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## ***ABOUT US***

WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal provided dedicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION: RISING ABUSE DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC**

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## **ABSTRACT**

WeProtect Global Alliance's Tuesday-released Global Threat Assessment report 2021 stated that COVID-19 has significantly increased online child sexual exploitation and abuse. According to the results of the WeProtect Worldwide Alliance's 2021 Global Threat Assessment report, the scope of child sexual exploitation and abuse online is growing so quickly that a step change in the global response is urgently needed to ensure secure online environments for kids. India still has widespread poverty and limited access to information and technology, making it a privilege dependent on the child's socioeconomic situation to report such instances. Families frequently fail to disclose instances of child sexual abuse because they are unaware of their legal options. The idea of sexting, which originated in the UK, has spread to other areas of the world, including India, where the recent pandemic has intensified its effects. The act of sending and receiving sexually explicit text messages, pictures, or videos, primarily over a mobile device, is referred to as sexting. These photographs can be transmitted via a mobile texting app or a conventional text message. Children may occasionally be coerced, tricked, or threatened into creating and disseminating a sexual image or video of themselves. There isn't an adult in the room physically. The Government, IT industry, schools and most importantly parents need to pull up their socks to prevent this type of heinous crimes which are being committed with their children. India might take a more international stance and look at creating bilateral or multilateral alliances to advance online child safety. Strategic alliances with nations like Australia and USA which are renowned for their effective OCSAE response procedures and with whom India already works on a number of cyber and technological initiatives, might be considered.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In various regions of the world, there has been an increase in reports of online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) since the COVID-19 pandemic's emergence in early 2020. Due to lockdowns and school closings brought on by the pandemic, an increasing number of kids have

started spending more time online as of early 2020. UNICEF has noted that the growth in children's screen usage has jeopardized their online safety and raised the likelihood that they will encounter inappropriate behaviour and content. India is combating the threat in a number of ways, but more work has to be done. UNICEF has noted that the growth in children's screen usage has jeopardized their online safety and raised the likelihood that they will encounter inappropriate behaviour and content. Cybercrimes against minors increased by more than 400% in India by 2019 compared to 2020. These offences involved the publication or transmission of materials containing child sexual abuse (CSAM) in almost 90% of the cases. It has been determined that the growing usage of social media sites, the widespread adoption of online schooling, and the use of educational apps all pose risks to children's online safety.

Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are two of the six categories of online risks for kids that UNICEF has identified. Together, they are referred to as "online child sexual abuse and exploitation" (OCSAE). OCSAE could refer to a variety of behaviors, including creating and disseminating CSAM, luring kids into sexual chats or creating explicit content, grooming and enticing kids to meet the abuser in person, the abuser's exhibitionism, and allowing a kid to participate in prostitution or sexual trafficking online.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. **ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION:** **MEANING AND EXPLANATION**

One of the most alarming public safety issues that our society is currently dealing with is online child sexual exploitation. Children in Canada and around the world, both past and present, continue to suffer because of it. Among the forms of online child sex exploitation are:

- Child sexual abuse material, commonly known as child pornography, includes textual accounts of actual or fictitious child sexual abuse as well as audio, video, and photographs.
- Sexting and self-generated content - Youth-produced sexual photographs and videos on the Internet that are frequently shared further without permission;

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<sup>1</sup> ANIRBAN SARMA, "A Pandemic of abuse: How India is protecting its children online." Read this article at <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-india-is-protecting-its-children-online/>>



- Sextortion is the practice of using pressure and threats to obtain from young people photographs or films of child sexual exploitation (either by other young people or adult perpetrators);
- Using platforms and programmes to connect with children and young people in order to sexually exploit them is known as grooming and enticing;
- Live streaming of child sex abuse Real-time viewing of child sexual abuse frequently involves the abuser directing it;
- Made-to-order content - Ordering movies or photographs in accordance with the abuser's tastes.

