

The Hidden Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Insights from Indonesia for ASEAN Child Protection

Background

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) continues to pose a major child protection, public health, and social welfare challenge across the ASEAN region. Over the past decade, however, ASEAN has demonstrated strong regional leadership in responding to this challenge through an increasingly coordinated child protection agenda. The ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children (RPA on EVAC), the Declaration on the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN, and the ASEAN Guidelines for the Provision of Protective and Support Services for All Child Victims of Trafficking, Child Abuse, Exploitation and Violence collectively reflect ASEAN's commitment to strengthening prevention, protection, justice, and recovery for children affected by violence (ASEAN, 2015, 2019, 2023).

Taken together, these regional initiatives represent more than a series of policy commitments. They reflect an important shift from fragmented institutional responses towards integrated, multisectoral systems that recognise the importance of child-friendly justice, psychosocial recovery, family support, coordinated case management, and collaboration across health, education, social welfare, and justice sectors (ASEAN, 2023). In doing so, ASEAN has established an increasingly comprehensive regional architecture that places the wellbeing and recovery of child victims at the centre of child protection efforts.

Yet one important question remains largely unexplored: what happens to children who are never identified by child protection systems? Research increasingly recognises that disclosure of childhood sexual abuse is rarely a single event; rather, it is an ongoing and often lifelong process

shaped by psychological, relational, and socio-cultural factors (McGill & McElvaney, 2022; McElvaney, 2015). For many survivors, disclosure is delayed for years or even decades, with first disclosure occurring only in adulthood. Rather than seeking help specifically because of childhood sexual abuse, many initially present to services with depression, anxiety, interpersonal difficulties, parenting challenges, or other psychosocial concerns, while the history of childhood sexual abuse emerges only later through assessment and therapeutic engagement (McGill & McElvaney, 2022). Consequently, a substantial group of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (ASCSA) remain outside formal child protection responses throughout childhood despite continuing to live with the long-term consequences of abuse.

Indonesia offers important insights into this overlooked population. Similar to many countries in the region, childhood sexual abuse remains substantially underreported, while disclosure is often constrained by stigma, unequal power relations, family dynamics, fear of negative consequences, and broader socio-cultural barriers (Wismayanti et al., 2019). Drawing on qualitative evidence from the author's doctoral research (Hidayati, 2026), this editorial focuses on a subgroup of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse whose experiences remained undisclosed throughout childhood and who therefore never entered formal child protection systems. We refer to this subgroup as hidden survivors. Their experiences do not suggest shortcomings in ASEAN's child protection agenda. Rather, they invite reflection on an important question for the next stage of regional child protection: how can existing systems better respond to survivors whose first meaningful contact with formal support occurs only after childhood has ended? Recognising this overlooked population provides an opportunity to extend ASEAN's already substantial achievements by strengthening continuity between child protection, adult mental health, social welfare, and social work systems.

2. What the Indonesian Evidence Adds

The policy and legal analyses presented by Wismayanti et al. (2019) have been instrumental in advancing Indonesia's response to childhood sexual abuse (CSA). Their review highlighted important progress in legislative reform, multisectoral policy development, and growing recognition of CSA as a child protection issue, while also identifying continuing challenges in implementation, institutional coordination, and service delivery. These analyses have substantially strengthened understanding of how child protection systems should respond when children affected by sexual abuse become visible to services.

The qualitative evidence presented in this editorial extends that discussion by focusing on a group of survivors who never became visible to those systems. Drawing on the author's doctoral research, which explored the life trajectories of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse through life-history interviews and triangulation with significant persons, a consistent pattern emerged. Across all participants, childhood sexual abuse remained undisclosed throughout childhood. Consequently, none entered formal child protection systems or received the protective, psychosocial, and recovery services intended for children affected by sexual abuse (Hidayati, 2026).

Importantly, the study also showed that survivors' pathways into formal support systems differed markedly from the assumptions that commonly underpin child protection responses. Participants did not seek help because they wished to disclose childhood sexual abuse. Rather, they sought assistance in adulthood for depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, relationship difficulties, parenting challenges, emotional distress, and other psychosocial concerns that had become increasingly difficult to manage. Only later, through reflection on their life experiences, did childhood sexual abuse begin to emerge as an important context for understanding these

difficulties (Hidayati, 2026). These trajectories illustrate that the consequences of childhood sexual abuse continue to unfold across the life course, even when the abuse itself remained hidden throughout childhood.

