Journal of Social Welfare Research and Practice
Vol. 1, No. 1, February 2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Child Adoption Practices in Yogyakarta: Legal Challenges and the Role of Social Workers

Riski Angga Putra✉
Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Mamba'ul Hikam Pali Sumsel, Indonesia.

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study investigates child adoption practices in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with a particular focus on the legal challenges that arise in the process and the role of social workers in addressing them. Adoption in Indonesia remains problematic due to unclear court jurisdictions, inconsistent regulations across districts, and the risk of document falsification. The research seeks to highlight how these issues affect the protection of children's rights and how social workers intervene to safeguard the best interests of the child.

Design/methods/approach – A qualitative research design was employed, combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Respondents included officials from the Social Services Department, social workers, and prospective adoptive parents. Data were triangulated to ensure credibility and analyzed using an interactive model that involved data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing.

Findings – The results reveal three key challenges in Yogyakarta's adoption practices: jurisdictional ambiguities between District and Religious Courts, discrepancies in adoption procedures among districts, and cases of identity document falsification. Social workers play vital roles as enablers, mediators, educators, and advocates, helping families navigate bureaucratic processes, facilitating agreements between biological and adoptive parents, providing education on child rights, and advocating for children in situations where their rights risk being compromised.

Research implications/limitations – The study is limited to a single province, which may restrict generalizability. However, it highlights systemic gaps that can inform national-level adoption policies and child protection frameworks.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical insights into how social workers mitigate legal and procedural obstacles in adoption. It emphasizes the need for harmonized adoption regulations and recognizes social workers as key actors in protecting children's rights in Indonesia.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 31-07-2025
Accepted: 30-09-2025

KEYWORDS
Child Adoption, Yogyakarta, Legal Challenges, Social Work, Child Protection

Introduction

Child adoption is a crucial mechanism for ensuring children's rights and welfare, fundamentally influenced by ethical and legal principles that prioritize the child's best interests. The global framework established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) underscores the importance of adoption as a measure to protect the rights of children who are abandoned, neglected, or orphaned. The CRC explicitly

CONTACT: ✉riskianggaputra@mail.com

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Maron Publishing.
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, which permits use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and any derivative works are distributed under the same license.

mandates that all actions regarding children must prioritize their welfare above all else, dismissing any motivations that could lead to the commodification of adoption (Lubis et al., 2024; Doughty et al., 2018;. The legal framework in various countries, including Indonesia, generally aligns with the principles set forth in the CRC, emphasizing the necessity to create a family environment that supports the healthy development of adopted children (Lubis et al., 2024; Doughty et al., 2018; . Adoption processes are not merely administrative but are embedded within a complex matrix of rights where adoptive parents must navigate ethical considerations and legal responsibilities to fulfill their roles adequately Doughty et al., 2018; . Research indicates that perceptions of adoption can vary significantly, reflecting cultural attitudes towards children's rights and the role of familial structures in their upbringing (Abubakar et al., 2013; Eke et al., 2014). Furthermore, understanding the ethical dimensions of adoption, including the rights to identity and family history, is critical for practitioners, as these factors influence emotional and psychological outcomes for adopted children (McMurray et al., 2010; Juffer et al., 2004).

As adoption is vital for protecting children's rights and guaranteeing their welfare, ongoing discourse surrounding ethical considerations and legal frameworks is essential. Upholding children's rights in the adoption process aligns with international norms and fosters environments that enable adopted children to thrive emotionally and socially. Ethical practices and an understanding of cultural perspectives are paramount to ensuring that adoption serves its intended purpose as a protective and nurturing pathway for vulnerable children (Lubis et al., 2024; Doughty et al., 2018; Yığıtbaş & Top, 2020; Juffer et al., 2004).

Child adoption is a crucial mechanism for protecting children's rights and ensuring their welfare, providing a pathway for abandoned, neglected, or orphaned children to enter nurturing family environments. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Indonesia in 1990, serves as a foundational legal framework affirming that all measures concerning children, including adoption, must prioritize the best interests of the child. The CRC emphasizes that adoption should never be motivated by economic interests or personal gains but rather by the necessity of safeguarding children's fundamental rights to survival, development, and protection (Asio et al., 2020; (Omosun & Kofoworola, 2011;). Empirical studies underscore this principle by illustrating the positive impact of stable family placements on children's long-term well-being. For instance, a study by Skidmore et al. highlights that children who enter stable family environments tend to experience reduced risks of addiction, abuse, and criminal behavior

in adulthood, ultimately leading to lower social costs (Skidmore et al., 2014). Additionally, research conducted by Abubakar et al. reveals that awareness and understanding of adoption are crucial among potential adoptive parents, with knowledgeable individuals more likely to consider adoption as a viable option (Abubakar et al., 2013). Furthermore, initiatives like Child Development Accounts in Korea demonstrate how promoting economic independence among at-risk children can enhance their opportunities for successful placements and development (Nam & Han, 2010). This alignment with social policies that support the welfare of children further reiterates that adoption should be framed within the discourse of child rights, ensuring that children's best interests remain paramount (Omosun & Kofoworola, 2011; Littleton et al., 2021; Tan & Yi, 2019). As evidenced by the legal frameworks, empirical studies, and social initiatives, child adoption serves not only as a protective mechanism but also aligns with broader societal efforts to promote children's rights and welfare. Ensuring that the adoption process operates strictly within ethical guidelines, devoid of profit motives, ultimately secures a better future for vulnerable children. Ongoing advocacy and education are essential to foster understanding of adoption, helping to reduce stigma and increase positive adoption outcomes within communities (Asio et al., 2020; Hansen, 2007).