### **3. SEX IN CYBERSPACE AND SEXTING AS THE FORM OF CHILD ABUSE**

Child abuse has also entered the online realm. Many kids are coerced into obscene poses that are subsequently shared online. Internet child pornography is a rapidly expanding industry, particularly for young teenagers under the age of 17. Some single mothers who are poor make their kids available for pornographic or pornographic presentations online. No consideration is given to the child's feelings when she grows up and discovers a pornographic image of herself. Contrary to adult pornographic photographs, child pornography is not protected by the First Amendment in the United States. Even in a significant case, it has been established that the First Amendment does not apply to photos showing youngsters having sex. Undeniably, the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act of 1977 established extremely harsh and severe penalties against child pornography and child sexual exploitation in the United States Code.<sup>2</sup> Young children and teens using personal cell phones to talk on them is getting more and more common. In the United States, it has been estimated that 52% of young teenagers own cell phones. Sexting has increased significantly as a result of the rise in the number of young people who own cell phones and use them to access the Internet. Sexting is a phrase that developed in the UK and refers to the posting or sending of sexually explicit photographs and messages via mobile devices and/or the Internet. In a recent survey, it was shown that 17% of the student participants acknowledged to engaging in sexting, and that this conduct became more prevalent as they got older. For instance, 32% of 18-year-olds reported they had sent or posted sexual photographs or messages, while 3% of 12-year-olds acknowledged to sexting. The study also discovered a

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<sup>2</sup> Obi N.I. Ebbe and Dilip K. Das, *Criminal Abuse of Women and Children: An International Perspective*, Page56-57.

connection between higher rates of sexting and higher rates of substance abuse, sexual behaviour, and emotional health issues like despair and suicidal ideation. Teenagers sext for a variety of reasons, but frequently, it is not of their own free will. 23 percent of kids who sext do so under peer pressure, whereas 51 percent of female teenagers who sext do it under pressure of boys. Furthermore, 61% of young teenagers who send sexually explicit communications or images do so under duress.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4. INDIA'S POSITION ON PROTECTING CHILDREN ONLINE**

The Second Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 2002, which tightens the CRC's provisions for both online and offline offences against children, was ratified by India in 2002. India was one of the first countries to ratify the CRC in 1990.

India has developed a strong legal system to safeguard children online. The Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008, which broadens the application of the IT Act, 2000 by identifying offences to which children are most vulnerable; the Protection of Children against Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012; the more recent Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, which aims to stop the spread of CSAM on social media platforms, and the Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008, which expands the scope of the IT Act, 2000 by identifying offences to which children are most vulnerable. A basis for reporting instances of OCSAE, such as the sale and distribution of pornographic materials, sexual harassment, criminal intimidation of children, defamation of children, online extortion, and child trafficking, is also provided by sections of the Indian Penal Code and the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act. India is ranked second in terms of the "extent of cyber-risks" that children face in the 2020 Child Safety Online Index, which was compiled after a survey of 30 nations during the first year of the pandemic. India received an "average" rating and is ranked ninth for having the "best online safety for children." This seems to show that although children in India are exposed to a large number of different cyber-hazards, the country is just 'average' at mitigating these risks.

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<sup>3</sup> Kelsey Becker and Catherine D. Marcum, "Sexual Victimization Online", *Sexual Victimization Then and Now*, Tara N. Richards and Catherine D. Marcum, Sage Publications, California, Page 141-142.

## **5. OCSAE MANAGEMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC**

India responded to the rise of OCSAE during the epidemic in four ways. In order to combat threats to children's safety, it has scaled back its promotion of existing reporting systems for online offences against children, tried to stifle CSAM's online presence, particularly on social media, concentrated on educating schools, and kept strengthening the ability of law enforcement agencies (LEAS) and advancing technology.

### **5.1 RAISING AWARENESS OF OCSAE REPORTING**

#### **METHODS**

The POCSO e-Box, a virtual complaint management system, and the National Cybercrime Reporting Portal (NCRP), India's two main systems for self-reporting OCSAE, have both been in place since before the epidemic. Since the beginning of 2020, the National Commission on the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and the National Commission on Women have increased their efforts to increase public awareness of these reporting platforms as well as the POCSO and IT Acts by methodically implementing outreach, advocacy, and stakeholder engagement programmes across the nation. The information-sharing agreement between India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and America's National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, in place since 2019, has been another tool used throughout the pandemic (NCMEC). In order to motivate state-level LEAS to take action, the NCRB shares the Tipline reports it gets from the NCMEC with them.

