



Home Not a Safe Haven for Girls: A Study on Sexual Abuse of Girl Children

Harpreet Kaur Sawhney PhD

Centre for Distance and Open Education, Punjabi University, Patiala.

Ritu Lehal PhD

School of Applied Management, Punjabi University, Patiala.

Sukhwinder Singh PhD

Women's Studies Centre, Punjabi University, Patiala.

Keywords

Incest,
Socio-economic Status,
Income Level,
Education,
Sexual Abuse,
Perpetrator.

Abstract

A country's future depends largely on its young. Ensuring that children have a safe and healthy upbringing is essential to their success as they grow from infants to teenagers and adults. Child sexual abuse is one of the most serious societal issues of our day and is considered a serious criminal offence. As per NCRB Report, 2022, 99.7% of victims of child sexual abuse were known to the offenders, out of which, 12.08% of the victims were abused by a family member only, indicating a high incidence of incest. Addressing child abuse, especially within families and communities, is a complex and challenging task. Due to feelings of shame, remorse, and intimidation by the abusers as well as the fear of social rejection and loss of family honour, the abused do not come out. As such, an attempt is made to study the abuse of girl children, in collaboration with a hospital, where the abused have sought treatment, in Patiala district of Punjab. The purpose of the study is to find out the demographic profile of the abused female children along with the measures to check sexual abuse.

I. Introduction

The destiny of any nation hinges significantly upon its youth. The cultivation of a secure and wholesome childhood is pivotal for children as they traverse the journey from infancy through adolescence and into adulthood. It is imperative to recognize that children, owing to their inherent immaturity, innocence, dependence, and heightened vulnerability, are predisposed to become susceptible targets for exploitation, both by individuals within their immediate familial circles and by those within society at large.

The pervasive scourge of child sexual abuse manifests as a grave and prevailing issue on a global scale. Child sexual abuse stands as a formidable criminal transgression, representing one of the paramount social challenges of contemporary times. Whenever a child falls victim to sexual exploitation at the hands of another individual, it invariably exacts a deleterious toll on the child's rights. Child sexual abuse, as a form of child

maltreatment, encompasses situations wherein an adult or an older adolescent, occupying a position of responsibility, trust, or authority, engages in the sexual exploitation of a child to gratify their own sexual desires and inclinations.

Gender disparities have historically persisted in the lives of female children. Within households, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged and marginalized strata of society, a strong preference towards male offspring prevails. Male children are routinely accorded educational opportunities, while their female counterparts are predominantly relegated to domestic pursuits. This discriminatory bias endures, perpetuated by customs and conventions that position girls as subservient to boys, characterized by a gender-biased perspective that treats girl children as burdens, liabilities, and even commodities (Kapur, 1995).

The perpetuation of these attitudes is aggravated by endemic illiteracy, economic destitution, and detrimental parental lifestyle choices, collectively contributing to the perpetuation of the abuse of female children. These compounding factors are underpinned by entrenched patriarchal value systems, which encompass a gamut of challenges, including female infanticide, feticide, limited social and economic prospects, oppressive domestic labor, neglect, substandard living conditions, sexual abuse, and exploitation, as well as forced prostitution and rape, all while denying these girls their fundamental right to protection. These multifaceted issues collectively conspire to burden girls with a host of daunting challenges with which they are compelled to grapple.

Scenario of Child Sexual Abuse in India

India hosts the second-largest child population globally, accounting for 19% of the total children in the world, with 18% of them below the age of 18 (Subramaniyan et al., 2017). Within India, there are 472 million children aged 0–18, constituting 39% of the country's total population. Among them, 247.5 million (52.4%) are male, and 224.6 million (47.6%) are female. The age distribution is as follows: 138.9 million children (29.4%) are in the 0–5 year age group, 100.9 million (21.4%) in the 6–9 year age group, 132.7 million (28.1%) in the 10–14 years age group, and 99.7 million (21.1%) in the 15–18 year age group. India also houses 128.5 million children in urban areas, constituting 34% of the total urban population. Among them, 67.7 million (52.7%) are male, and 60.7 million (47.3%) are female (National Institute of Urban Affairs, Status of Children in Urban India, 2016).

In the year 2021, a total of 428,278 cases of crimes against women were registered, reflecting a 15.3% increase over the previous year (2020), which recorded 371,503 cases (National Crime Records Bureau, NCRB, 2022). In percentage terms, major crime categories under 'Crime Against Children' in 2020 included Kidnapping and Abduction (45.0%) and violations of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (38.1%), which encompasses child rape (NCRB, 2022). Regrettably, Delhi has earned the unfortunate distinction of being the crime capital, with an alarming average of two minor girls being raped daily in the national capital, rendering it the most unsafe metropolitan city for women across the country, according to the report.

As per the latest data from the National Crime Records Bureau, a total of 2,556 (NCRB Report 2022) cases of crimes against children, including trafficking, kidnapping, begging, murder, sexual assault and so on were registered in Punjab last year. There was a sharp spike in the number of cases in Punjab under the POCSO Act, from 389 in 2019 to

720 cases in 2020, the year of lock-down and 601 in 2021. The state has a poor conviction rate of 25.2% (NCRB Report 2022) in cases of crime with children. 100% of crimes were committed against girl children. 99.7% of victims were known to offenders, out of which, 12.08% of the victims were abused by a family member only, indicating a high incidence of incest.(NCRB Report, 2022).