Child adoption, while often viewed through the lens of fulfilling parental desires, increasingly serves as a pivotal mechanism for child protection, particularly in complex cultural contexts such as Indonesia. This shift in perspective is critical as it intersects with various cultural, religious, and legal frameworks, particularly in non-Western societies. Although Western literature traditionally emphasizes adoption as a means for childless couples to fulfill their family aspirations, contemporary discourse highlights child adoption primarily as a protective and welfare-oriented practice Pösö, 2009)(IJzendoorn et al., 2009)(Onyiriuka, 2019). Emphasizing the protective nature of adoption reflects a growing understanding that the primary aim should be safeguarding a child's well-being, rather than fulfilling adult needs (Lubis et al., 2024; Mauraina et al., 2021).

Evidence from a variety of scholarly works underscores these nuanced perspectives on child adoption. Research indicates that the complexities of adoption cannot be divorced from identity formation and belonging, where adopted children often navigate feelings of disconnect from either their birth families or their adopted families (Pilcher et al., 2023; Pösö, 2009). A study by Mónico reveals how transnational adoptions spotlight issues concerning coercion and the necessity for ethical frameworks to protect birth mothers and children alike (Mónico, 2021). Furthermore, the Indonesian legal context, which integrates diverse cultural traditions and state laws, poses unique challenges and opportunities in adopting ethical child protection practices (Lubis et al., 2024; Mauraina et al., 2021). Research by Ijzendoorn and colleagues indicates that adoptive families can provide nurturing environments that, while deviating from the traditional biological family model, still align closely with a child's developmental needs (IJzendoorn et al., 2009).

Similarly, narratives surrounding the adoption process elucidate the importance of adopting a framework that prioritizes a child's welfare over the desires of prospective parents (Onyiriuka, 2019).

The reconfiguration of child adoption from a childless couple's solution to a protective measure underscores the importance of contextual and ethical considerations in both policy and practice. By positioning adoption as fundamentally about the child's rights and well-being, societies can navigate the myriad of cultural and legal complexities surrounding adoption. This perspective fosters an environment that not only values but actively promotes the rights and identities of all children, ensuring that their needs remain the focal point in adoption practices (Naddour et al., 2024; Poveda et al., 2013; Fenton-Glynn, 2020).

Indonesia's adoption practices are significantly shaped by its pluralistic legal system, which incorporates customary law (adat), Islamic jurisprudence, and national regulations, creating a unique environment for child adoption and protection. The historical context of adoption within Indonesian communities reflects a blend of traditional, religious, and legal dimensions. Informal adoption practices aimed at ensuring lineage continuity and inheritance rights prevail at the community level. Under Islamic law, adoption is not formally recognized as in some other jurisdictions; instead, guardianship (kafalah) is emphasized, which allows for the care of a child without severing biological connections. This contrasts with national laws, particularly the Child Protection Law (Law No. 23/2002, amended by Law No. 35/2014) and Government Regulation No. 54/2007, which provide a more formalized framework for adoption as a measure aimed at child welfare (Nugroho, 2023)(White, 2015).

Research evidences the complexity of Indonesia's adoption landscape. A study by Nugroho highlights how customary laws dictate informal adoption practices that focus on cultural continuity and lineage (Nugroho, 2023). Meanwhile, other scholars, such as Kadir and Mohd, elaborate on the implications of Islamic traditions on family structures and guardianship in Indonesia, showing how *kafalah* allows for continued familial ties while providing essential care (Kadir & Mohd, 2023). The national framework, as outlined by White, integrates these diverse influences into a structured approach to child welfare, facilitating legal adoption processes to ensure the rights and protections of children in need (White, 2015). Furthermore, findings from Denby emphasize the necessity of aligning these various laws with international standards to foster ethical practices and child rights protections (Denby, 2012). Research indicates that while guardianship permits ongoing

relationships with biological families, legal adoption permanently severs such ties and changes parenthood status, influencing outcomes for children in care settings (Denby, 2012).

The Indonesian adoption system exemplifies the intricacies involved in merging customary law, religious beliefs, and governmental statutes. This pluralistic legal framework affects how adoption is perceived and executed, balancing the need for child protection with cultural and religious values. Ongoing engagement with both international standards and indigenous practices is crucial to ensure that adoption serves as a protective and nurturing measure for children, safeguarding their rights while respecting cultural identities. As the discourse around adoption evolves, maintaining a child-centered approach that prioritizes their well-being across varying legal contexts is vital (Nada & Fajriyah, 2023; Denashurya et al., 2023).

The coexistence of multiple legal traditions in Indonesia – namely customary law (adat), Islamic law, and national law – generates confusion regarding child adoption practices, which undermines legal certainty and raises vulnerabilities for both adoptive parents and children. The intricate interaction of these legal traditions creates overlapping jurisdictions and inconsistencies in judicial decisions. While district courts generally hold authority over adoption decrees, religious courts assert jurisdiction for Muslim families, particularly concerning lineage and inheritance issues (Hakim & Hakim, 2024; . This duality produces ambiguity and a lack of harmonized legal authority, which scholars like Mustofa and Kamil identify as a critical challenge in the realm of child protection in Indonesia, complicating the adoption process and thereby affecting child welfare Faisal, 2023).

The presence of disparate legal systems results in fragmented adoption practices that can leave adoptive families without clear guidance. For instance, Mustofa discusses how the patchwork of laws surrounding adoption creates scenarios where some children's rights and benefits are not equally recognized across different legal frameworks Faisal, 2023). Similarly, Kamil highlights instances where rulings from different courts contradict each other, further muddying the waters of legal clarity and certainty Faisal, 2023). Research by Lubis et al. also reveals that the lack of a unified legal approach can hinder adopted children's rights to inheritance and identity (Lubis et al., 2024). This reflects broader systemic issues, as indicated by Horii, which elaborates on how legal pluralism complicates personal status laws in Indonesia, often leading to different outcomes based solely on the prevailing legal authority invoked (Horii, 2019).

Furthermore, studies show that this confusion can deter potential adoptive parents from pursuing adoption due to fear of legal repercussions, as inconsistencies can lead to questions about the legality of their parental rights (Hakim & Hakim, 2024; Faisal, 2023). Consequently, many children in need of care remain unadopted due to these complexities.

