

ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE – AN EMERGING CONCERN IN INDIA

Understanding Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA)

The World Health Organisation defines child sexual abuse as “the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to; or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent...resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power” (WHO, 1999).

In recent years, with the increased use of the internet and social media, children and adolescents are exposed to the risk of online sexual abuse. Online sexual abuse and exploitation take various forms, including, Grooming, Blackmailing, Luring, Persistence, and Sexting, among others.



Grooming is establishing/building a relationship with a child in person or using the internet or other digital technologies to facilitate online or offline sexual contact with that person. A relationship is developed by using specific strategies such as complimenting over and over, providing lots of attention and affection, kindness, gifts, and money. Some grooming methods include love bombing (showering love) or gaslighting (using fear/ shame).



Blackmailing is similar to the common sense understanding of the term to get something by threatening to hurt the victim, such as publishing sexual photos/videos of them unless the victim does what they want (also called sextortion).



Luring is when a person uses online communication to contact someone they think is under 18 to make it easier for them to commit a sexual offence against that person.



Persistence is to keep asking for something, even when refused.



Pity/guilt includes making the victim feel sorry for them or guilty about something, often manipulating the victim into doing what the predator wants.



Sharing sexually explicit material includes sending unwanted sexually explicit material (pornography, nude photos of themselves, etc.) and trying to convince the victim that this type of unsolicited sexual behaviour is acceptable.



Sexting, even if seemingly consensual, may lead to non-voluntarily sexting in response to pressure and lack of consent for forwarding images.

While there are various forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, there is limited consensus on what constitutes Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA). Childnet International defines online sexual harassment as “unwanted sexual conduct on any digital platform. It includes various behaviours that use technology to share digital content such as images, videos, posts, messages, pages, etc.” UNICEF considers a situation “when a second party benefits monetarily, through a sexual activity involving a child” as online sexual exploitation too. The Council of Europe Convention includes situations where a child or another person is given or promised money or other forms of remuneration, payment, or consideration in return for the child engaging in sexual activity, even if the payment/remuneration is not madeⁱ. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has developed [a glossary of definitions of online child sexual abuse](#). The lack of consistent, standardised terminology outlining the various forms of OCSEA makes it challenging to identify, build awareness, and address the issue. There are also emerging concerns about data privacy leaks and threats, which could impact and influence OCSEA.

Hence, there is an urgent need to standardise definitions and terminologies. There is also a need to include the emerging tactics of abuse and exploitation online, along with aspects of data privacy and theft, when defining online sexual exploitation and abuse.

OCSEA- Emerging Concerns in India

India is emerging as one of the largest internet users in the world. India is ranked second for accessing social networks after Chinaⁱⁱ. Around 65% of internet users are between 12 and 29 years of age, and about 31% are aged 12–19 (IAMAI and Nielsen, 2019)ⁱⁱⁱ. With the adoption of internet-based education, owing to COVID-19 and consequent lockdowns, the age of children using

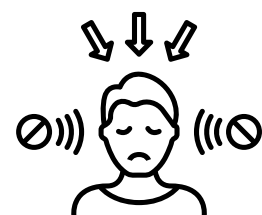
the internet and social media is rapidly reducing. While Facebook and Instagram have mandated a minimum age of 13 years to access their platforms, a study by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), in 2021, across six states found that 38% of 10-year olds had Facebook accounts, while over 24% had Instagram accounts.

While internet use has several advantages, including access to education and platforms for expression, motivation, development of identity, and forums of acceptance^{iv}, it poses threats, as young person’s often overshare what would be considered private information publicly, both intentionally and unintentionally. Young persons also meet unknown people online, engage in conversation and online gaming, and even create fake profiles (McAfee, 2014). A follow-up study by McAfee in 2022^v found that Indian children have the highest exposure to online risks and are among the youngest to reach mobile maturity.

A compilation of reports on child sexual abuse material found online puts India on top of the global list, with 11.7% of the total reports or 19.87 lakh reports of such material uploaded from the country^{vi}. India reported over 24 lakh instances of online child sexual abuse during 2017-20, with 80% of the victims being girls below the age of 14 years, according to Interpol data. A study by CRY (2020)^{vii} among school students in Delhi found that one in every three adolescents exposed to the internet is a victim of cyberbullying and other forms of online abuse.