It is essential to understand the causes of sexual abuse to identify the same. Kewalramani, in his study, approached the problem of sexual abuse with a 'systems model' and perceived it as a behaviour that is influenced by factors at several different levels. The analysis of the family environment revealed that conflict between parents and weakening of inhibitions leading to neglect of children, absence of affectionate protection of the child, alcoholism of the bread-winner male member, his lack of accountability, adequate control on the children, illicit relations involving mother, dominance of stepfather and social isolation of the family were more important factors of child sexual abuse (Kewalramani, 1992).

As such, an attempt is made to study the abuse of girl children, in collaboration with a hospital, where the abused have sought treatment, in Patiala district of Punjab. The purpose of the study is to find out the demographic profile of abused and perpetrators of girl children and to suggest measures to check sexual abuse.

II. Review of Literature

The current study draws from a broader systematic review which is aimed at examining the prevalence, determinants and consequences of female child sexual abuse in India.

Carson, et al.(2013) in their study pointed out that child sexual abuse (CSA) is a severe and pervasive issue in India, just as it is in many other parts of the world today. Sexual abuse trauma can cause developmental delays and a variety of psychological and emotional issues that some children and adolescents may never fully recover from. When sexual abuse is not reported, children are forced to suffer in silence without receiving the protective and therapeutic support they require.

Kusuma (2015) tried to analyse the levels of sexual abuse of female children in rural and urban areas of Tirupati and to assess the parenting practices of female children in rural and urban areas of Tirupati. She concluded that the sexual abuse of female children can only be controlled through the combined efforts of family and schools, where the female children are taught and trained to face such abuse by exposing the abusers.

Belur et al (2015). The legal aspect of child sexual abuse has been discussed by the researchers. Their work highlights both the expected advantages and the unintended results that could result from the adoption of POCSO in the Indian setting. Without a doubt, the passage of POCSO represents a significant accomplishment.

Kapur (2017) studied the status of girl child in India. She opined that provision of education, health care facilities, adequate diet and nutrition and amenities and facilities render a significant contribution towards child development. The main areas that have been taken into account in this research paper include demographic profile of children, different situations experienced by children, education, health status, nutritional status, child labour, crime against children, and protection of children from abuse and neglect, and national policies and programs for children.

Choudhury et al (2018) conducted a systematic review of fifty-one studies related to child sexual abuse in India. The review indicates that prevalence rates of CSA are high among both boys and girls in India. They concluded that CSA is a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in the interplay between individual, family, community, and societal factors. The patriarchal societal norms and power differentials in such societies based on class, gender, and sexual preferences emerged as common descriptive themes that increased the risks of CSA.

Hotchandani (2018) attempted to study the impact of the POCSO Act after its enactment and enforcement and to assess the contribution of the POCSO Act in solving the cases of child sexual abuse. She concluded that a child who suffers sexual abuse needs to have a psychological support and counselling in a most friendly way. The doctor who is attending a child must deal with him/her in the friendliest form, making them feel least distressful. Mishra and Singh (2019) in their study examined the significance of kids for the development of the nation. They primarily addressed the problem of child sexual abuse and its effect on children. The Constitutional issues and child rights in India are also covered further in this paper. The judicial and legislative activities on child sexual abuse have been discussed in this paper.

Kapur (2019) observed that in some rural communities, girl children are regarded as liabilities and there is a preference for male children. The various issues concerning girl child have been discussed. She suggested that it is highly imperative to formulate measures that would eliminate evil practices like female feticide, child marriage, malnutrition, exploitation, child trafficking and child abuse. Opportunities should be provided to facilitate education and employment among them.

Roy and Madiki (2020) In their study, examined the problem of child sexual abuse. This study was aimed at gathering information and comprehending the psychological shift that results from sexual abuse, as well as the child's level of awareness of the numerous illegal behaviours that he or she may have already encountered. Further, the research sheds light on the social machinery that is in place to address the brutality of sexual abuse and to give education, rights protection, and psychological assistance that may stop this problem in its tracks.

Singh and Kumar (2022) observe that with passage of time, the legislature has tried its best to protect female children and women and brought a number of acts to provide safety to them. They discussed various landmark judgments and suggested that Human Rights & its Law must be included in the syllabus as a compulsory subject of schools, colleges, universities and in other required institutions or organizations or establishments. Human rights and laws must be taught.

Maity and Chakraborty (2023) have tried to examine whether the "Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act" (PCSO) (2012), contributes to reducing "sexual abuse of children" in India and whether the escalation of "Quality of life" also entails a reduction in "sexual abuse of children". They found that improvement in "quality of life" ensures child protection together with the up-gradation of human capital, thereby enhancement of socio-economic conditions and that results in enhancing the safety and security of all.

Kumaravel et al (2023) in their research have described the profile of girl child sexual abuse reported to a tertiary care hospital. A retrospective analysis of CSA reported

in children aged below 18 years from January, 2019 to June, 2022 was undertaken. Out of 231 cases of sexual abuse reported, in the majority of cases children were below 18 years, followed by children from 10 to 15 years, and there be only two male victims. In 89.6%, the perpetrator was known to the victim. Revictimization was seen in 31%. The reported perpetrators were friends (27%), neighbours (34.8%), strangers (10.4%), or fathers (7.8%). They opined that early identification of CSA is important to prevent revictimization. Children from all age groups can be victims of CSA. Perpetrators can hail from all walks of life.