The Indonesian evidence therefore adds a perspective that has received limited attention within current child protection discourse. Rather than focusing on how child protection systems respond to children who are identified, it draws attention to hidden survivors, adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse whose experiences remained undisclosed during childhood and who therefore never entered formal protection systems. Their trajectories should not be interpreted as evidence that child protection systems have failed. Instead, they demonstrate that child protection systems inevitably operate within the temporal boundaries of childhood. When disclosure does not occur during that period, survivors' first opportunities for support are often found within adult mental health, social welfare, family, and community services.

Viewed alongside the policy analysis of Wismayanti et al. (2019), the Indonesian evidence contributes an additional dimension to current regional discussions. If previous scholarship has helped explain how child protection systems can be strengthened, the experiences documented in Hidayati (2026) invite a complementary question for ASEAN: how can existing child protection commitments be better connected with adult mental health, social welfare, and social work systems so that survivors who remained unseen as children are not left unsupported as adults?

3. Looking Ahead: Extending the Promise of ASEAN Child Protection

The experiences of hidden survivors should not be interpreted as exposing weaknesses in ASEAN's child protection agenda. Rather, they demonstrate the strength of a regional architecture that is now well positioned to evolve in response to new evidence. ASEAN has established an increasingly comprehensive child protection framework that integrates prevention, protection,

justice, recovery, and multisectoral collaboration. The Indonesian evidence presented in this editorial does not challenge these achievements; instead, it suggests that they can be extended to reach a population that has remained largely outside existing policy discussions.

One important implication concerns how child protection systems understand visibility. Existing frameworks are necessarily designed to respond to children who become known to protection services while they are still children. Yet the experiences of hidden survivors remind us that not every child who experiences sexual abuse becomes visible during childhood. For these individuals, the absence of disclosure should not be interpreted as the absence of need. Recognising hidden survivors therefore expands, not redefines the scope of child protection by acknowledging that opportunities for support may first arise long after childhood has ended.

The Indonesian evidence also highlights the importance of continuity across service systems. For many survivors, the first meaningful opportunity for support occurs through adult mental health, social welfare, family, or community services rather than through child protection. This suggests that child protection should not be viewed as a time-limited intervention confined to childhood, but as part of a broader continuum of care that recognises how the consequences of childhood sexual abuse may unfold across the life course. Strengthening connections between child protection and adult-oriented services may therefore represent one of the next important directions for regional policy development.

Within this continuum, social work occupies a particularly important position. As a profession that works across children, families, communities, mental health, and adult wellbeing, social work is uniquely placed to bridge services that have traditionally operated within separate institutional boundaries. Trauma-informed social work practice can help connect survivors with appropriate

support regardless of when disclosure occurs, reinforcing continuity rather than fragmentation across systems.

Ultimately, the experiences of hidden survivors invite ASEAN to consider not only how children are protected, but also how protection can continue when childhood has passed without disclosure. ASEAN has already demonstrated regional leadership in strengthening child protection. The next opportunity lies in ensuring that this strong foundation continues to evolve so that those who remained invisible as children are no longer invisible when they seek support as adults.

Dr. Nurul Eka Hidayati, M.Si
Secretary General
Indonesian Social Work Consortium

ORCID-ID
0009-0004-4784-7089

SCOPUS ID
60512050400

References

- Association of Southeast Asian Nations. (2015). *ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children (RPA on EVAC) 2016–2025*. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Regional-Plan-of-Action-on-the-Elimination-of-Violence-against-Children-RPA-on-EVAC-2016-in-collaboration-with-SOMSWD-ENG.pdf>
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations. (2019). *Declaration on the Protection of Children from All Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN*. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/3-Declaration-on-the-Protection-of-Children-from-all-Forms-of-Online-Exploitation-and-Abuse-in-ASEAN.pdf>
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations. (2023). *ASEAN Guidelines for the Provision of Protective and Support Services for All Child Victims of Trafficking, Child Abuse, Exploitation and Violence*. <https://acwc.asean.org/resources/publications/asean-guidelines-for-provision-of-protective-and-support-services-for-all-child-victims-and-children-in-contact-with-the-law-as-a-result-of-online-child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation>

- Hidayati, N. E. (2026). *Adult life-course trajectories of survivors of childhood sexual abuse: A qualitative study* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- McGill, A., & McElvaney, R. (2022). *Adult disclosure of child sexual abuse: A literature review*. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 31(6), 653–676. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221088278>
- Wismayanti, Y. F., O’Leary, P., Tilbury, C., & Tjoe, Y. (2019). Child sexual abuse in Indonesia: A systematic review of literature, law and policy. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 95, 104034. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104034>