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PSYCHOSOCIAL COUNSELING FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN PALANGKA RAYA

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Abstract

This community-service study examines the role of psychosocial counseling in supporting the psychological and social recovery of women involved in commercial sex work (CSW) linked to human trafficking in Indonesia. Using a participatory and trauma-informed design, trained counselors implemented a needs-based program integrating individual trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, brief psychosocial stabilization, coping-skills training, and rights-literacy awareness, accompanied by referrals to legal, health, and social-protection services. Participants were identified through partner coordination and screened for psychosocial needs, while outcomes were monitored through session notes, pre–post brief instruments, satisfaction evaluations, and follow-up activities. A case subject, a widowed single mother who entered CSW due to post-divorce economic pressure and limited social support, illustrates the structural drivers of vulnerability, including poverty, social isolation, and informal recruitment, as well as multilayered harms such as shame, guilt, anxiety, emotional suppression, and somatic complaints. The findings indicate that counseling fostered empathetic therapeutic relationships, emotional validation, psychoeducation, and practical coping techniques, resulting in reduced emotional suppression, greater openness, improved coping capacity, emerging hope, and initial planning toward safer livelihoods. However, the findings also show that trauma-informed psychosocial

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counseling, while contributing meaningful short-term psychosocial gains, is insufficient as a standalone intervention. Durable recovery requires integrated responses that address structural determinants, including economic alternatives, confidential welfare access, and coordinated multi-sector referrals. This study contributes to victim recovery and community-based psychosocial intervention literature by highlighting the importance of embedding counseling within gender-sensitive, trauma-oriented service models. Larger-sample evaluations using standardized measures and longer follow-up are needed to assess the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of combined psychosocial and structural interventions.

Keywords: Psychosocial Counseling; Human Trafficking; Commercial Sex Work; Victim Recovery; Trauma-Informed Intervention

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking remains a significant social and humanitarian issue in Indonesia, demonstrating a dynamic trend that is not only criminal but also structural. One form of exploitation frequently identified in this practice is sexual exploitation through commercial sex workers (CSWs) or *Pekerja Seks Komersial* (PSK) (Dalimoenthe, 2018). In this context, human trafficking involves more than just the physical movement of victims; it also involves mechanisms of coercion, deception, and control that leave victims vulnerable to the loss of their freedom of choice. This situation demands a multidisciplinary study that combines legal, social, and mental health perspectives to holistically understand the complexity of the phenomenon.

Commercial sex workers are defined as individuals who provide sexual services to others for the purpose of obtaining compensation in the form of money or other economic benefits (Aji et al., 2024). While this definition reflects the economic aspect, the reality on the ground demonstrates heterogeneity in experiences: some sex workers may work voluntarily, while many others are forced or manipulated. Populations recruited or forced into sexual exploitation networks generally come from vulnerable social and economic groups, making structural factors an important parameter in analyzing their involvement in the practice.

Push factors often associated with individuals entering sex work include economic instability, limited access to education, social pressure, and manipulation by certain parties. This combination of individual, family, and community factors creates a vulnerable pathway that facilitates recruitment and exploitation. Thus, portraying sex workers as fully autonomous

actors can obscure the role of structural factors and agents of exploitation that facilitate human trafficking.

The impact of human trafficking on victims of commercial sex work is multidimensional, with complex and long-lasting psychological consequences. Victims often experience symptoms of trauma, anxiety, depression, guilt, and social stigma, complicating social reintegration. Pressure and discrimination from the social environment exacerbate victims' mental health, hinder their access to health services, and perpetuate the cycle of vulnerability. Research shows that commercial sex workers involved in violence or coercion have high levels of psychological vulnerability, requiring specific and sustained intervention responses (Pujhana & Tobing, 2021).