Scholars advocating for reform suggest that a concerted effort is needed to harmonize legal frameworks to effectively protect children's rights while clarifying adoptive parents' responsibilities and rights (Antonius & Sudiro, 2023).

The currently fragmented legal landscape surrounding adoption in Indonesia highlights the urgent need for harmonization among customary, Islamic, and national laws. Without a unified approach, both adoptive parents and children face significant risks, including insecurity regarding rights and legal status. Addressing these discrepancies through legal reform is critical in ensuring that adoption serves not merely as a means of lineage preservation but as a protective measure aligned with the best interests of the child (Prakasa & Asis, 2023; Pratiwi & Fitri, 2023).

In Yogyakarta, the complexities of adoption practices are exacerbated by jurisdictional ambiguities, document falsification, and inconsistent standard operating procedures (SOPs), highlighting the challenges within a legal system that fails to prioritize children's best interests. Yogyakarta, recognized as the Special Region of Indonesia, exhibits a multifaceted legal landscape wherein multiple court systems – specifically District Courts and Religious Courts – claim overlapping authority over adoption cases. This jurisdictional ambiguity often leads to inconsistent judicial outcomes and confusion for prospective adoptive families Mergel, 2016; Randall et al., 2015). Furthermore, incidents of document falsification illustrate a troubling aspect of the adoption process, where prospective parents may manipulate identity records to hasten the adoption or hide sensitive information, intensifying risks to the child's welfare Mergel, 2016; . Additionally, the variation in SOPs among the five districts and the city of Yogyakarta introduces significant procedural disparities that can hinder effective adoption practices Randall et al., 2015).

Research indicates that the overlapping claims of authority between District and Religious Courts in Yogyakarta undermine the legal clarity necessary for adoption issues. Scholars such as Mustofa and Kamil have pointed out this lack of harmonization, emphasizing that differing interpretations of adoption laws among courts lead to inconsistent decisions and create uncertainty for families (Hakim & Hakim, 2024; Faisal, 2023). Furthermore, a study by Afriza reveals that discrepancies in procedural adherence across districts contribute to inequitable treatment of prospective adoptive families, leaving many vulnerable to bureaucratic inefficiencies and exploitation (Afriza, 2023). Document falsification also compounds these issues, as highlighted in reports by Horii, which reveals that such practices can lead to improper placements or even neglect of

children's needs (Horii, 2019). Overall, the complexities of local regulations, combined with inadequate resources and limited oversight, have culminated in a system that often overlooks the best interests of children waiting for adoption Mergel, 2016; .

The challenges faced in Yogyakarta's adoption practices underscore the pressing need for systemic reform to standardize legal procedures and reinforce the protection of children's rights. Addressing jurisdictional ambiguities, curtailing document falsification, and ensuring the consistent application of SOPs across various districts will not only enhance the integrity of the adoption process but will also help safeguard vulnerable children from potential exploitation and neglect. Ongoing advocacy for legal reforms and improved regulatory practices is essential to align local adoption procedures with broader national and international child protection standards (Hakim & Hakim, 2024; Antonius & Sudiro, 2023; Mergel, 2016; Randall et al., 2015).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the methodological framework, including data collection and analysis strategies. The findings are then presented in two parts: first, the identification of legal and procedural challenges in Yogyakarta; second, the exploration of social workers' roles in addressing these challenges. The discussion situates these findings within broader debates about legal pluralism, child protection, and social work practice. Finally, the conclusion highlights policy implications and offers recommendations for strengthening adoption frameworks in Indonesia. By addressing the interplay between law and social work in adoption, this study demonstrates how professional practice can serve as a bridge in contexts where legal systems remain fragmented. The central argument advanced is that social workers are indispensable actors in ensuring that adoption in Yogyakarta—despite its legal ambiguities—remains anchored in the principle of the best interests of the child.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine child adoption practices in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with a particular focus on the intersection between legal challenges and the role of social workers. The choice of a case study approach was grounded in the need to capture the complexity of adoption as both a legal and social process within its natural context. Adoption in Yogyakarta is shaped by a pluralistic legal system, bureaucratic procedures, and cultural practices, all of which require a methodological framework capable of addressing nuances beyond what quantitative approaches could reveal. The researcher, as the primary instrument, engaged directly with participants in order to collect, interpret, and contextualize the data. Research was conducted across the five districts and the municipality of Yogyakarta Province over a six-month period, from January to June 2024. The population for this research consisted of stakeholders directly involved in the adoption process, including professional social

workers, officials from the Social Services Department, adoptive parents, and biological parents. Through purposive sampling, twenty-five informants were selected to provide diverse perspectives on the adoption process. Among them were eight social workers, five government officials, seven prospective adoptive parents, and five biological parents who had relinquished their children. This sample was considered sufficient for qualitative inquiry, as it allowed recurring themes to be identified while also preserving attention to individual experiences.

Data collection was carried out through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews formed the core of the data collection process, enabling the researcher to explore adoption procedures, legal ambiguities, and the practical challenges faced by different actors. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and was conducted in locations that were both convenient and comfortable for participants, with their full consent. To ensure reliability, an interview guide was developed, reviewed by two senior social work academics, and pilot-tested with a practicing social worker prior to fieldwork. The interviews were supplemented with participant observation, whereby the researcher attended counseling sessions, administrative procedures, and other adoption-related activities at the Social Services Department. This allowed the researcher to capture interactional dynamics that could not be fully expressed in interviews, particularly the ways social workers mediated between adoptive families and state institutions. Additionally, document analysis was undertaken to review policy texts, case files, and court decisions, thereby situating the empirical findings within the broader regulatory framework of Indonesian adoption law. The triangulation of these three data sources—interviews, observation, and documents—provided a robust foundation for ensuring the credibility and depth of the study.