Need of the Study

There are many children in India, and a sizeable portion of them experience abuse, exploitation, or neglect. Nationwide, there is not enough information available about child abuse. Except for a few infrequent, small-scale study endeavours, insufficient efforts have been made to investigate the various forms and levels of child abuse across the country. Every year, the only source of information is crime data, which is provided by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). According to NCRB statistics, only offences that can be prosecuted under the IPC or other criminal Acts are recorded. The NCRB figures do not account for practices like corporal punishment, child pornography, exposure, or other types of abuse. There is a gross under-reporting of crimes against children, which in itself reveals low priority accorded to the children by parents, caregivers and the community members (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007). The lack of speedy justice further aggravates this malady, leading to re-victimisation many times. As a result, an effort is made to research the abuse of girl children in partnership with a hospital in the Patiala district of Punjab, where the abused have sought medical attention. The goal of the study is to determine how vulnerable girl children are, as well as the protective measures taken by families of abused female children. The study aims to debunk the stigma around child abuse by examining the demographics of sexual abuse victims and offenders. The study will aid in the development of suitable policies, strategies, and plans to address the problem of girl child abuse. The present study has the following objectives.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the demographic profile of the abused girl children and perpetrators of abuse.*
- To suggest measures to prevent sexual abuse of girl children.*

III. Research Methodology

Scope

The present study has been conducted on an issue which is not only a social taboo, but also demands effective redressal machinery, due to which there is limited research on this subject. Due to the prevalence of eve-teasing and harassment of women in Northern India, which is fueled by a patriarchal mentality and a lack of prompt redress for victims, the study assumes increased relevance. The current study intends to provide a deeper and broader understanding of the malady of girl child sexual abuse because there is little research on the topic in the setting of Punjab, specifically Patiala. This study was conducted in the Children's ward at the Government Rajindra Hospital in Patiala, which offers medical care to victims of sexual assault. The largest government hospital in Patiala district is Government Rajindra Hospital, which offers low-cost medical care to

those living in the city and nearby rural areas. The data of abused girl children was provided by a leading pediatrician, at the Children's ward, in Government Rajindra Hospital, Patiala, where these exploited female children sought medical treatment. The medical condition of the victims could not be concealed from the pediatrician and her medical staff, who made painstaking efforts in motivating them to divulge the details of their trauma.

Data Collection

Both qualitative and quantitative research techniques were used in this study. Collecting authentic data is a significant difficulty in these investigations. Due to feelings of humiliation, regret, remorse and intimidation by the abusers as well as the fear of social rejection and loss of family honour, the abused do not come out. In order to obtain accurate information from them, the pediatrician and her medical team conducted in-person interviews with the abused female children and their parents. It was difficult to get information out of such victims. The research team had to put in extra effort through counselling to get authentic information from them.

Sample Size

Although, the incidence of sexual harassment of girl children is very high, only 40 victims and their families, who had sought treatment at Government Rajindra Hospital, could be cajoled into sharing their trauma. Most of the victims and their parents choose not to discuss or disclose the abuse. The pediatrician was able to identify a select few patients who sought medical care based on their behaviour and the damage they had sustained. The victims and their parents refused to speak up out of concern for social rejection and loss of family honour, so the pediatrician and her medical staff had to convince them to reveal details of the atrocities they had endured. Additionally, in the pediatrician's perspective, this figure closely captures the annual cases of sexual assault of young girls who seek treatment at Government Rajindra Hospital.

Sampling Design

For the current study, Purposive Sampling method was adopted to serve the objectives of the study. Primary data was collected with structured questionnaire and personal interviews by the pediatrician and her medical staff, with abused girl children and their families, who came for treatment at the Children's ward at Government Rajindra Hospital, Patiala. The study used secondary sources like journals, reports of National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Ministry of Child and Women Development, (MCWD), to understand the nature of girl child sexual abuse.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

The abuse of female children is rampant in India, especially when it occurs in the home or by family members. In general, abuse has received more attention in areas that are more visible, such as child labour, prostitution, marriage, and other situations. In the vast majority of cases of girl child abuse in our country, the perpetrator is a well-known individual. They could be a neighbour, a member of the community, a relative, or even a family member. Addressing child abuse, especially within families and communities, is a complex and challenging task. Due to feelings of shame, remorse, and intimidation by the abusers as well as the fear of social rejection and loss of family honour, the abused

do not come out. Many victims do not report when the attacker is a family member for fear of social disgrace. Minors are sometimes unaware that they are being wronged. Crimes against children are grossly under-reported, which shows that parents, careers, and community members do not give them the importance they deserve. Even the strongest police apparatus and the strictest laws cannot guarantee the prevention of sexual violence against female children. Police have the authority to penalise the culprit after the crime has been committed. However, the harm has already been done. A prison sentence for the accused comes after years of legal battle and does little to assist the victim in coping with lifelong anguish. Many victims are forced to amend their statements in court simply because the subject has been 'amicably settled' among the elders. On the basis of a structured questionnaire, primary data was collected from the victims. The demographic profile of the victims of Child Sexual Abuse and offenders is being discussed here.

Table 1: Population group-wise number of the victims

| Residence | Responses in % |
|------------|----------------|
| Rural | 17% |
| Urban | 50% |
| Semi-urban | 33% |

The demographic profile of girl child abuse victims has been analysed. Table1 indicates that the majority of the families of the victims reside in urban areas i.e.50%, followed by families residing in semi-urban areas i.e.33%; and rural areas comprise a 17% share of total families. The density of the population in the urban areas has drastically increased because of the migration of people from the rural areas who were basically an agrarian population, but now intend to become industrial workers with the hope of a better lifestyle, including quality education for their children, updated health facilities (Krishna, 2011).