Psychosocial counseling has emerged as a relevant intervention in the recovery efforts of human trafficking victims, including sex workers. This approach not only targets reducing psychological symptoms but also aims to rebuild a sense of security, strengthen self-esteem, and improve victims' social adaptation and daily functioning (Janah, 2018). Psychosocial counseling services provide a safe space for victims to disclose traumatic experiences, process the emotional impact, and acquire coping strategies and social skills necessary for reintegration. Therefore, evaluating the role and effectiveness of psychosocial counseling is crucial for designing interventions that are responsive to victims' needs.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that psychosocial counseling is crucial for the recovery of human trafficking victims, both in terms of psychological trauma and social reintegration. Research by Syam (2025) illustrates that human trafficking survivors experience severe trauma, feelings of depression, and social withdrawal. Therefore, counseling and psychosocial support services in safe houses are key factors in restoring their sense of security and self-esteem and improving their quality of life post-trauma. A study by Subardhini et al. (2025) found that victims experience PTSD, depression, and social stigma, while multidimensional psychosocial counseling interventions (psychological, social, and spiritual) can reduce symptoms of distress and improve social adaptation. Hasibuan (2021) emphasized that psychosocial counseling significantly contributes to positive attitudinal changes, improved coping, and reduced psychological disorders in female trafficking victims, particularly through humanistic and cognitive-behavioral approaches.

Vidhya (2024) research on psychosocial rehabilitation in Semarang showed that individual and group counseling helped three female trafficking victims experience positive

behavioral changes, increased self-confidence, and reduced trauma symptoms. Azky (2019) in his research on the problems and psychosocial rehabilitation of child trafficking victims emphasized the importance of trauma-informed care-based psychosocial counseling to restore children's self-confidence, sense of security, and social skills so they can return to school and interact with their peers. Meanwhile, Ashofa (2019) showed that eclectic counseling (behavioral and humanistic) combined with social rehabilitation activities at the center was able to reduce anxiety, improve social relationships, and build hope for the future in victims. Thus, these studies collectively confirm that structured, trauma-informed, and ongoing psychosocial counseling is a vital component in the psychological and social recovery of human trafficking victims.

Based on the complexity of the phenomenon and the need for intervention, this article aims to analyze the role of psychosocial counseling in supporting the psychological and social recovery process of human trafficking victims, using a case study of commercial sex workers. This study is expected to provide empirical evidence regarding intervention mechanisms, supporting and inhibiting factors for recovery, as well as recommendations for more integrated service policies and practices. The findings of this service are expected to contribute to the development of a gender-sensitive, trauma-oriented service model that considers the structural context influencing victims' vulnerability.

METHODS

This community service activity uses a participatory and trauma-informed approach in the form of a psychosocial counseling program for victims or potential victims of human trafficking. The program is designed as a needs-based intervention, combining individual sessions and coping skills training. The community service providers are trained counselors (Khasanah et al., 2024). The program is implemented to ensure referrals for legal, health, and social protection services.

Implementation begins with a needs assessment and participant identification through partner coordination, using trauma and psychosocial needs screening instruments. Interventions include: (a) individual counseling sessions based on trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy and a brief psychosocial approach for emotional stabilization; and (b) awareness-raising on rights literacy to enhance self-protection and economic independence.

Each session is designed with gender- and culturally sensitive materials and utilizes simple tools such as worksheets, modules, and reference guides.

Monitoring was conducted periodically through session notes, participant satisfaction evaluation sheets, and outcome measurements using brief instruments at pre- and post-intervention levels, as well as follow-up. Evaluations included (a) process aspects, namely attendance and discipline in the counseling implementation process; (b) psychosocial outcomes, namely reduced traumatic symptoms, increased coping skills, and social support; and (c) short-term impacts, namely access to referral services and increased independence (Zunaidi, 2024).

RESULTS

A Glance at Human Trafficking Victims in Commercial Sex Worker Cases

The findings of the community service indicate that the subject's involvement in commercial sex work stemmed from post-divorce economic pressures. As a widow with a five-year-old child and no family support, the subject faced pressing basic needs (food, shelter, and education) with very limited financial resources. This economic vulnerability was not merely a temporary condition, but rather a structural situation that reduced the subject's ability to access formal employment or adequate social assistance. In this context, commercial sex practice emerged as a pragmatic choice chosen to fill the gap in living needs, not simply a moral decision or personal desire (Amiroh, 2025).