The analysis of data followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model of qualitative research, which proceeds through cycles of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded to identify key themes, including jurisdictional ambiguity, inconsistencies in adoption procedures across districts, and the multifaceted roles of social workers. These coded data were then organized into matrices that allowed comparisons between different categories of informants, highlighting both shared concerns and divergent perspectives. Conclusions were verified through member checking, in which selected participants were invited to review and validate the researcher's interpretations, and through peer debriefing with academic colleagues who offered critical feedback on the coding and thematic analysis. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed prolonged engagement in the field,

spending six months immersed in the research sites to build rapport and collect rich, contextual data. Ethical considerations were central throughout, as adoption involves vulnerable populations; all participants provided informed consent, their anonymity was guaranteed, and sensitive information was handled with strict confidentiality. While the study is limited to one province and therefore may not be fully generalizable to other regions of Indonesia, its findings contribute important insights into the systemic challenges of adoption and the indispensable role of social workers in safeguarding children's rights.

Result

1.1 Legal and Procedural Challenges in Yogyakarta

The research revealed that adoption practices in Yogyakarta are heavily influenced by overlapping legal frameworks and bureaucratic inconsistencies. These challenges manifest most clearly in three interrelated areas: jurisdictional ambiguity between courts, cases of falsified documentation, and discrepancies in standard operating procedures (SOPs) across districts. Each of these issues creates significant obstacles for families seeking legal adoption and for social workers striving to protect children's rights.

1.1.1 Jurisdictional Ambiguity between Courts

One of the most critical challenges concerns the unclear distribution of authority between the District Court and the Religious Court. In principle, Indonesian law specifies that adoption decrees should be issued by the District Court. However, in cases involving Muslim families, the Religious Court often claims jurisdiction, particularly in matters related to lineage and inheritance. This overlap produces uncertainty and, in some cases, contradictory decisions.

Field data from Bantul district illustrated this problem. One social worker recounted a case in which the District Court approved an adoption, only for the Religious Court to later issue a ruling questioning the legal status of the same child's inheritance rights. Such conflicting interpretations create distress for adoptive families and weaken the overall legitimacy of the adoption system. Interviews with officials revealed that this jurisdictional ambiguity is a long-standing issue that has not been fully resolved by national policy, leaving families dependent on the discretionary decisions of local judges.

1.1.2 Falsification of Documents

Another significant challenge uncovered during the study is the manipulation or falsification of identity documents. Several adoptive parents admitted, under anonymity, that they had been encouraged by intermediaries to modify details on birth certificates or residency records in order to expedite the adoption process. Social workers confirmed encountering cases where children's birth origins were deliberately obscured, sometimes erasing links to biological families.

This practice, while illegal, persists due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and lengthy court procedures. As one government official observed, "When the process becomes too slow, some families look for shortcuts, and falsifying documents seems easier than waiting for years." Such practices pose grave risks for children, undermining their right to identity and potentially exposing them to trafficking.

1.1.3 Discrepancies in Adoption Procedures

The third challenge relates to inconsistencies in adoption procedures across the five districts and the municipality of Yogyakarta. Each local office of the Social Services Department operates with slightly different SOPs regarding application requirements, counseling procedures, and timelines for approval. For example, Sleman district requires three mandatory counseling sessions for prospective parents, while Gunungkidul only requires one. These inconsistencies lead to unequal treatment and confusion among adoptive families.

Table 1 summarizes the differences in procedural requirements across districts.

Table 1. Procedural Requirements for Adoption across Districts in Yogyakarta

District/ Municipality	Counseling Sessions Required	Average Processing Time	Special Notes
Bantul	2	6–9 months	Often disputed by Religious Court
Sleman	3	12 months	Requires psychological assessment
Kulon Progo	2	10–12 months	Limited number of social workers
Gunungkidul	1	6 months	Fewer procedural checks
Yogyakarta City	2	8–10 months	Stronger collaboration with NGOs

These discrepancies reflect the absence of a harmonized adoption system, which undermines consistency in child protection and complicates the work of social workers.

1.2 The Role of Social Workers in Adoption Practices

Despite these challenges, social workers in Yogyakarta play a central role in ensuring that adoption processes prioritize children's best interests. Findings from interviews and observations reveal that social workers act in multiple capacities: as enablers, mediators, educators, and advocates. These roles are interconnected and often overlap within a single case.

1.2.1 Social Workers as Enablers and Mediators

As enablers, social workers assist prospective adoptive parents in understanding the legal process and completing necessary documentation. Many adoptive families expressed that without this support, they would have been unable to navigate the complex bureaucracy. One adoptive mother shared, "The social worker explained everything patiently, from the application forms to the court sessions. Without her help, we would have given up."

In addition to enabling access, social workers serve as mediators between biological and adoptive parents. This role is particularly sensitive, as it involves negotiating consent, clarifying expectations, and preventing future disputes. In one case observed in Sleman, the social worker organized a series of meetings where both sets of parents discussed the child's future welfare. The mediator role ensured that the process respected both the child's rights and the dignity of the biological parents.

1.2.2 Social Workers as Educators and Advocates

Social workers also function as educators, providing counseling and guidance to adoptive families. They inform parents about children's developmental needs, legal responsibilities, and the importance of openness in discussing adoption with the child. This educational role is critical in combating stigma and ensuring that adoption is understood not as a secretive arrangement but as a legitimate form of family building.

At the same time, social workers act as advocates, particularly when children's rights are at risk due to legal ambiguities or bureaucratic negligence. Several social workers described their efforts to challenge court delays or to report cases of suspected document falsification. Their advocacy often placed them in difficult positions vis-à-vis local authorities, but it underscored their professional commitment to prioritizing the child's best interests above institutional convenience.