Table 2: Siblings of the victims

| Number of siblings | Responses in % |
|--------------------|----------------|
| None | 5% |
| 1 | 29% |
| 2 | 20% |
| 3 | 20% |
| More | 26% |

Table2 depicts the number of siblings of the abused.29% of the victims' families of abused have one sibling and 20% have more than two siblings, followed by 20% of abused with three siblings each.26% of the victims had more than three siblings. This indicates that girl children with three or more siblings may be subject to greater neglect, leading to greater vulnerability to exploitation. This indicates that as the size of a family increases, there is greater vulnerability of girl children to abuse.

Table 3: Family type of the victims

| Family Type | Responses in % |
|-------------|----------------|
| Nuclear | 39% |
| Joint | 61% |

Table 3 depicts a large number i.e., 61% of the victims are living in joint families, while 39% are living in nuclear families. It seems that female children in joint families are more prone to abuse by their own kith and kin. This is in conformity with the national data, which indicates incest as a major contributor of abuse. This could be due to a greater probability of incest in bigger joint families.

Table 4: Family members of the victims

| Number of members | Responses in % |
|-------------------|----------------|
| 2 | 3% |
| 3 | 8% |
| 4 | 8% |
| 5 | 19% |
| None | 62% |

Table 4 shows that 62% of the victims have more than five family members, followed by 19% of victims having five members and 8% of victims have four or three family members. This shows that even a big family, with more than five members cannot protect the girl children from abuse or effectively take care of them.

Table 5: Caste of the victims

| Caste | Responses in % |
|---------|----------------|
| General | 28% |
| OBC | 25% |
| SC | 47% |

Table 5 indicates the caste profile of the victims. As far as caste is concerned, 47% belong to the SC category, followed by 28% belonging to the general category and 25% comprising of the OBC category. The lower castes are often targets for any form of crime, as corroborated by various studies (Bower, 2003; by waters, et al., 2016; Sexton and Sobelson, 2018).

Table 6: Domicile Status of the victims

| Status | Responses in % |
|----------|----------------|
| Migrated | 39% |
| Native | 61% |

Table 6 shows that a significant number of girl children victims i.e. 39% are migrants, compared to 61% of victims who are natives of this state. This could be due to the fact that the natives are more aware of the loopholes of the law and are in an advantageous position compared to migrants, who have to struggle with survival issues.

Table 7: Education of the victim's Father

| Education | Responses in % |
|-------------|----------------|
| Uneducated | 40% |
| Primary | 18% |
| Middle | 8% |
| High School | 3% |
| UG | 3% |
| PG | 28% |

The educational status of the fathers of the abused female child victims is indicated in Table 7. A substantial proportion of fathers of victims i.e. 40% are uneducated. Uneducated fathers constitute the largest share, among the fathers of victims, i.e. 40%. This has been corroborated by Deb and Mukherjee, (2011) who concluded that the majority of the sexually abused girls came from families that were rural, poor, low in educational background, and of a nuclear family structure. Surprisingly, 28% of fathers of victims are postgraduates, followed by 18% having primary education. A negligible number i.e. 3% of fathers had passed high school and 3% of fathers were undergraduates. 8% of fathers had middle level education.

Table 8: Education of the victim's Mother

| Education | Responses in % |
|-------------|----------------|
| Uneducated | 45% |
| Primary | 14% |
| Middle | 5% |
| High School | 11% |
| UG | 8% |
| PG | 17% |

Table 8 brings out the harsh fact that 45% of the mothers of the abused female children were uneducated. Only 14% of the mothers had primary education, 5% had education up to the middle level and 11% up to high school level. 17% were post graduates and 8% were undergraduates. Thus, the abuse of girl children is more in families where both father and mother are uneducated, as depicted in tables 11 and 12.

Table 9: Monthly income of the victim's family

| Income | Responses in % |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 0-20000Rs | 66% |
| 20001Rs-30000Rs | 17% |
| 30001Rs-40000Rs | 0 |
| Above 40001Rs | 17% |

Table 9 highlights that the economic status of the families of the female children victims is not sound, as corroborated by the fact that 66% of the total families have monthly income up to Rs 20,000 followed by 17% of family members having monthly income between Rs 20,000-30,000 and only 17% having monthly income above Rs 40,000. Economically weaker and vulnerable are always found to be the soft target for any crime, particularly in developing countries (Bower, 2003; by waters, et al., 2016; Sexton and Sobelson, 2018). Many poverty-related factors which contribute to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children are abandonment, moving to industrial areas, starting to work from a very young age and educational deprivation. Children belonging to lower socio-economic group are subjected to higher level of sexual abuse as compared to those belonging to middle and upper socio-economic status, clearly highlighting the influence of socio-economic status as an important determinant to be considered as a causal factor of sexual abuse among children. (Pratibha et al. 2016)

Table 10: Religion of the victims

| Religion | Responses in % |
|----------|----------------|
| Sikh | 28% |

| | |
|-----------|-----|
| Hindu | 53% |
| Muslim | 8% |
| Christian | 11% |

As far as religious inclinations are concerned, Table 10 indicates that the majority of the victims' families follow Hinduism, i.e. 53%; followed by 28% following Sikhism; 11% following Christianity and 8% following Islam. The incidence of abuse is highest among Hindus simply because their population is large. Although sexual exploitation and abuse is strongly correlated to poverty, it occurs in families across the socioeconomic and religious spectrum. (Carson et al. 2013).