The increasing use of ed-tech has also posed data privacy concerns, as several apps gather personal data of children and adolescents, which could be misused, leading to online abuse (sexual and otherwise)^{ix}.

"1 in every 3 adolescents exposed to the internet is a victim of cyberbullying and other forms of online abuse."



Population Foundation of India conducted a study on adolescents' digital interactions and Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) in four states in India in 2022. The objectives of the study were to:

- (1) Understand the type and amount of social media activity among adolescents.
- (2) Understand parents' and teachers' perceptions of adolescent digital engagement, and
- (3) Understand and analyse adolescents' awareness and experiences of OCSEA.

A cross-sectional mixed-method study was done in Bihar, Delhi, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. The study included an extensive literature review and a quantitative survey involving 822 adolescents, 219 parents, and 45 teachers across rural, urban, and peri-urban regions. The adolescents for the quantitative survey were chosen across rural, urban, and peri-urban regions, with a sample size powered at 80% and a confidence interval of 95% at each region level. The survey utilized a stratified multi-stage random sampling strategy, selecting 2 districts in each state and 2-3 blocks within each district, and households with adolescents aged 13-19 were surveyed. Additionally, 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including adolescents, parents, teachers, civil society organizations, and technology/social media companies.

The study by the Population Foundation of India (2022) showed that:

- ◆ **15%** adolescents surveyed had faced at least one incident related to online sexual exploitation or abuse. A higher proportion of urban boys reported this.
- ◆ The most common incident was **'coming across sexually explicit content when surfing the internet'**.
- ◆ **1%** of adolescents also reported instances of persons talking to them about sex even when they did not want to and being threatened or embarrassed by someone posting or sending messages about them to other persons. A greater proportion of adolescent girls reported this.

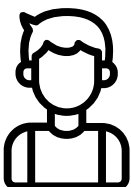


"My friend and I had gone to a cybercafé to create an email id for my friends. The person at the cybercafé copied my friend's phone number and then called her and shared inappropriate/dirty messages and sexually explicit content on her WhatsApp"

- Adolescent Girl, Bihar

"I use phone to watch education related video but within an hour, I start to feel like watching some song videos or serials. During that time, some inappropriate videos also come up, so I watch it. Sometimes, it has also happened on Facebook"

- Adolescent Girl, Bihar



"My female friend was blackmailed by someone she met on the internet, who forced her to send him inappropriate photos of herself. Fearing he might tell her family that she was talking to a stranger online, my friend sent him the photos he wanted. The person then shared these photos on the internet. My friend and her brother later filed a police complaint, and the police caught the culprit" - Adolescent Boy, Delhi

Among those who had encountered at least one OCSEA-related incident, 55% had done so on Facebook, followed by 42% on YouTube, 34% on WhatsApp, 14% on Instagram and between 1% and 5% on other social media sites (Tinder, Twitter, Snapchat, etc). Only 1% adolescents reported to have faced it on Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms.

Parents were often unaware or did not wish to acknowledge that their wards faced OCSEA. However, analysis suggests that increased parental supervision was associated with lower reporting of OCSEA among adolescents.

When faced with an incident of OCSEA, most adolescents deleted or blocked the person/ source or changed their privacy settings. 17% respondents who had faced an incident did not do anything. Adolescents were often unaware of redressal mechanisms. Of those aware, police cyber cell and child line were reported as the forums for redressal. However, adolescents feared reporting or telling their parents of any incidents of OCSEA, more so girls, fearing significant punitive action, including discontinuation of education and early marriage.

Adolescent girls are at a particular disadvantage- they have limited digital and internet access and are also subject to more monitoring and rules as compared to boys. However, in any instance of OCSEA, or abuse-like incidents, they are often suspected/ blamed and face more punitive action than boys. In other words, even though girls have significantly restricted digital access if any instance of abuse occurs, they are usually the ones who are blamed.

Policy and program actions– the need for comprehensive redressal for OCSEA

The policy and legal framework for cybersecurity in India are evolving. India was an early ratifier of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1990. In 2002 it acceded to the Second Optional Protocol, which further strengthened the CRC's provisions for online and offline offences against children.