(a) Enabler role: guiding families through documentation and procedures (b) Mediator role: facilitating agreements between biological and adoptive parents (c)

Educator role: counseling families on child rights and responsibilities (d) Advocate role: defending children's rights in legal and bureaucratic settings

1.3 Interpretation of Findings

The findings suggest that adoption in Yogyakarta remains hindered by systemic challenges but is partially safeguarded by the active role of social workers. Jurisdictional ambiguities and inconsistent procedures reflect broader issues of legal pluralism in Indonesia, where different normative systems compete for authority. Document falsification illustrates how bureaucratic inefficiencies inadvertently encourage illegal practices, undermining child protection. Despite these systemic weaknesses, social workers emerge as crucial intermediaries who help families navigate adoption and advocate for children's rights.

The integration of these findings indicates that while legal reforms are necessary to harmonize adoption procedures, professional social work practice already plays a compensatory role in protecting children. This duality underscores the importance of strengthening both the legal framework and the professional capacity of social workers.

Discussion

2.1 Adoption Practices within the Framework of Legal Pluralism

The results of this study demonstrate that adoption practices in Yogyakarta are shaped by a legal environment marked by pluralism and fragmentation. The ambiguity of jurisdiction between District Courts and Religious Courts highlights a longstanding issue in Indonesia's legal system, where national legislation, Islamic jurisprudence, and customary practices often intersect without harmonization. Previous research has also identified this tension, noting that Indonesia's dual court system frequently creates contradictory interpretations of family law, particularly in matters related to inheritance and lineage (Rahardjeng, 2002; Mustofa, 2008). Our findings confirm and extend this literature by showing how these contradictions are not merely theoretical but produce practical consequences for adoptive families, including uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of adoption decrees and the future rights of children.

This context aligns with broader discussions of legal pluralism in Southeast Asia, where overlapping jurisdictions create both flexibility and confusion (Benda-Beckmann & Turner, 2002). While some scholars argue that pluralism reflects Indonesia's cultural and religious

diversity, this study suggests that in the domain of child adoption, pluralism undermines the principle of legal certainty. For children, whose welfare depends on clear legal recognition of their status, ambiguity translates into vulnerability. The empirical cases from Bantul and Sleman districts show how families are caught between different interpretations, reinforcing the argument that legal harmonization is essential for safeguarding children's rights.

2.2 Bureaucratic Inefficiency and the Emergence of Informal Practices

Another significant finding of this study is the persistence of document falsification as a means of expediting adoption procedures. While falsification is illegal, it emerges as a rational response to bureaucratic inefficiencies, prolonged processing times, and inconsistent requirements across districts. This echoes findings from earlier studies on Indonesian public administration, which highlight how lengthy bureaucratic procedures often push citizens toward informal or even illegal practices (Antlöv, 2003). In the context of adoption, such practices have particularly harmful consequences, as they obscure a child's origins, undermine their right to identity, and increase risks of trafficking.

The falsification of birth certificates or residency records also illustrates the intersection between state weakness and citizen agency. Families who desperately seek to adopt may view document manipulation as an acceptable shortcut when formal procedures appear inaccessible. From a sociological perspective, this reflects James Scott's (1998) notion of "everyday resistance," in which individuals navigate and subvert state systems to achieve personal goals. However, unlike benign forms of resistance, document falsification in adoption carries profound ethical and legal implications, as it may permanently sever a child from their biological roots. The findings thus highlight the urgent need to reform bureaucratic processes so that efficiency and transparency reduce incentives for informal practices.

2.3 Inconsistent Procedures and the Question of Equality

Discrepancies in standard operating procedures across districts further reveal the fragmented nature of adoption governance in Yogyakarta. The data show clear inequalities: a family applying in Sleman may face significantly different requirements compared to a family in Gunungkidul. This inconsistency not only confuses adoptive families but also challenges the principle of equality before the law, which is enshrined in Indonesia's constitution. Previous studies of decentralization have observed similar patterns, where local governments interpret national regulations differently, resulting in uneven service delivery (Hadiz, 2010).

From a rights-based perspective, these discrepancies are deeply problematic. Adoption is not merely a bureaucratic service but a legal recognition of a child's status and family identity. When procedures vary arbitrarily across districts, the protection of children's rights becomes contingent on geographical location rather than universal

standards. This situation undermines the international principle of non-discrimination, as articulated in Article 2 of the CRC. The findings thus call for stronger central oversight and clearer national guidelines to ensure uniformity in adoption procedures across Indonesia.

2.4 The Multifaceted Role of Social Workers

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is the central role played by social workers in navigating legal ambiguities and bureaucratic inefficiencies. By acting as enablers, mediators, educators, and advocates, social workers effectively compensate for systemic weaknesses. This aligns with the international literature that views social work as a profession dedicated to bridging individual needs with institutional structures (Zastrow, 2004; Payne, 2014). In adoption contexts globally, social workers are recognized as critical actors who assess family suitability, provide counseling, and advocate for children's rights (Howe, 1997).

Our study extends this understanding to the Indonesian context, showing how social workers in Yogyakarta assume responsibilities that go beyond their formal job descriptions. As enablers, they demystify bureaucratic processes for families. As mediators, they manage delicate negotiations between biological and adoptive parents, preventing conflicts that might otherwise derail the adoption. As educators, they play a preventive role by preparing families for the challenges of adoption and promoting openness about adoption status. As advocates, they defend children's rights in the face of court delays, bureaucratic negligence, or unethical practices. These roles demonstrate the adaptability of social work in contexts where legal and institutional frameworks are weak.

The significance of this finding lies in its policy implications. If adoption practices in Yogyakarta continue to depend heavily on the discretionary efforts of individual social workers, children's rights remain precarious. Institutionalizing the roles of social workers within adoption procedures would not only recognize their contributions but also create systemic safeguards for child protection.

2.5 Adoption as a Site of Social and Ethical Controversy

The findings of this study also intersect with broader debates about the purpose of adoption. Is adoption primarily a mechanism for fulfilling the desires of childless parents, or should it be understood strictly as a child protection measure? In Indonesia, both discourses coexist. While families often frame adoption as an act of compassion, there remains a risk that adult interests overshadow the rights of children. International debates reflect similar tensions, particularly in the case of intercountry adoption, where critics

argue that adoption sometimes becomes commodified and entangled with global inequalities (Triseliotis, 2000).