Although these measures are commendable, there is still a problem with the general lack of knowledge of India's OCSAE reporting tools, which results in a pitifully low proportion of crimes that are self-reported. 1102 cybercrimes against children were reported to the NCRP in 2020, while the POCSO e-Box received 151 complaints between 2020 and 2021. In contrast, the NCMEC reported OCSAE to the NCRB 2,725,518 times in 2020 alone.

### **5.2 ATTEMPTING TO COMBAT CSAM ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

#### **PLATFORMS**

The lone new piece of legislation passed during the pandemic that aims to address the problem of CSAM on social media is the contentious Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. The IT Rules require social media intermediaries to

develop methods to detect CSAM and restrict user access to it, as well as to forbid their users from publishing or sending it. More controversially, when faced with a court order for the investigation or prosecution of an offence involving CSAM or sexually explicit material, the rules require intermediaries to assist in tracing the originating source of information. The IT Rules are a source of contention. Social media networks' end-to-end encryption would need to be broken in order for them to be able to track down material, endangering the security of all online conversations conducted through the platforms. Furthermore, no specific technique for enforcing traceability is suggested by the guidelines. Additionally, the rules' very validity is called into question because the IT Act, from which they are derived, does not provide the government the authority to impose technological changes on platforms. Therefore, even though the IT Rules aim to address OCSAE in theory, it is difficult to see how they could be put into practice unless these problems are fixed.<sup>4</sup>

### **5.3 SENSITIZING SCHOOLS**

India's pandemic response has placed a major emphasis on raising awareness in schools about OCSAE and other internet hazards to youngsters. Both the NCPCR and the Ministry of Education have produced and disseminated manuals for school safety that also act as compendia of the rules, legislation, and reporting procedures in place with regard to children's online safety. The National Council for Educational Research and Training and the Central Board for Secondary Education, two apex organisations, have also published student-friendly guides on online kid safety issues and trained instructors in cyber-safety. These center-driven efforts aim to hold schools more accountable for teaching staff members and administrators about internet child safety while also directly educating students. However, it is crucial that state governments make sure that equivalent technologies are used in all of the state's schools. Greater compliance might result from the creation of state-level monitoring systems for online safety in educational institutions.

### **5.4 ENHANCING TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN CAPACITY**

Finally, the training of LEAs and judicial officers under the 'Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children' scheme managed by the Ministry of Home Affairs has continued with heightened intensity during the epidemic. Since the start of the epidemic, Big Tech companies have been taking technological steps to combat OCSAE in addition to these attempts to increase human capability. For instance, Google and Facebook have both started programmes in India to teach kids about online safety and have made steps to remove CSAM from their platforms.

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<sup>4</sup> Supra Note 1.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

India would do well to consider how it could improve its OCSAE response capabilities as it begins the third year of the pandemic. A significant barrier still exists since not enough people are aware of the laws, services, and reporting processes for OCSAE. To attract the required public attention, a phased nationwide 360-degree awareness campaign supported by the Indian mass media could be an important first step. The audiences who are most at risk might be greatly increased by incorporating OCSAE modules into computer science and sex education curriculum at schools, as well as making sure that centrally generated knowledge goods are made available in numerous regional languages. The battle against OCSAE will require the support of the private sector. Before the IT Rules, 2021 can be effectively applied by social media intermediaries, they need to be carefully and sensitively reevaluated. The contentious provisions regarding traceability and decryption are still present in the recently suggested draught revisions to these laws, despite the fact that some of the suggestions made within them may have advantageous effects. In order to enhance child safety online, India could take a more global perspective and look into bilateral or multilateral alliances. Strategic alliances with nations like Australia, which are renowned for their effective OCSAE response procedures and with whom India already works on a number of cyber and technological initiatives, might be considered. Working together to share knowledge, strengthen LEA capabilities, and thwart the activities of CSAM offenders might be very beneficial for both parties and contribute to creating a more secure and safe online environment for kids.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Supra Note 1