Table 11: Victims are staying with parent/parents

| Staying with | Responses in % |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| With Both (Father and Mother) | 94% |
| Only with Father | 6% |
| Only with Mother | 0 |

Table 11 reveals that the abused female children were largely staying with both their parents i.e., 94%. of the abused children are living with both their parents. Only 6% of them live with either of their parents. This indicates the fact that girl children who stay with both their parents are also not insulated from this problem and are vulnerable.

Table 12: Health profile of the Victims

| Status | Responses in % |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Normal Health | 67% |
| Physically Disabled | 14% |
| Ill | 8% |
| Any other | 11% |

Table 12 indicates the health status of the abused. Incidentally, 67% of the abused girls had normal health; 8% were ill while 11% were suffering from some disability. The children who suffer from health problems and disabilities are more likely to get subjected to different forms of abuse and mistreatment (Kapur, 2018). The major reason attributed to this tendency of the abusers is that they feel these children will not be able to complain against them to anybody and even if they do complain, the perpetrators will not be identified.

Table 13: Is the victim going to school?

| Going to school | Responses in % |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Yes | 36% |
| No | 64% |

It has been observed in Table 13 that 36% of the victims went to school while 64% did not go, which is a matter of grave concern. Children become an easy target for any type of sexual assault when their parents are not present. (Maity and Chakraborty, 2023). Moreover, going to school increases the awareness among children about good and bad touch and provides a safe environment for them.

Table 13.1: If not going to school, what is she doing?

| Activity of the abused not going to school | Responses in % |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Free | 17% |
| Care of Siblings at home | 10% |

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| Working at a shop | 30% |
| Domestic helper | 26% |
| Any other | 17% |

On analysing the profile of the female child victims not going to school as per Table 13.1 that 30% work in shops 26% serve as domestic workers, 10% take care of their siblings, while 17% are free. The parents of these girl children are poverty-stricken, deprived and socio-economically backward sections of the society, who consider girls as encumbrances. As they are not sufficiently educated, they have to perform petty jobs and do not have adequate resources to fulfill their needs. Consequently, they feel that sending girls to schools, purchasing books, bags, uniforms and paying school fees is a waste of monetary resources.

Table 13.2: If not working, with whom does she spend time?

| Time spent With | Responses in % |
|-----------------|----------------|
| Parents | 0 |
| Friends | 28% |
| Siblings | 56% |
| Neighbours | 16% |
| Any other | 0 |

Table 13.2 indicates that the children who are not working and spend time with their siblings constitute 56% of the victims, while 28% spend time with their siblings and 16% spend time with their neighbours. This indicates that the siblings of these girl children are unable to protect them from this exploitation. Neighbours and friends are also unable to provide protection against this heinous crime. Thus, girl children do not get protection from their family and social structures.

Table 13.3: With whom does the victim spend time after school?

| With whom spent time | Responses in % |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Parents | 23% |
| Friends | 38.4% |
| Siblings | 15.3% |
| Neighbours | 15.3% |
| Any other | 8% |

Table 13.3 depicts the people with whom the abused female children spend time after school. Friends are the people with whom the maximum time has been spent, i.e. 38.4%, followed by parents, i.e. 23% lastly % and by siblings and neighbours, each constituting 15.3%. Any other includes staying with grandparents and living with cousins and going to tuition. This shows that girl children are most unsafe when they are with their friends, followed by parents, siblings and neighbours. This is due to the fact that friends of the female children would also be of the same age as the victims themselves. As such, they are not powerful enough to protect their friends.

Table 14: Place of sexual abuse

| Place of abuse | Responses in % |
|----------------|----------------|
| Home | 52% |
| School | 6% |
| Field | 16% |

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| Work Place | 6% |
| Deserted Place | 8% |
| Any other | 12% |

Table 14 indicates the site of sexual abuse. It is heart-wrenching to observe that the majority of the cases of sexual abuse, i.e. 52% have taken place at the homes of these hapless girls. This is in contrast with the study of Agatha et al, (2012), who reported a higher occurrence of abuse in the perpetrator's house. This forces us to ask ourselves, if the home is not a safe haven for children, then where can they be safe? 16% of the abused girls have been violated in fields, probably when their parents were earning their livelihood. 8% of girls have been abused in deserted places, away from the watchful eyes of the public and police. 6% of the victims have been harassed at their schools, while another 6% have been violated in at the workplace of their parents.

Table 15: Age of the child experiencing CSA for the first time

| Age of victim | Responses in % |
|---------------|----------------|
| 0-6 years | 6% |
| 7-10 years | 50% |
| 11-14 years | 11% |
| 15-18 years | 33% |

Table 15 indicates that 50% of the abused female children belonged to the age group 7-10 years, 33% of the abused were between 15-18 years old; 11% were between 11-14 years and 6% of victims were below 6 years of age. The incidence of this crime is maximum in the age-group of 7-10 years and least in the age-group 11-14 years. With increase in age, probably the awareness of girls increases, which could be the reason for fewer incidents of abuse among older girls. It is indeed harrowing to note that 50% of the total victims have been innocent pre-pubescent girls, of the age-group 7-10 years, which shows the mental depravity of the culprits. Age is no bar for the violators and even female children up to six years have also been victims of this shameful act.

