and (3) shelter and rehabilitation services. Legal assistance functions as the central mechanism for providing legal information, accompanying victims throughout judicial proceedings, and facilitating communication among victims, families, and justice institutions.

Cross-sectoral coordination among law enforcement agencies, health services, educational institutions, social services, child protection agencies, psychologists, prosecutors, and legal aid providers is incorporated to reduce repetitive procedures and ensure child-sensitive, victim-centered services.

The pathway concludes with monitoring, evaluation, and case closure to ensure continuity of care and assess intervention outcomes. Overall, the model demonstrates how integrated legal assistance can strengthen access to justice and reduce secondary victimization through coordinated, multidisciplinary services.

Discussion

This study indicates that legal assistance plays an important role in reducing the risk of secondary victimization among child victims of sexual violence by facilitating procedural navigation, strengthening institutional communication, and providing continuous support throughout judicial proceedings. Beyond legal representation, legal assistance enables victims and their families to understand legal procedures, communicate effectively with relevant institutions, and actively participate in the justice process. Consequently, legal assistance protects victims' rights while reducing the psychological burden of institutional interactions.

These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that secondary victimization often results from institutional responses rather than the criminal act itself. Repeated interviews, fragmented legal procedures, inadequate coordination, and insensitive treatment may intensify psychological distress during criminal proceedings [1, 2]. Recent evidence similarly identifies repeated examinations, prolonged legal processes, victim-blaming attitudes, fragmented services, and limited trauma-informed practices as major contributors to secondary victimization among child victims[9]. Together, these findings highlight the importance of coordinated institutional responses that minimize unnecessary procedural exposure while protecting children's psychological well-being and dignity.

Legal assistance also strengthens victim-centered justice. Ramadianto et al. emphasized that criminal justice systems should ensure meaningful victim participation while protecting victims' rights and dignity [3, 4]. Consistent with this principle, participants described legal assistance as improving procedural understanding, facilitating communication with justice institutions, and providing continuous guidance throughout legal proceedings. These findings suggest that legal assistance operationalizes victim-centered justice by promoting meaningful participation without increasing procedural burden.

The findings further reinforce the concept of access to justice, which extends beyond formal access to courts to include effective and equitable legal protection [5–7]. Cappelletti and Garth argued that justice systems must enable individuals to exercise their legal rights in practice rather than merely recognize them in legislation 5. Likewise, the United Nations Development Program and Indonesia's