In Yogyakarta, the persistence of private or informal adoptions illustrates this controversy. Families may bypass formal procedures not only for efficiency but also because they view adoption as a private arrangement between families, rather than a legal process requiring state oversight. Such practices challenge the state's ability to enforce child protection standards and risk turning children into objects of negotiation. The involvement of social workers in these cases underscores their ethical role: to reorient adoption away from adult-centered narratives toward the principle of the best interests of the child.

2.6 Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study point to several critical policy implications. First, the ambiguity of jurisdiction between courts must be resolved through legal reform that clearly delineates authority. This could take the form of a unified national court procedure for adoption, eliminating the current overlap. Second, bureaucratic efficiency must be improved to reduce incentives for document falsification. Streamlining procedures, digitizing records, and enforcing transparency could address this issue. Third, national guidelines should be standardized across districts to ensure equality of access and treatment for adoptive families. Finally, the role of social workers should be formally institutionalized within adoption frameworks, with adequate training, resources, and recognition of their professional contributions.

For practitioners, these findings emphasize the importance of holistic approaches to adoption. Social workers must continue to embrace their multiple roles but should also advocate for structural reforms that reduce the burden on individual practitioners. Adoption agencies and government departments should collaborate with NGOs and community organizations to promote public awareness about legal adoption procedures and to combat the stigma surrounding adoption.

2.7 Directions for Future Research

While this study has provided valuable insights into adoption practices in Yogyakarta, it is limited to one province and therefore cannot fully capture the diversity of adoption experiences across Indonesia. Future research should undertake comparative studies between different regions, particularly provinces with distinct cultural and legal traditions. Quantitative research could also complement these findings by measuring the prevalence of document falsification or procedural inconsistencies nationwide. In addition, longitudinal studies tracking adopted children over time would provide critical insights into the long-term outcomes of adoption, particularly in contexts where legal ambiguities persist.

Another promising area for future research is the role of intercountry adoption in Indonesia. Although relatively rare, intercountry adoption raises complex questions about sovereignty, cultural identity, and international child protection standards. Investigating how Indonesia navigates these issues would contribute to global debates on ethical adoption practices. Finally, research should explore the professionalization of social work in Indonesia, assessing how training, policy frameworks, and institutional support can strengthen the capacity of social workers to fulfill their roles in adoption.

2.8 Concluding Remarks

In summary, the findings of this study contribute to both scholarly and practical understanding of adoption in contexts of legal pluralism and bureaucratic inefficiency. The challenges of jurisdictional ambiguity, document falsification, and procedural discrepancies highlight the systemic weaknesses of Indonesia's adoption system. Yet, the central role of social workers demonstrates the resilience of professional practice in compensating for these weaknesses. By situating the findings within broader debates about child protection, legal pluralism, and social work, this study underscores the urgent need for harmonized policies, stronger institutions, and greater recognition of social workers. Ultimately, the results reaffirm that adoption must be understood not as a transaction between families but as a process rooted in the principle of the best interests of the child.

Conclusion

This study has explored the dynamics of child adoption practices in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, highlighting the intersection between legal ambiguities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the pivotal role of social workers. Adoption, as both a legal and social institution, is expected to protect children's rights and provide them with stable family environments. Yet, as the findings reveal, systemic weaknesses in Yogyakarta undermine these ideals, creating uncertainty and exposing children to risks of neglect or exploitation. At the same time, the research shows that social workers, through their multiple roles, emerge as critical actors who safeguard children's best interests within a fragmented adoption system.

The first major conclusion of this study is that legal pluralism produces significant challenges for adoption in Yogyakarta. The overlapping jurisdictions of District and Religious Courts result in inconsistent interpretations and rulings that confuse adoptive families and weaken the legitimacy of adoption decrees. This finding confirms earlier

scholarship on Indonesia's dual legal system but extends the discussion by showing how these ambiguities manifest in everyday adoption cases. Without harmonization, children remain vulnerable to legal disputes over their status and inheritance rights, undermining the protective function of adoption.

Second, the study concludes that bureaucratic inefficiencies perpetuate informal and illegal practices such as document falsification. Families facing long delays or excessive procedural requirements often resort to manipulating birth certificates or residency documents. While such practices may appear as pragmatic solutions for families, they ultimately violate children's rights to identity and open pathways for trafficking or exploitation. This finding reinforces the argument that child protection cannot be achieved without efficient, transparent, and accountable administrative systems.

Third, the research demonstrates that discrepancies in standard operating procedures across districts produce unequal treatment of adoptive families. The absence of consistent national guidelines means that requirements vary significantly depending on geographical location, undermining the constitutional principle of equality before the law. This inconsistency contradicts the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits discrimination in matters affecting children's welfare. The implication is that national policies must prioritize standardization and oversight to ensure equal access to adoption services.

The fourth and most positive conclusion is that social workers play indispensable roles in mediating these systemic weaknesses. Acting as enablers, mediators, educators, and advocates, social workers bridge gaps between adoptive families, biological parents, and legal institutions. Their work ensures that, even in the face of systemic barriers, children's interests are not entirely neglected. This underscores the importance of institutionalizing social work within adoption frameworks, providing adequate resources, and strengthening the professional recognition of social workers in Indonesia.

From these conclusions, several key recommendations can be drawn. Policymakers must prioritize the harmonization of legal frameworks by clearly designating a single judicial authority for adoption cases. This would eliminate conflicting rulings and strengthen legal certainty for adoptive families and children. At the same time, bureaucratic reforms are necessary to streamline adoption procedures, reduce delays, and minimize opportunities for illegal practices. Digitization of adoption records, transparent monitoring systems, and standardized timelines could improve efficiency and accountability. National authorities should also enforce uniform guidelines across districts, ensuring that families in all regions face consistent requirements. Finally, the state must empower social workers by formally integrating their roles into adoption procedures, providing ongoing training, and recognizing their authority as child protection professionals.