Table 16: Who is the Perpetrator?

| Perpetrator | Responses in % |
|-------------|----------------|
| Father | 22% |
| Grandfather | 8% |
| Step-father | 5% |
| Relatives | 14% |
| Friends | 17% |
| Neighbours | 11% |
| Siblings | 3% |
| Teacher | 3% |
| Servant | 3% |
| Total known | (86%) |
| Stranger | 14% |
| Total | 100% |

One shudders to accept the fact depicted in Table 16 that the perpetrator of this heinous crime has been the father of the female child in most of the cases i.e. 22%; followed by friends i.e. 17%; relatives and strangers both 14% each. This indicates that

incest is the biggest contributor to this dastardly act. Neighbours were the evildoers in 11% of the cases, followed by grandfathers in 8% of the victims; stepfather was the culprit in 5% of the cases. This has been corroborated by Benedet and Grant (2020), who found that sexual abuse by fathers, may be the easiest to perpetrate, the hardest to uncover and the most damaging to the victims. Siblings and servants were the offenders in 3% of these cases. Thus, 86% of the offenders are known to the abused. Furthermore, fathers, grandfathers, stepfathers and relatives together constituted 49% of the perpetrators of this abuse. When the protectors become the predators, then the safety of the girls is endangered. This reveals the mental depravity and the degradation of the moral fabric of the society where even a daughter is not safe with her father. In the Indian scenario, we can say that 90% of the accused are known to the child (Maity, 2022). Parents and/or close relatives are the most common perpetrators of Child Abuse and Neglect (Deb, 2005; Deb and Mukherjee 2009), which includes child sexual abuse (Virani 2000). Girl children, who occupy a lower status in the family and society, are particularly vulnerable to CAN, including sexually abusive acts (Chawla 2004; Deb and Mukherjee 2009).

Table 17: Age of the perpetrator

| Age | Responses in % |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| Child (Below 18 years of Age) | 28% |
| Young (Between 19-35 years) | 50% |
| Middle Aged (Between 36-60 years) | 19% |
| Old Person (Above 60 years) | 3% |

On analysing the age of the culprits, as per Table 17, it is evident that 50% of the wrongdoers are young (18-35 years); followed by adolescents (children below 18 years of age) 28% of total wrongdoers and 19% were middle-aged people. In India, aged 40 and above, alcoholic, addicted to pornography, illiterate or minor literate, are the common characteristics of the accused of the POCSO Act (2012) (Chowdhuri and Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

Major Findings

Sexual abuse not only violates a child's physical and emotional boundaries but also shatters their trust in adults and can lead to severe psychological trauma. The effects of such abuse can manifest in various ways, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, self-esteem issues, and a range of behavioral problems. These scars can persist into adulthood and affect a person's overall well-being and ability to form healthy relationships.

Girl children from poverty-ridden families, with poor educational backgrounds are the soft targets for this crime. Children from lower socioeconomic groups experience more sexual abuse than those from middle and upper socioeconomic groups do. As earning a livelihood and sustaining themselves was most important for them, they were not able to think beyond it, and could not answer the questions about the emotional aspects of abuse, asked in the questionnaires prepared by the researchers. The study found that the majority of the families of the victims reside in urban areas and belonged to the low income strata. It was found that sexual exploitation and abuse occurred in all families irrespective of any religious inclination. Despite the fact that the majority of the abused female children were largely staying with both their parents, they were still not

insulated from this problem and are vulnerable. The girl children who suffer from health problems and disabilities were more prone to different forms of abuse and mistreatment. The majority of the victims were living in joint families. It seems that female children in joint families are more prone to abuse by their own kith and kin. A large number of victims had more than five siblings, but were still not safe and suffered abuse. This indicates that girl children with three or more siblings may be subject to greater neglect, leading to greater vulnerability to exploitation. It is heart-wrenching to observe that the majority of the cases of sexual abuse have taken place at the homes of these hapless girls. After school, these victims stayed with their siblings, neighbours and friends, who were also unable to provide protection against this heinous crime. The majority of the abused girl children were not going to school, which is a matter of grave concern. Children become an easy target for any type of sexual assault when their parents are not present. The parents of these girl children are poverty-stricken, deprived and socio-economically backward sections of the society, who consider girls as encumbrances. As they are not sufficiently educated, they have to perform petty jobs and do not have adequate resources to fulfill their needs. Consequently, they feel that sending girls to schools, purchasing books, bags, uniforms and paying school fees is wastage of money. The incidence of sexual abuse of girls was maximum in the age-group of 7-10 years. It is indeed harrowing to note that 50% of the total victims have been innocent pre-pubescent girls, of the age-group 7-10 years, which shows the mental depravity of the culprits. Age is no bar for the violators and even female children up to six years have also been victims of this shameful act. It has been found that incest is the biggest contributor to this dastardly act. It is even more harrowing that among these known circle of people, fathers of these girls are the wrong doers. When the protectors become the predators, then the safety of the girls is endangered. This reveals the sickness and the degradation of the moral fabric of the society where even a daughter is not safe in her own house. This crime has been committed mostly in the homes of these girls, which are supposed to be a safe haven for them.