Interview data revealed that the subjects' entry into the practice was heavily influenced by informal social networks and the allure of quick solutions to economic problems. A friend's invitation offering instant income served as a primary trigger; the offer seemed like a realistic shortcut given the subjects' limited employment options. The practice, conducted almost daily and in secret, suggests a continued need for income and an attempt to manage social risks—avoiding detection by family and community (Hidayat, 2025). The mechanism of acquiring clients through random encounters and appointments at specific locations reflects a practical adaptation to a flexible and unsafe sexual services market.

These findings underscore the need for deeper interventions that address both structural determinants and individual impacts. Practical solutions include access to social welfare programs, direct economic assistance or job skills training appropriate to the local market, and psychosocial counseling and legal support services when needed. Interventions

should also consider social sensitivity (e.g., assistance schemes that maintain confidentiality and minimize the risk of stigma) and empower local support networks (NGOs, community health centers, religious groups) to provide safe referrals. This approach not only reduces the economic pressures that drive risky practices but also mitigates the psychological and social impacts that hinder the subjects' reintegration into a more stable and secure life.

Psychosocial and Victim Support Approaches

The subject demonstrated significant limitations in social support in her daily life, evident in her pattern of living solely with her child, with no network of family or close friends who could serve as sources of support. This situation left her without a safe space to share stories, express concerns, or receive practical assistance when facing domestic, economic, or health challenges. The absence of meaningful social interactions also cut off opportunities for the subject to receive positive feedback, emotional validation, and adaptive coping strategies typically learned and reinforced through interpersonal relationships (Taufiqoh & Khodijah, 2025). Cumulatively, these factors increased the stress burden and reduced the subject's capacity to respond to life's pressures with both internal and external resources.

Due to a lack of social support, subjects tend to suppress emotional distress over long periods of time, potentially leading to psychological symptoms such as persistent anxiety, depressive mood, and decreased motivation. Long-term emotional suppression is also prone to somatic manifestations (e.g., complaints of dizziness, sleep disturbances, pain without a clear medical cause) and cognitive impairments such as difficulty concentrating or making decisions. From a sociopsychological perspective, this suppression can be a passive coping strategy that temporarily reduces interpersonal conflict, but in the long run carries the risk of eroding psychological resilience (Noor et al., 2024). Thus, subjects are in a state of psychosocial vulnerability that affects not only their emotional well-being but also their social abilities to find work, build relationships, and access support services.

The psychosocial counseling approach used in this mentoring program targets three main aspects: providing emotional support, building empathetic relationships, and facilitating self-understanding and solution options. Emotional support focuses on validating the subject's feelings and reducing emotional isolation through a therapeutic presence. An empathetic relationship helps build a sense of security, allowing the subject to feel trusted to share their story. In addition, the counselor provides brief education on normal stress responses and signs of needing further intervention, providing the subject with a framework for understanding

what they are experiencing. This approach also emphasizes the practice of simple coping skills (e.g., relaxation techniques, breath regulation, and thought management) that can be immediately applied in stressful situations.

The counseling process apparently encouraged behavioral and cognitive changes: subjects became more open in expressing life experiences and suppressed emotional distress. This open communication marked a shift from passive to active coping, as through storytelling, subjects began to reflect on problem patterns and recognize the relationship between stressors (e.g., job instability or the burden of being the sole breadwinner) and their emotional responses (Adhi, 2017). This change was also evident in the emergence of hope for life changes and the initial ability to plan practical steps, such as seeking safer employment alternatives. These changes indicate increased adaptive functioning and problem-solving capacity, which have the potential to improve medium-term well-being.

DISCUSSION

The research results indicate that economic pressure is the primary factor causing subjects to engage in commercial sex work practices related to human trafficking. This condition aligns with research by Ikhlasiah Dalimoenthe (2018), which explains that poverty and economic instability are dominant factors that increase women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. The pressure of living makes individuals more likely to accept job offers with fast pay without considering the psychological and social risks they will face. This situation demonstrates that economic pressure can influence individuals' decision-making processes during times of crisis. Pinamangun et al. (2025) also explained that women's economic vulnerability increases the risk of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

The subject's condition as a widow raising a child alone demonstrates significant social vulnerability. The lack of family support causes the subject to experience simultaneous psychological and social stress in daily life. Recent research indicates that women with limited social support experience higher levels of stress and anxiety when facing prolonged economic pressure. This condition aligns with psychosocial theory, which states that social support plays a crucial role in helping individuals cope with life's pressures and maintain emotional stability. Lukmannia and Faizah (2024) explains that social support plays a significant influence on the emotional stability of victims of sexual exploitation as they undergo psychological recovery.