However, India does not have enough specific laws and regulations explicitly meant to address all forms of online sexual abuse. The availability of enforcement officials with the specialised expertise to handle the issues comprehensively is also limited. Currently, online sexual abuse is processed under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. Different sections of the act cover parts of online abuse. There are also other laws on child sexual abuse under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 (amended 2008) explicitly addresses cyberbullying. Section 67B(c) of the IT Act, 2008 also punishes the enticement of children online for publishing or transmitting materials depicting children in a sexually explicit act in electronic form. The Personal Data Protection Bill (PDP) 2019 deals with children's data privacy, issues around children's use of online services, including educational apps, the role of service providers, and restrictions on profiling children. Thus, multiple laws and acts deal with various aspects of OCSEA. However, there is no comprehensive law/ regulation or policies addressing OCSEA.

Redressal mechanisms for OCSEA also need strengthening. All cities in India have dedicated cybercrime cells. The Government has also set up two chief mechanisms for self-reporting online child sexual abuse: the POCSO e-Box, a virtual complaint management system, and the National Cybercrime Reporting Portal (NCRP). However, the study by the Population Foundation of India reveals that awareness of these helplines is limited. Complaints, if any, are reported to ChildLine (1098) or the police stations. Respondents also reported the need for greater sensitivity at police stations to enable ease in reporting.

Support systems and rehabilitative interventions for victims of OCSEA are limited. Some civil society initiatives address online sexual abuse through prevention and rehabilitation centers/ helplines, information provision campaigns and portals, and awareness on more significant issues of sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR). However, the reach of these efforts is often limited geographically and among specific population groups targeted by their interventions.

The country needs a comprehensive safe internet ecosystem that safeguards children from risks of online abuse and enables rehabilitative support. It is also necessary to work with multiple stakeholder groups, including children, parents, teachers, schools, civil society, governments, and the private sector, to enable a holistic response on the internet safety and OCSEA.

Recommendations and Action Points



GOVERNMENT- NATIONAL

POLICY AND SYSTEM STRENGTHENING:

Short-Term:

- Comprehensive definition for OCSEA – common across laws, policies, & programs.
- Strengthening current systems for management of OCSEA – for greater public awareness & access.
- Engagement with private sector to strengthen identification & reporting incidents of OCSEA. Ensure implementation of redressal mechanisms outlined in the IT Act & rules 2021.

Long-Term:

- Defining clear processes/ systems (SOPs) to manage & address OCSEA – identification, reporting, perpetrator punishment, & intervention packages for support of victims.
- Robust information systems – gathering/ collating information on the extent & nature of OCSEA to inform policy & program action.

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND DIGITAL LITERACY:

Short-Term:

- Inclusion of internet safety and OCSEA in school curriculum & existing programs on SRHR.
- Integration of comprehensive sexuality education in the school curriculum/ programs to empower children and adolescents with information on sexual health & safety – both online & offline.

Long-Term:

- Development of an age-appropriate & gender-sensitive digital safety & literacy curriculum to be included in the school curriculum across subjects.
- Platforms & resource libraries – online & offline where children, adolescents, & adults could seek information & guidance on digital safety & redressal of abuse.



GOVERNMENT- STATES

Short-Medium Term:

- Establishment of a cell within the ChildLine on OCSEA .
- Sessions on internet safety & OCSEA in schools – through videos or CSO engagement.
- Public awareness campaigns on OCSEA, its identification, reporting, & available systems for redressal.

Long-Term:

- Training of police personnel – working in cybercrime cell, women’s cell, & child protection issues– on OCSEA, its identification, & management. The training to enable attitudinal shifts & guidance on sensitive management of adolescents, especially girls who file complaints.
- Capacity building of schoolteachers on OCSEA & digital safety. The sessions should address the needs & disadvantages of adolescent girls.



CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- Organisations working on SRHR & with adolescents to build/ enhance capacity to work on issues of digital safety and OCSEA.
- Development of IEC materials – modules, video content, & posters on OCSEA, to be used in schools & for mass awareness campaigns.
- Engagement with media personnel/ houses to enable appropriate & sensitive reporting on OCSEA.
- Pilot initiatives/ campaigns to engage with parents & the larger community on OCSEA (which could be replicated later at scale)

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Population Foundation of India is a national non-government organisation (NGO), founded in 1970 by JRD Tata, that promotes and advocates for the effective formulation and implementation of gender-sensitive population, health and development strategies and policies. Working with government and NGOs, it addresses population issues within the large discourse of empowering women and men.

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The End Violence Partnership is a platform for collective, evidence-based advocacy and action launched in July 2016 by the UN Secretary-General with a focus on fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goal 16.2: ending all forms of violence against children by 2030.