Implications for Society

Preventing child sexual abuse, especially of girls, and providing them with support is a critical societal duty. It involves raising awareness, educating children and adults about recognising abuse and implementing legal measures to hold perpetrators accountable. Additionally, offering therapeutic and counseling services to victims is essential to help them heal and recover.

Economically weaker and vulnerable are always found to be the soft target for any crime, particularly in developing countries. Socio-economic status has a significant impact and should be taken into account as a causal factor in cases of girl child sexual abuse. As such, emphasis should be placed on the enrolment of children, especially girls, in schools and encourage them to continue education. The states need to ensure that basic education is available, accessible and adaptable for all. Provision of education is one of the most productive investments that can be made by the family, community and the whole country. Education will empower girls of all ages, and equip them to recognise “good and bad touch”, and voice against any “kind of sexual offence” without fear or guilt. Through education, awareness can be created about the fact that, through dialing Child helpline, help is just a call away; many such crimes can be prevented.

Family structures need to be strengthened and enriched. Parents should openly discuss about good and bad touch with their children, especially daughters and sensitise them about such horrendous acts. The parents and children need to be sensitised about the usage and availability of the Child helpline number. Only then will they have the confidence to use this number and avoid this exploitation.

There should be simplicity and greater accessibility of redressal mechanisms so that children and communities have ease in reporting crimes. Only detecting and punishing such offences on a fast-track basis can prevent such crimes. The protection of girl children is a dire need of urban India. In this respect, the local-state-central governments need to work in tandem and ensure the rights of children. It requires a multi-faceted approach involving education, legal reforms, community engagement, and a shift in societal attitudes. Organizations, government agencies, and concerned individuals must work together to create a safer environment for children and ensure that perpetrators of child abuse are held accountable for their actions.

It is highly imperative that the capacities of the law enforcement authorities, judiciary and other child protection human resources within the government are built up to ensure speedy justice in case of crimes against children in a humane and appropriate manner. Doctors, along with teachers and parents, are, many times, the first to identify these vulnerable children and have a primary responsibility of championing the drive towards soothing the inflicted physical and mental wounds of the victims, as well as eradicating this evil from our societies. It is important that teacher training and school level policies take account of the POCSO act and also sensitise teachers and school heads to report abuse. A multi-disciplinary response is necessary for comprehensive management that includes psychological support to the victim and the family. Parents, school teachers and the civil society at large must overcome the traditional inimical attitudes of silence and shame and take appropriate educative measures to prevent CSA.

However, like all laws, POCSO applies only after a crime is reported; prevention requires interventions which are not necessarily only legal in nature. The victims should be provided free counselling by psychologists to enable them to cope with the psychological and emotional trauma. Awareness about such counselling facilities should be spread among the vulnerable and affected victims. Makers, guardians, and enforcers of the law have a role in providing adequate checks and balances in the system. The POCSO Act envisages a multidisciplinary approach that will be conducive to medical care and justice delivery for a sexually abused child. This can be achieved when all key stakeholders such as Juvenile Police Units, Child Welfare Committees, District Child Protection Units, health professionals, mental health professionals including psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors, child developmental experts, medical social workers, advocates, magistrates and members of the legal profession work in tandem.

References

- Agatha, G., & Bk, M. (2019). Profile of victims examined under POCSO Act 2012, in *JNIMS, Imphal. International J Health Res Medico Legal Practice*, 5, 13.
- Asha, B. (2017). Child sexual abuse: Need for law reforms. *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 57(4), 630-639.
- Bower, C. (2003). The relationship between child abuse and poverty. *Agenda*, 17(56), 84-87.

- Bywaters, P., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., Hanratty, J., Mason, W., McCartan, C., & Steils, N. (2016). *The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: An evidence review*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Benedet, J., & Grant, I. (2020). Breaking the Silence on Father-Daughter Sexual Abuse of Adolescent Girls: A Case Law Study. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 32(2), 239-287.
- Belur, J., & Singh, B. B. (2015). Child sexual abuse and the law in India: a commentary. *Crime Science*, 4(1), 1-6.
- Carson, D. K., Foster, J. M., & Tripathi, N. (2013). Child sexual abuse in India: Current issues and research. *Psychological Studies*, 58, 318-325.
- Chandar, R; Kavinh & Kannappan, M. (2018). A Study on Sexual Abuse of Children and Youth in India, *International Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 119(17), 1063.
- Chandran, S., Bhargava, S., & Kishor, M. (2018). Under reporting of child sexual abuse-The barriers guarding the silence. *Telangana Journal of Psychiatry*, 4(2), 57-60.
- Malley-Morrison, K. (Ed.). (2012). *International perspectives on family violence and abuse: A cognitive ecological approach*. Routledge.
- Choudhury, R. (2006). Understanding family life in India. *Family life education in India: Perspectives, challenges, and applications*, 31-57.
- Choudhry, V., Dayal, R., Pillai, D., Kalokhe, A. S., Beier, K., & Patel, V. (2018). Child sexual abuse in India: A systematic review. *PloS one*, 13(10), e0205086.
- Soumeek, C., & Parthpratim, M. (2016). A Study of Socio-Demographic Profile of Persons Accused Under POCSO Act 2012. *IJHRMLP*, 2, 50-55.
- Choudhry, V., Dayal, R., Pillai, D., Kalokhe, A. S., Beier, K., & Patel, V. (2018). Child sexual abuse in India: A systematic review. *PloS one*, 13(10), e0205086.
- Cutajar, M. C., Mullen, P. E., Ogloff, J. R., Thomas, S. D., Wells, D. L., & Spataro, J. (2010). Psychopathology in a large cohort of sexually abused children followed up to 43 years. *Child abuse & neglect*, 34(11), 813-822.
- Deb, S. (2005). Child abuse and neglect: the Indian scenario. *Social Science International*, 21(1), 3-19.
- Deb, S., & Mukherjee, A. (2009). *Impact of sexual abuse on mental health of children*. Concept Publishing Company.
- Deb, S., & Mukherjee, A. (2011). Background and adjustment capacity of sexually abused girls and their perceptions of intervention. *Child Abuse Review*, 20(3), 213-230.
- Deb, S., & Walsh, K. (2012). Impact of physical, psychological, and sexual violence on social adjustment of school children in India. *School Psychology International*, 33(4), 391-415.
- Gupta, S and Garg, S. (2020). Causes and Effects of Child Sexual Abuse, *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 5(5), 1868.

