

STRENGTHENING REDRESSAL MECHANISMS FOR ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN INDIA

Concerns and extent of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) among adolescents

The use of the internet and social media is rising drastically among adolescents. It was found that Indian children have the highest exposure to online risks globally and are among the youngest to reach mobile maturityⁱ. More than 65% of internet users in India are between 12-29 years of age.ⁱⁱ

In a compilation of reports on Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) found online, India stands right 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.ⁱⁱⁱ A 77% rise in child 'self-generated' sexual material was reported between 2019 to 2020^{iv}. Online searches for child sexual abuse content rose by 95% in India during COVID-19.^v Given the increasing internet use among adolescents, the risk of exposure to OCSEA incidents is high.

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.^{vi}

A study by the Population Foundation of India in 2022 in four states (822 adolescent girls and boys, 219 parents, and 45 teachers) reveals that 15% adolescents faced at least one incident of online sexual abuse or exploitation - a higher proportion of urban boys. Among those who faced at least one OCSEA incident, 67% were above 15 years of age, compared to 33%, 13-15 years of age.⁽¹⁾



The most common OCSEA incident reported was 'coming across sexually explicit content when surfing the internet'.

OCSEA Incidents Faced by Adolescents:

- Receiving emails or messages with ads/links to explicit/X-rated content or websites.
- Receiving sexually explicit content (images, videos, posts, messages) from a known or unknown person
- Being asked for sexual information about themselves (when they did not want to answer)
- Being asked to do something sexually explicit that they did not want or were uncomfortable with
- Being threatened or embarrassed by someone posting or sending messages about them for other people to see
- Conversations about sex when online, even if they didn't want to

Case 1: A adolescent girl being blackmailed by a male abuser

Location: Uttar Pradesh

The respondent was studying in Class 12. A friend of the respondent had befriended two boys online and was chatting with both. The respondent advised her friend not to chat with both boys. She particularly advised her to stop talking to one of the boys who later became the 'blackmailer' and 'abuser'. The abuser tried to contact the respondent too. The respondent had blocked the abuser from all platforms except the 'home phone', which was her father. The abuser created a fake profile on Instagram and threatened to have private pictures of the respondent. He tried to blackmail her into becoming his girlfriend; he said he would otherwise leak her private pictures. He also sent her a headless nude image of a woman stating that these were her pictures and that he would leak them. The respondent warned him that she was not scared of his false threats. However, she was worried about him calling on the number which her father had. The respondent told the abuser that she would report him to the police if he did not stop. The abuser was not bothered by the threats and, in turn, said that he would spoil her image in society.

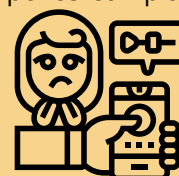


After two days of blackmail, the respondent called the 1090 women's helpline number in UP and reported the incident. She was asked to send screenshots and phone recordings. Two days after she made the report, the abuser reached out to the respondent and apologised. He requested her to take back the complaint, as he was worried that it would affect his sister's wedding.

Case 2: A young girl being blackmailed by a friend

Location: New Delhi

The abuser (male) was a victim's 'friend' on a social media platform. The abuser and the victim did not know each other personally and were only friends through social media. The abuser sent a message to the victim on the social media platform (as a direct message), saying that he had access to inappropriate photos of her. Over a few days, he blackmailed the victim into sending him more such images. Else, he would show the photographs he had to her family. The victim, scared and fearful, gave into the demand of the abuser and sent him the photographs he wanted. Following this, the abuser put these private photographs on the internet. The victim too her brother and friend into confidence, and with their support, she filed a police complaint. Following the police complaint, the abuser was identified as a resident of Noida and arrested by the police.



Several other such incidents were reported as well.