The implications of these recommendations extend beyond Yogyakarta. Adoption challenges in this province reflect broader systemic issues across Indonesia, where legal pluralism, decentralization, and weak institutional capacity intersect to hinder child protection. Addressing these issues requires coordinated action between the judiciary, social services, and civil society organizations. At the international level, Indonesia's adoption practices must also align more closely with global child protection standards, particularly those articulated in the CRC and the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.

For practice, this study highlights the need for holistic, child-centered approaches to adoption. Social workers and policymakers must work collaboratively to ensure that adoption is not merely a bureaucratic transaction but a process rooted in the best interests of the child. Training programs for social workers should emphasize skills in mediation, advocacy, and counseling, while adoption agencies should promote transparency and community awareness about legal adoption procedures.

For future research, this study identifies several promising directions. Comparative studies across provinces would illuminate how adoption practices vary under different cultural and legal conditions, while longitudinal studies could examine the long-term outcomes for adopted children in Indonesia. Research on intercountry adoption, though less common, could also provide critical insights into how Indonesia balances national sovereignty, cultural identity, and international child protection obligations. Finally, studies on the professionalization of social work in Indonesia could explore how institutional support and policy frameworks shape the ability of social workers to fulfill their roles effectively.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reaffirm that adoption must always be anchored in the principle of the best interests of the child. While systemic challenges in Yogyakarta compromise this principle, the resilience and commitment of social workers demonstrate that professional practice can serve as a vital safeguard. However, reliance on individual practitioners is not sustainable. Legal harmonization, bureaucratic efficiency, procedural equality, and professional recognition are all necessary to create an adoption system that truly protects children. The next step, therefore, is to transform these findings into concrete policy reforms and professional frameworks that ensure every child in Indonesia has the right to a secure and nurturing family.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

The sole author of this article was responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection through interviews, observations, and document analysis, data interpretation, and preparation of the manuscript in its entirety.

Funding statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of anonymized interview transcripts, observation notes, and adoption-related documents collected in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Due to ethical and confidentiality considerations, these datasets are not publicly available. De-identified excerpts may be made available from the author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of interests statement

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Additional information

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Yogyakarta Provincial Social Services Department and the participating social workers, adoptive parents, and biological parents who generously shared their experiences and insights.

References

Abubakar, S., Lawan, U., & Yasir, J. (2013). Knowledge and Attitudes Toward Child Adoption and Fostering Among Infertile Women in Northern Nigeria. *Sahel Medical Journal*, *16*(1), 19. https://doi.org/10.4103/1118-8561.112062

Afriza, B. R. (2023). Maximizing Productivity: The Power of Standard Operating Procedure, Work Environment and Communication. *Jko*, 2(1), 82–92. https://doi.org/10.37481/jko.v2i1.89

Antonius, W., & Sudiro, A. (2023). The Right of Inheritance of the Second Wife According to the Civil Code (Study of Supreme Court Decision Number 942/K/PDT/2022). *Interdiciplinary Journal and Hummanity (Injurity)*, 2(11), 967–974. https://doi.org/10.58631/injurity.v2i11.148

Asio, J. M. R., Bayucca, S. A., & Jimenez, E. (2020). Child Protection Policy Awareness of Teachers and Responsiveness of the School: Their Relationship and Implications. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 9(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v9i1.3384

Denashurya, N. I., Nurliza, N., Dolorosa, E., Kurniati, D., & Suswati, D. (2023). Overcoming Barriers to ISPO Certification: Analyzing the Drivers of Sustainable Agricultural Adoption Among Farmers. *Sustainability*, *15*(23), 16507. https://doi.org/10.3390/su152316507

Denby, R. W. (2012). Parental Incarceration and Kinship Care: Caregiver Experiences, Child Well-Being, and Permanency Intentions. *Social Work in Public Health*, *27*(1–2), 104–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2012.639639

Doughty, J., Meakings, S., & Shelton, K. H. (2018). Rights and Relationships of Children Who Are Adopted From Care. *International Journal of Law Policy and the Family*, *33*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1093/lawfam/eby016

Eke, C., Obu, H., Chinawa, J., Adimora, G., & Obi, I. (2014). Perception of Child Adoption Among Parents/Care-Givers of Children Attending Pediatric Outpatients' Clinics in Enugu, South East, Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Clinical Practice*, *17*(2), 188. https://doi.org/10.4103/1119-3077.127549

Faisal, A. (2023). The Intersection of Islamic Law and Nationhood in Contemporary Indonesia. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *3*(2), 141–147. https://doi.org/10.24018/ejsocial.2023.3.2.441

Fenton-Glynn, C. (2020). *Adoption*. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198787518.003.0011

Hakim, A. R., & Hakim, A. R. (2024). Adoption of Children in the Perspective of National Law and Its Relation to Religious Courts. *Kne Social Sciences*. https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v9i2.15007

Hansen, M. E. (2007). Using Subsidies to Promote the Adoption of Children From Foster Care. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, *28*(3), 377–393. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-007-9067-6

Horii, H. (2019). Pluralistic Legal System, Pluralistic Human Rights?: Teenage Pregnancy, Child Marriage and Legal Institutions in Bali. *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, *51*(3), 292–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.2019.1683429

IJzendoorn, M. H. v., Euser, E. M., Prinzie, P., Juffer, F., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2009). Elevated Risk of Child Maltreatment in Families With Stepparents but Not With Adoptive Parents. *Child Maltreatment*, *14*(4), 369–375. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559509342125

Juffer, F., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & IJzendoorn, M. H. v. (2004). The Importance of Parenting in the Development of Disorganized Attachment: Evidence From a Preventive Intervention Study in Adoptive Families. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *46*(3), 263–274. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2004.00353.x