- Hettiarachchi, Darshani. (2020). Prevalence and risk factors of child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of children in South Asian countries: A literature review, *Global Scientific Journal*, 8(5)
- Hotchandnanani, R. Khusboo. (2018). Every Child is Special-A Study of Child Sexual Abuse and the law (POCSO) In India, *International Journal of Creative Rise Thoughts*, 6(1), 1386-1389.
- Kakkar, Loveleen., Varadan, Srinivas., & Kumar, Pravesh. (2007). A Study on Child Abuse: India 2007. Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India.
- Kapur, P. (1995). Girl child abuse: violation of her human rights. *Social change*, 25(2-3), 3-18.
- Kapur, R. Status of Children in India.
- Kapur, R (2018). Child Abuse in India
- Kewalramani, G. S. (1992). Child abuse, a sociological study of working and non-working children.
- D. (2011). Human Trafficking in women and children – Human Rights Dimensions under Domestic and International Law: A critical study, *Indian Journal of Human Rights and the Law*, 121.
- Kumaravel, K. S., Subha, S. S., Anurekha, V., Kumar, P., & Haripriya, P. R. (2023). Sociodemographic and clinical characteristics of child sexual abuse reported to an urban public hospital in Southern India, 2019–22. *Indian pediatrics*, 60(2), 133-136.
- Kusuma, A. (2015). A Study on Girl Child Sexual Abuse in Rural and Urban Areas of Andhra Pradesh, *International Journal of Research and Analytical Review*, 2(3), 11-17.
- Matiyani, H. (2011). Sexual abuse of children: A sociological study in Delhi Metropolis. Unpublished Doctoral thesis). Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University.
- Maity, S. (2022). Escalation of police efficiency diminishes POCSO incidences—myth or reality? Evidence from Indian states. *International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice*, 5(1), 155-180.
- Maity, S., & Chakraborty, P. R. (2023). Implications of the POCSO Act and determinants of child sexual abuse in India: insights at the state level. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10(1), 1-13.
- Mishra, Manjari and Singh, K. (2019). Child Sexual Abuse, affecting the Child Rights in India, *Pen ACCLAIMS*, 6, 2.
- Nath, N., & Kohli, M. (1988, June). Child abuse in India: Some issues. In National Institute for Public Cooperation and Child Development [NIPCCD] (Ed.), *National Seminar on Child Abuse in India* (pp. 137-151).
- Harikumar, P.; Kumar, S.; Laxmi, P.K. & Kumar, V. (2021). A Socio-Legal Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in India, *Design Engineering (Toronto)*, 9, 1768 - 1775.
- Paine, M. L., & Hansen, D. J. (2002). Factors influencing children to self-disclose sexual abuse. *Clinical psychology review*, 22(2), 271-295.

- Pratibha, A. M., & Anshu, N. C. (2016). *Impact of socio economic status and gender on sexual abuse among children*. *International journal of science and research (Nagpur)*, 5(11), 360-362.
- Roy, S., & Madiki, I. P. (2020). *Child abuse: is India well-equipped for the challenge?*. *International Journal of Policy Science and Law*, 1(2).
- Singh, S.; & Kumar, R. (2022). *Sexual Offences Against Female Children in India: A Critical Study*, *Legal Research Development*, 7(1).
- Spataro, J., Moss, S. A., & Wells, D. L. (2001). *Child sexual abuse: A reality for both sexes*. *Australian Psychologist*, 36(3), 177-183.
- Seth, R., & Srivastava, R. N. (2017). *Child Sexual Abuse: Management and prevention, and protection of children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act*. *Indian pediatrics*, 54, 949-953.
- Seth, K.; & Sharma, R. (2015). *Overview of Laws Against Online Child Sexual Abuse in India, UK and US*, *International Journal of Research*, 2(12), 1171.
- Sexton DL Jr., & Sobelson, B. (2018). *Examining the connection between poverty and child maltreatment and neglect*.
- Siddique, A. (2009). *Criminology: Problems and Perspectives*, Eastern Book Company, Lucknow.
- Subramaniyan, V. K. S., Mital, A., Rao, C., & Chandra, G. (2017). *Barriers and challenges in seeking psychiatric intervention in a general hospital, by the collaborative child response unit, (a multidisciplinary team approach to handling child abuse) A qualitative analysis*. *Indian journal of psychological medicine*, 39(1), 12-20.
- Virani, P. (2000). *Bitter chocolate: Child sexual abuse in India*. Penguin UK.