“ Once, an unknown person made video calls to me. He shared inappropriate videos with me. I messaged him and said – ‘Brother, who are you? Why are you sending all this stuff with me? Please don't send me such things and don't call me ’ ”

-Adolescent Girl, Rajasthan

“ School groups are formed on WhatsApp. So, the number is shared with people in the groups. It has happened once or twice that I got messages and calls from some boys. Once I was added to some group randomly, and even very dirty pictures were shared in the group by some person ”

- Adolescent Girl, Delhi





The OCSEA incidents were relatively the same across all geographies, except for a lower rate of random pop-ups of sexual content in rural India (9%) compared to urban and peri-urban locations (14%). A slightly higher proportion of girls, as compared to boys, received unwanted sexual requests and threatening/ embarrassing messages.

Despite the increasing incidence of OCSEA, India lacks the appropriate systems to identify and address the issue appropriately. There is a lack of robust and representative data documenting the online experiences of the country's children and adolescents.

So far, only incidents of OCSEA that are reported as a crime are registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, the IT Act, 2000, and the Indian IPC, 1860, with different sections of each law/ policy, dealing with different OCSEA incidents. Comprehensive and specific laws and regulations explicitly meant to address all forms of online sexual abuse are absent. There is also a lack of capacity among enforcement officials to address reported incidents. Thus, an urgent need is strengthening existing systems to identify and address OCSEA effectively.


Available helplines and redressal mechanisms for OCSEA

The current helplines and reporting mechanisms for OCSEA, as available in the country, are as follows.

REPORTING AND REHABILITATION MECHANISMS	
	Offline/ physical reporting
	Police Station/ Cyber Cell
	Helpline/ complaint numbers
	Helpline- Childline (1098)
	National Cyber Crime's helpline number (1930)
	Other helplines listed by the national commission for women for women in distress and legal aid, which could also be accessed by adolescent girls facing sexual abuse http://www.ncw.nic.in/helplines
	Online Reporting Platforms
	National Cybercrime Reporting Portal (NCRP)- https://www.cybercrime.gov.in/
	eBaalNidan - https://ncpcr.gov.in/ebaalnidan/
	POCSO e-box - https://ncpcr.gov.in/pocso/
	Civil Society Efforts
	NGO complaint cells/ platforms- Bachpan Bachao Aandolan (1800-102-7022) - https://bba.org.in/complaint-cell/IWF Aarambh India Reporting Portal- https://aarambhindia.org/report/

Few states in India have launched their helpline numbers – for domestic/ sexual abuse or women’s helplines.

In the context of rehabilitation, the POSCO Act (2012) mentions victim compensation, but it has not been implemented or effectively used. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in the country work on child support, especially to provide mental health or education support to victims of OCSEA. This year, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has launched a portal for rehabilitating child victims of sexual abuse and assault victims, including cases of OCSEA.

<p><u>Initiatives by Technology Companies and CSOs</u></p> <p>(Public awareness, child support, management of child sexual abuse material, reporting portals, evidence generation)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">☑ Twitter’s Twitter for Good initiative – internet safety and education☑ Facebook initiative with Learning Links Foundation on cyber safety☑ Tulir Centre for the Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse☑ Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) – helpline and following support, including legal aid and support.☑ India child protection fund (an initiative of the BBA) – enables fund resources to CSOs to curb child exploitation.☑ Aarambh India – Rights. Action. Technology. Inclusion (RATI) program (on-ground victim support, strengthening child protection systems), a helpline to report child sexual abuse, online resource library, evidence gathering,☑ WeProtect global alliance on child sexual abuse online; has many Indian CSOs as members.☑ Asian School of Cyber Laws’ –Free online ‘cyberfit’ program for citizens
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Gaps and challenges in the reporting and redressal mechanisms for OCSEA

Some of the significant systemic gaps in the current reporting and redressal mechanisms of the OCSEA incidents/ crimes are:

