

Child Sexual Abuse: Breaking the Culture of Silence

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39,827 is not just a random number from our daily maths class but is indicative of the dire situation we inhabit. These are the number of cases reported for child abuse in 2018 under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) by the National Crime Records Bureau (Press Trust of India 2020). This article attempts to elaborate on the socio-cultural context of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), highlighting the pandemic-induced challenges and mapping out effective strategies to protect different colours of childhood from these offences.

Sexual abuse of children is not a recent phenomenon but rooted in the past, which provided it with enough opportunities to proliferate and take its contemporary forms. Anagol (2020) argues violence against a muli (girl) was part of the discussion undertaken by religious lawmakers in Sanskrit and gained traction during the age of consent debate in the colonial period. While analyzing the Shivaji and Peshwa rule in Maharashtra, the legitimization of pre-pubertal marriages coincided with the 'burgeoning of child sexual abuse' (Anagol,2022). The rights of children were limited, and they were often subjected to forced child labour pre-pubertal marriage, which significantly altered their experience of childhood and subjected them to a greater degree of physical and sexual exploitation.

The contemporary context witnessed an unprecedented change with the first large scale nationwide study of child abuse undertaken by the Government of India in 2007, which revealed that 50% of the population (n = 12447) was exposed to some form of sexual abuse (Kacker et al. 2007, Pandey et al. 2020). This was followed by incorporating key tenets and principles of the United Nations Convention on the Child Rights in the comprehensive law of POCSO passed in 2012 that aimed to protect children from sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography. It understood child sexual abuse as an umbrella

term involving a wide range of offences (penetrative assaults including rape and sodomy, non-penetrative sexual abuses including verbal abuse, voyeurism and inappropriate touching, along with indecent exposure including flashing and pornographic material). Chaudhary (2020) highlights the uniqueness of the law, which aimed to provide a child-focussed framework to deal with child sexual abuse, based on the notion of inclusivity and adoption of gender-neutral understanding of both victims and perpetrators.

Studies conducted across states have revealed that the law's impact is limited and child sexual abuse continues to be a global concern. As Banwari (2015) mentions, 'shame, secrecy, and denial associated with abuse's act(s) foster a pervasive culture of silence. Children often do not speak about it, and adults are uninformed and do not take action even if they suspect someone is sexually abusing a child' (Govt. of India,2007). The acts of violence remain under-reported, under-recognized and under-treated when the victims are boys due to embedded notions of masculinity, particularly in situations where the perpetrator is a peer (Banwari 2015). Disability exacerbates sexual offences due to communication gaps, dependency and vulnerability of the child. Studies have indicated that 'twice as many disabled girls report CSA that non-disabled girls' and 'boys with physical disability are three times more likely to experience sexual victimization than non-disabled boys' (I. Barron et al. 2019). A survey conducted by Swasti Health Resource Centre revealed that four of every ten transgender people are subjected to sexual abuse before 18 years of age (Chaturvedi 2017). Social media also acts as a source of threat. A study by Interpol estimated that around 2.4 million instances of online child abuse were reported in India between 2017-2020, 80% of which were experienced by girls under the age of 14 (Press Trust of India,2021).

These alarming trends demand urgent action, particularly during the pandemic marked

by social distress and aggravated violence. Data from the Childline India Foundation has reported a significant (approx. 50%) increase in the received calls for protection, indicating only the tip of the iceberg (Poddar et al. 2020). Increasing homelessness, loss of caregivers, closure of schools, and increase in child marriage, among other things, subject children to greater exploitation.

Significant steps must be taken to increase awareness and protect children from such acts of violence. Pandey and Reddy (2020) argue for both child-focused and parents-focused approaches to deal with the situation. Effective communication with parents and grandparents about the issue could successfully reduce the mental distress that children are subjected to. Banwari (2015) suggests that cinema could be an effective medium to enhance awareness and break the culture of silence between parents and children. Popular movies like Highway by Imtiaz Ali and shows including Satyamev Jayate could empower individuals to come out with their stories and share their personal lived experiences. Also,

more than 80% of perpetrators are known to the child, and thus cases do not go to court. Despite the presence of stringent laws like POCSO, child abuse continues.

The need of the hour is to have enough preventive measures in place and employ multiprong strategies to curb CSA. Introducing the Sexual Health Module in the school curriculum for classes one to 12 would be a step to create awareness. Short stories, illustrations and articles on child rights in school books would create awareness among parents and children. Making short films and podcasts would create awareness among children and parents and break the ice between them. Creating safe, child-friendly community spaces making full-day functional Anganwadi centres can be helpful. Anthropos India Foundation's sustained work on this can be accessed in the links given in the references.

We hope this article sets in motion constructive conversation to protect our children's future and ensure that every childhood matters.

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