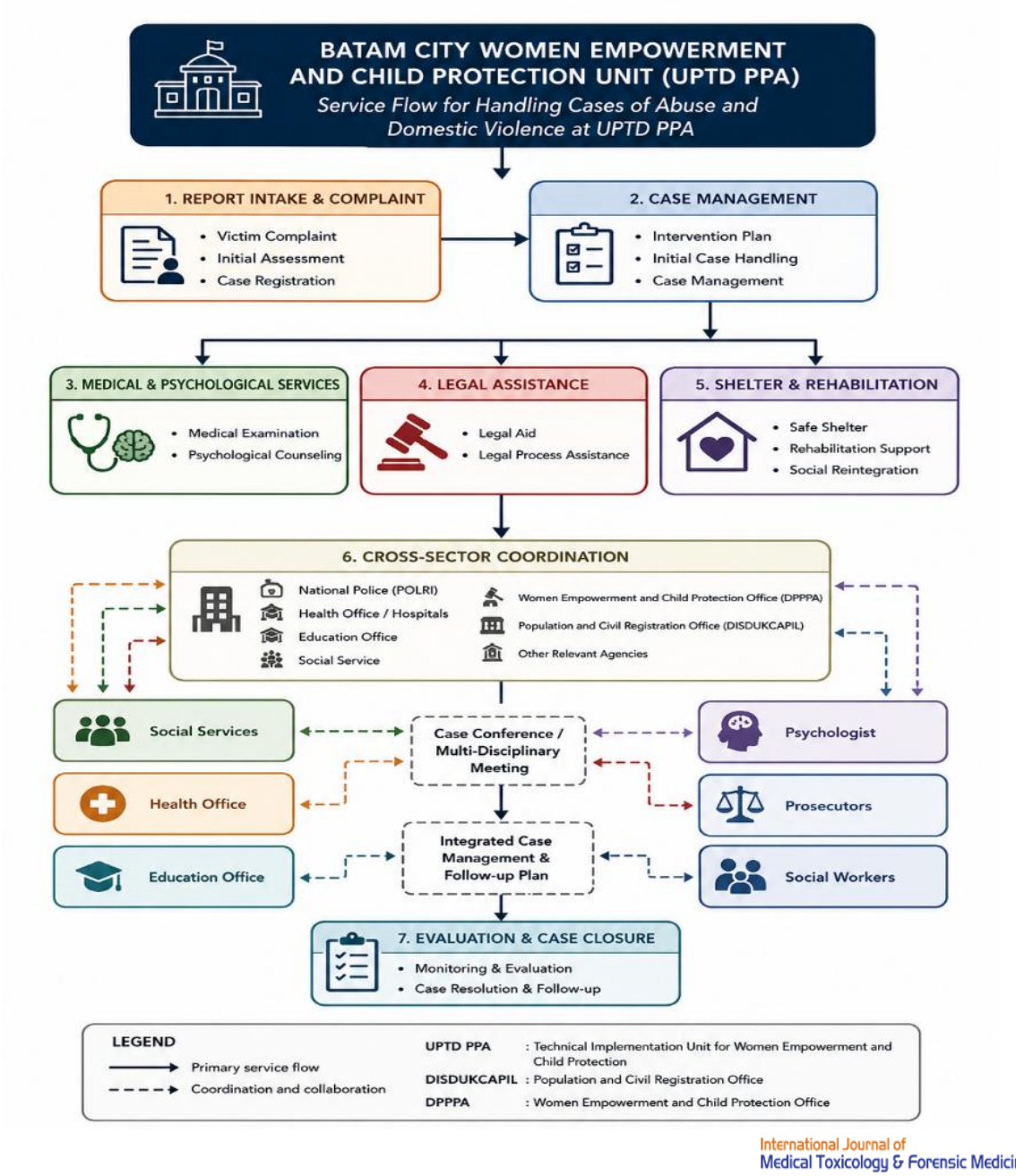


Figure 1. Proposed integrated legal assistance model to reduce the risk of secondary victimization among child victims of sexual violence.

National Strategy on Access to Justice emphasize accessible, coordinated, and responsive justice services for vulnerable populations [6, 7]. The present findings support these principles by demonstrating that legal assistance bridges communication between victims and institutions, thereby improving procedural accessibility and reducing institutional barriers.

Consistent with Apriyani et al., legal assistance enhances children's access to justice by strengthening legal representation and institutional protection[8]. Recent studies further indicate that trauma-informed justice integrates legal protection with psychological support, child-sensitive communication, and multidisciplinary collaboration to reduce retraumatization and improve victims' confidence in legal processes[10]. These findings support integrating legal assistance within trauma-informed justice systems rather than limiting its role to procedural representation.

From a practical perspective, strengthening collaboration among legal institutions, forensic medical services, psychologists, social workers, and child protection agencies is essential. Standardized referral systems, integrated case management, continuous professional training, and trauma-informed practices should be prioritized to improve service quality and

reduce the risk of secondary victimization. Multidisciplinary approaches have been shown to enhance institutional coordination, increase victims' trust in legal processes, and reduce system-induced trauma among vulnerable children [10, 11].

This study has several limitations. As a qualitative case study conducted in Batam, the findings reflect a specific institutional context and the perspectives of institutional stakeholders rather than child victims, considering ethical concerns regarding retraumatization. Nevertheless, the study provides empirical evidence supporting the role of legal assistance in preventing secondary victimization and strengthening access to justice for child victims of sexual violence in Indonesia. Future multicenter and mixed-methods studies are recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of legal assistance across different institutional settings.

Conclusion

This study indicates that legal assistance plays an important role in improving access to justice and reducing the risk of secondary victimization among child victims of sexual violence. Effective legal assistance requires coordinated collaboration among legal, medical, psychosocial, and child protection services. Based on the findings, an integrated victim-centered service pathway was developed to improve case management within the UPTD PPA Batam system through early assessment, multidisciplinary coordination, continuous legal and psychosocial support, and systematic evaluation.

This framework offers a practical model for strengthening institutional responses to child sexual violence and may inform the development of coordinated child protection systems in Indonesia.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine, Hasanuddin University (Komite Etik Penelitian Kesehatan Fakultas Kedokteran Universitas Hasanuddin), with approval number UH24010023, dated 13 February 2026. Only adult participants were involved in the study; no child participants were interviewed. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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