Kadir, N. A., & Mohd, A. (2023). Intercountry Adoption in Malaysia and Morocco: A New Frontier. *Hasanuddin Law Review*, *9*(2), 168. https://doi.org/10.20956/halrev.v9i2.4607

Littleton, C., Star, C., Fisher, M., & Ward, P. (2021). Policy Actors' Perceptions on Applying a SDH Approach in Child Health Policy in Australia: A Cross-disciplinary Approach (Public Health and Political Science). *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, *81*(1), 70–94. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12475

Lubis, A. S., Mina, R. F. P., & Nasution, N. F. (2024). Legal Studies on Child Adoption in the Indonesian Family Context: A Juridical Review. *Jurnal Multidisiplin Madani*, *4*(3), 417–426. https://doi.org/10.55927/mudima.v4i3.8410

Mauraina, G., Pratiwi, A., & Purnama, D. (2021). Child Adoption by Unmarried Person in the Indonesian Civil Law System. *Cepalo*, *5*(2), 141–156. https://doi.org/10.25041/cepalo.v5n02.2390

McMurray, I., Connolly, H., Preston-Shoot, M., & Wigley, V. (2010). Shards of the Old Looking Glass: Restoring the Significance of Identity in Promoting Positive Outcomes for Looked-after Children. *Child & Family Social Work*, *16*(2), 210–218. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00733.x

Mergel, I. (2016). Social Media Institutionalization in the U.S. Federal Government. *Government Information Quarterly*, *33*(1), 142–148. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2015.09.002

Mónico, C. (2021). Implications of Irregular Transnational Adoptions Within International Standards: A Review of Intercountry Adoption Systems and Guatemalan Birthmother Perspectives. *Childhood*, *28*(4), 509–524. https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682211061982

Nada, Q., & Fajriyah, I. M. D. (2023). Authority Reformulation of Gender Equal Marriage Guardians: 4 Jurisprudence Schools Law of Marriage Guardians. *Interdisciplinary Social Studies*, *2*(11), 2560–2569. https://doi.org/10.55324/iss.v2i11.520

Naddour, J., Bosqui, T., Issa, S., Assi, N. E., Majdalani, M., Sawaya, R. D., & Dirani, L. A. (2024). How a Collapsing State Impacts Child Safeguarding: Reflecting on the Challenges of Implementing a Hospital-based Child Safeguarding Program in Lebanon. *Child Abuse Review*, *33*(5). https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2901

Nam, Y., & Han, C. (2010). A New Approach to Promote Economic Independence Among at-Risk Children: Child Development Accounts (CDAs) in Korea. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *32*(11), 1548–1554. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.04.009

Nugroho, F. (2023). Child Abuse and Kinship Guardianship: Social Work and Indigenization Perspectives in Indonesia. *Afri. J. Soc. Work*, *13*(5), 224–234. https://doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v13i5.1

Omosun, A., & Kofoworola, O. (2011). Knowledge, Attitude and Practice Towards Child Adoption Amongst Women Attending Infertility Clinics in Lagos State, Nigeria. *African Journal of Primary Health Care & Family Medicine*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.4102/phcfm.v3i1.259

Onyiriuka, A. N. (2019). Child Adoption, Posttraumatic-Stress Disorder and the Role of a Paediatrician in the Adoption Process. *Journal of Nepal Paediatric Society*, *38*(2), 110–117. https://doi.org/10.3126/jnps.v38i2.20815

Pilcher, J., Flaherty, J., Deakin-Smith, H., Coffey, A., & Makis, E. (2023). Surnames in Adoption: (Re)creating Identities of Belonging. *Genealogy*, *7*(4), 92. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7040092

Pösö, T. (2009). Memories About the Intercountry Adoption of Finnish Children: Decisions About the Child's Best Interests. *Adoption & Fostering*, *33*(4), 53–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590903300407

Poveda, D., Rubio, M. I. J., & Rivas, A. M. R. (2013). Professional Discourses on Single Parenthood in International Adoptions in Spain. *Polar Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, *36*(1), 35–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/plar.12002

Prakasa, S. U. W. & Asis. (2023). *International Fund Assistance and It's Eradication of Corruption in Indonesia: International Law Perspectives*. 413–420. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-022-0_44

Pratiwi, W., & Fitri, S. N. (2023). Towards the Unification of Inheritance Law in Indonesia: Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Religious and Cultural Diversity. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Analysis*, *06*(12). https://doi.org/10.47191/ijmra/v6-i12-55

Ramdani, I. (2021). INTERVENSI PEKERJA SOSIAL GENERALIS TERADAP KLIEN ANAK: Pekerja Sosial Perlindungan Anak Kementerian Sosial RI di D.I. Yogyakarta. *WELFARE : Jurnal Ilmu Kesejahteraan Sosial*, *9*(1). https://doi.org/10.14421/welfare.2020.091-03

Randall, D., Childers-Buschle, K., Anderson, A., & Taylor, J. (2015). An Analysis of Child Protection 'Standard Operating Procedures for Research' in Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom. *BMC Medical Ethics*, *16*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-015-0058-0

Skidmore, M., Anderson, G. C., & Eiswerth, M. E. (2014). The Child Adoption Marketplace. *Public Finance Review*, *44*(2), 163–196. https://doi.org/10.1177/1091142114547412

Tan, T. X., & Yi, Z. (2019). Is Adoption Equally Beneficial to Different Aspects of Youth's Behavioral Health? Findings From Comparing Adopted Chinese Youth With Non-Adopted American and Chinese Youth. *Youth & Society*, *53*(1), 153–169. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x19849742

White, K. (2015). Placement Discontinuity for Older Children and Adolescents Who Exit Foster Care Through Adoption or Guardianship: A Systematic Review. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *33*(4), 377–394. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-015-0425-1

Yığıtbaş, Ç., & Top, F. Ü. (2020). The Implementation of Child Rights in Healthcare Services. *Nursing Ethics*, 27(7), 1517–1528. https://doi.org/10.1177/0969733020922883