The research results also showed that the subjects experienced inner conflict in the form of shame, fear, and guilt due to the work they did. This condition is in line with the research of I Kadek Wahyu Pujhana and David Hizkia Tobing (2021), which explained that commercial sex workers often experience psychological pressure in the form of anxiety, low self-esteem, emotional trauma, and self-identity conflict due to social stigma from society. The feelings of guilt experienced by the subjects indicate a conflict between economic needs and moral values believed in in everyday life. This psychological pressure can have an impact on declining mental health if not received appropriate support. Kiling and Kiling-Bunga (2019) explained that victims of human trafficking generally experience anxiety, trauma, low self-esteem, and impaired social functioning due to the experiences of exploitation they experience.

The subjects' secretive behavior reflects a deep fear of social rejection from their surroundings. This anxiety drives them to conceal their identities and experiences to avoid stigma. The negative stigma surrounding sex workers places victims in social isolation, leading them to withdraw, limit interactions, and lose access to support networks that could help alleviate psychological burdens. Amelia's (2025) research shows that victims of sexual exploitation need a safe space to disclose their traumatic experiences and emotional distress; without a safe space, disclosure and the healing process will be hampered. Emotional support and social acceptance are crucial factors in restoring victims' self-confidence and social functioning, as such acceptance allows for reintegration into society and strengthens their capacity to face stigma.

The psychosocial counseling approach used in this study was deemed relevant in assisting the subject's psychological and social recovery process. This approach not only focuses on the individual's emotional state but also considers the social environmental factors that influence the victim's life. The counseling process was carried out through empathetic relationships, providing emotional support, and helping the subject understand their remaining potential (Coutinho et al., 2014). This approach helped the subject reduce emotional burdens and increase openness in expressing life experiences that had been suppressed. Kusumaningrum and Pratama explained that the trauma and psychosocial counseling approach helped victims better express their emotions and rebuild a sense of security in their social lives (Subardhini et al., 2025).

The results of the mentoring program showed that psychosocial counseling helped the subjects improve their coping skills in the face of life's pressures. They began to express their

feelings more openly and showed hope for improving their living conditions in the future. Atikah's (2025) research indicates that ongoing psychosocial counseling can improve the resilience and coping skills of victims of sexual exploitation. This finding aligns with recent research on psychosocial counseling, which explains that ongoing psychological and social support can help victims of sexual exploitation increase their resilience and adaptability to their social environment. The results of this study indicate that victims of human trafficking require psychosocial mentoring, social support, and economic empowerment to escape the cycle of sexual exploitation and lead more prosperous lives.

CONCLUSION

This community-service study demonstrates that psychosocial counseling, delivered through a trauma-informed and needs-based approach, plays a meaningful role in supporting the psychological and social recovery of women involved in commercial sex work linked to human trafficking. Economic pressure and limited social support were identified as primary structural drivers that precipitated entry into commercial sex work for the case subject, while stigma, shame, and secrecy exacerbated psychological distress and hindered access to support. The implemented interventions—individual trauma-focused cognitive behavioral counseling, brief psychosocial stabilization techniques, and rights-literacy awareness—were associated with reduced emotional suppression, increased openness in expression, improved coping skills, emergence of hope, and initial steps toward safer livelihood planning. These changes indicate enhanced adaptive functioning and short-term gains in psychosocial wellbeing. Despite these positive outcomes, recovery depended on addressing broader structural factors: sustainable economic alternatives, confidential social-welfare access, and coordinated referral pathways for legal and health protection. Therefore, psychosocial counseling should be integrated into multi-sectoral, gender-sensitive, and trauma-informed service models that combine psychological support with economic empowerment and stigma-sensitive community referral systems. Future evaluations with larger samples, standardized outcome measures, and longer follow-up are recommended to quantify effectiveness, assess durability of gains, and identify the most cost-effective combinations of counseling and structural interventions.

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