- ☛ No exclusive helpline/ reporting mechanism for OCSEA. While there are multiple helplines, none specialize in OCSEA or have specialized teams to manage issues of OCSEA.
- ☛ Information/awareness on existing helplines is limited to ChildLine. There is a need for greater information provision to adolescents and communities on how incidents of OCSEA could be reported.
- ☛ No standard protocols/ mechanisms for redressal/ rehabilitation and victim support.
- ☛ Lack of processes/ SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) on the reporting, investigation, evidence management, and conviction of OCSEA crimes/ incidents.
- ☛ Limited capacities among officials (including police and those working in cybercrimes) on the various forms of OCSEA and its management. Limited capacities for managing sensitive cases, especially those involving adolescent girls.
- ☛ Lack of systems for data gathering and tracking of OCSEA.

Action points and Recommendations



Establishing Reporting and Redressal Mechanisms

- Creating a special/ dedicated wing under ChildLine on OCSEA, given that ChildLine is already well known.
- Creating SOPs/ systems for reporting and managing OCSEA incidents/ crimes - including identification, reporting, and perpetrator punishment.
- Creating/outlining a package/ system for victim redressal and support.
- Creating a data infrastructure/ system for the reporting and evidence management for OCSEA. There is a need for systems of data gathering and collation on OCSEA from multiple helplines/ sources to enable proper tracking and evidence for program and policy initiatives.

There is a need for convergence and coordination between departments at the state and central levels for effective implementation. The systems/ mechanisms created should clearly outline the roles of different departments and stakeholders in reporting, redressal, and data management.



Training and Capacity Building of Key Stakeholders

- Training of police personnel – working in cybercrime cell, women’s cell, and on child protection issues – on OCSEA, its identification, and management. There is also a need for sensitivity training for officials to manage complaints from children and adolescents.
- Training of officials from key departments - including health, women and child development, home/ law and enforcement, and the judiciary on OCSEA and its management.
- Training on OCSEA, its forms, reporting mechanisms, and redressal for key stakeholders (who could further inform adolescents/ local communities) - including teachers/ educators in schools and colleges, panchayat members and elected representatives, members of Self Help groups (SHGs) and collectives, representatives of civil society organizations.



Public Awareness on OCSEA and its Redressal

- Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials and awareness campaigns on OCSEA, its forms, and how to safeguard against it.
- IEC materials and awareness campaigns on helplines and redressal mechanisms for OCSEA.

To address the significant silence on sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in the longterm, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) must be provided to students through schools and other platforms. It is also critical to engage with parents, teachers, and other community members on SRHR to enable an environment where issues of sexual abuse can be discussed openly and constructively.

References

- [i] McAfee Corp, May 2022, Life Behind the Screens of Parents, Tweens, and Teens—India
- [ii] IAMA, Nielsen Digital in India Report 2019—Round 2
- [iii] Romya Kannan, Most Online Content on Child Sexual Abuse from India, The Hindu, April 18th 2020
- [iv] Internet Watch Foundation
- [v] Hindustan Times, Online searches for child sexual abuse content rose 95% in India during Covid-19, 19th October 2021
- [vi] Press Trust of India, India Reported over 24 L Online Child Abuse Cases in 2017-20: Interpol, Business Standard, 17th Nov, 2021

Endnotes

1. The Population Foundation of India conducted a mixed method study in four states (Bihar, Delhi, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh) in 2022 to examine social media activity among adolescents, their awareness and experiences of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA), and parents' and teachers' perceptions of adolescent digital engagement. 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.



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.

Head Office:

B-28, Qutab Institutional Area, New Delhi- 110016
T: +91 11 43894100 | F: +91 1143894199

Regional Offices:

Bihar: 123A, 1st Floor, Patlipura Colony, Patna- 800013
T: +91 612 227 0634

Rajasthan: C-9, Shiv Marg, Shyam Nagar, Jaipur- 302019
T: +91 141 410 477

Uttar Pradesh: C-3, Nirala Nagar, Opposite Thandi Park, Lucknow- 226020 T: +91 522 400 5091



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.