



Viewpoint

## **Mental health and legal implications of child pornography during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown: “How safe are our children?”**

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### **Introduction**

India has a global ranking of the second-largest child population and has been ranked 65th among 80 countries, thereby presenting child safety concerns. (Sharma, 2020). Every 15 minutes, a child is sexually exploited in India, according to the BBC report (2017). Growing digitalization proliferates children's vulnerability to harm (UNICEF, 2020). Sexual exploitation causes wounds to a child which can never be healed. Child pornography is defined as ‘Any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a minor (persons less than 18 years old)’ (Department of Justice, 2017). According to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act in India, it refers to ‘any visual depiction of sexually explicit conduct involving a child which includes a photograph, video, digital or computer-generated image indistinguishable from an actual child and an image created, adapted or modified but

appear to depict a child’ (POCSO, 2019). Around the globe, the ratio of online uploading of child sexual abuse material ranked highest in India; which raises the concerns towards the safety of the children during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Many researchers provide data regarding the exploitation of children by their family members, close relatives, and neighbors involving in this heinous crime (Sharma, 2020).

### **The magnitude of the problem and impact of sexual abuse on children**

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the countries have not updated their data on sexual assault against children. According to the National Crime Agency (NCA) of the United Kingdom, over 300,000 people in the country are vulnerable to child violence in 2020, considering both the physical and digital worlds. India Child Protection Fund (ICPF) is one of South Asia’s largest child protection organizations, working to end child trafficking and child rape. It reports that amid the COVID-19 pandemic, during the lockdown period, there has been an alarming spike in internet use, including pornography and online search for child pornography sites in India during March 2020 (The Hindu,

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2020). Also, there is a rise in searches for visual material of children's violent content, which can render them more vulnerable to sexual abuse during and after the lockdown period (The Hindu, 2020). Global concern is that children are now more prone to online grooming and sexual coercion throughout the world (Europol, 2020). This indicates that children are more vulnerable to 'sexual predators' as, during confinement, abusers are turning to an online platform to gratify their criminal impulses, making it more unsafe for children as they are now spending more time being online (The Hindu, 2020).

Child Helpline in India has reported more than 92,000 Save Our Souls (SOS) calls asking for protection from abuse and violence in the initial days of the lockdown. It is known that lifetime victimization of the child due to the images or video textured online results in traumatic mental health consequences. Victims suffer from unremitting apprehension about the exposure of the images and videos online and about being identified by others, leading to feelings of ongoing guilt, susceptibility, helplessness, and powerlessness as they experience cumulative trauma exposure (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018, 2019; Von Weiler et al., 2010). Additionally, the child's normal development is thwarted, leading to insecure attachment with family and others, emotional instability, and different mental health conditions (Ratican, 1992). In the long run, this form of abuse leaves a permanent scar on survivor's mental health even when they grow up. They may experience anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, hypervigilance, poor body image, self-harm, suicidal ideas and attempts, conflictual sexual relationships, and paranoia (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017).

## Recommendations

Integrating the STOP and SAVE initiative

(Basile et al., 2016) into the community with principal techniques where STOP stands for promoting social participation, i.e., use of bystander approach where people that might have witnessed the abuse; could report in confidence with the victim; about the abuse. The Trusted/True Adult initiative; where the child can confide to at home and educate them about the safe use of the internet and monitor their internet use. To establish a community program for open conversation while maintaining confidentiality; while appointing a clinical psychologist trained in handling cases with trauma and social workers regarding their abuse.

Varied teaching methods programs that focus on increasing awareness and understanding of the problem behaviors while acquiring or enhancing skill. Outcome evaluation Programs have smart goals and agendas and make an effort to document their results relative to the goals systematically.

Inculcating abuse education in the form of activities in both family and school settings. Activities like distinguishing between good and bad secret or good -bad touch; differentiating intimate parts and non intimate parts; understanding different expressions and emotional reactions (privacy mural); understanding the basis of private space and characteristics of abusers by role-plays; addressing to a trusted adult about their sufferings. Socialization of these activities in moderation with an adult may decrease the frequency of sexual abuse and increase preventive measures (Nation et al., 2003). Application and socialization of such initiatives will help decrease the frequency of child sexual abuse and aid previous victims of child sexual abuse in psychosocial-economical ways. Use of GSM mobile alliance to stem and reverse child sexual abuse contents (GSM Association, 2013). The 'Don't Look Away' project, started by

the ECPAT (2014), network corroborating 18 European Nations, helps in online reporting of child exploitation/ child abuse content by anyone who witnesses it online or offline. It has been shown to decrease the growth in child sexual abuse. It is also available in the form of an application on a smartphone. Such online initiatives in India could also replicate these patterns and protect children all over India's midst of lockdown.

Parents can play a crucial role in providing sexual education, promoting safe and responsible internet use by becoming 'digitally aware' and talking about the abuse around them to avoid potentially abusive and exploitative situations. These behaviors can avoid the risks of Internet exploitation by providing the appropriate use of the technology and keep children safe online. In addition, parents should be 'non-blaming' and should provide a safe and secure home environment so that children can talk freely about the issues.

Teachers and child protection organizations can work in collaboration for conducting various child awareness training programs for digital use, cyber-safety, danger signs about online abusers, and mechanisms for reporting any such act with helpline numbers which can help in the prevention of child abuse and inculcating the importance of disclosing about the abuse without terror and/or providing expertise to parents and guardians on how to identify and respond to abuse.

Media can have an enormous impact in transforming public knowledge through various forms by highlighting the issues regarding abuse. It can provide a framework and platform for victims to think and talk about it freely and spread awareness amongst others by using active and interactive sessions and tele-counseling services.

The government should aware people regarding the risk of using porn sites via its

media literacy platform. Online child safety can be ensured by generating advisory for online platforms ensuring age-appropriate content and blocking and/or prohibiting all websites that carry child sexual abuse material, and curbing the use of children for pornographic purposes.

Launching digital campaigns can lead to greater awareness amongst parents, which will lessen online risks and improve online safety for their children. Schools in alliance with non-government organizations (NGOs) can undertake training programs for parents, making them aware of dangers for children who are at risk at an early age.

## Conclusion

There is a need for a more robust and integrative framework to take serious legal action against child pornography websites to protect children globally. During pandemic times, there is a need to spread more awareness and provide mental health care for this vulnerable section of the society and their parents by using reliable media and tele-counseling services. Furthermore, there is a need to ensure prompt and effective law enforcement, which can be accessed easily by children, as they need to know whom and how to contact SOS if any such situation arises. For immediate action, in this process, there is a need to involve NGOs, law enforcement agencies, mental health workers, internet service providers, and telecommunication companies.

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