

SEXUAL PREDATION: PROTECTING CHILDREN IN THE ERA OF INTERNET- THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Protection of children from online threats is a global challenge and must be addressed urgently.

In India, around 134 million children have access to mobile phones and faster internet connection and this number is just increasing leaps and bounds with the passage of time. Though this phenomenal diversification of web access has its boons, however, the lack of legal literacy and safety measures can end up being detrimental to children and can lead to online violence and threats such as online bullying, emotional abuse and sexual predation.

To curb exploitation through e-resources, many laws have been incorporated by Indian government however; the implementation of the said laws is weak. Due to unawareness amongst the youth and lack of sensitization in the police, limited number of cases are reported and the conviction number is even lower.

Through this paper the author intends to peel the sugar-coated truth and intends to shed light on the dark reality of child exploitation through e- resources. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the current prevailing situations in India while giving sharp reference to laws and enforcement procedures made for the protection of children from online harassment and to give suitable recommendations and suggestions that can be incorporated in the Indian regime for their better implementation.

Key Words: *online abuse, child exploitation, child protection, cyber harassment*

JEL Classification: [K00]

1. Introduction

As of 2016, there were around 367.48 million internet subscribers in India.¹ While India's rate of access is comparatively less than other middle-income developing countries like BRICS, however, the country is rapidly catching up in the field of cyber technology and cyber access and is acting as a foreground market of untapped internet-user domain specially in the field of smartphones. Government initiatives like 'Digital India'² and incentives given to multinational companies are facilitating the expansion of the same.

With such massive expansion of information and communication technology (ICT) doors of new opportunities of growth have opened, however, path that they lead to, is not free from challenges. In India it is estimated that

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¹ The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, *The Indian Telecom Service Performance Indicators*, Jul-Sep, 2016, Available at: http://www.trai.gov.in/sites/default/files/Indicator_Reports_Ending_Sep_30122016.pdf [10 Mar 2017].

² Digital India, The National Flagship Programme of the Government of India, Available: www.digitalindia.gov.in [10 Mar 2017].

approximately 137 million minors are avid users of internet/smartphones.³ It is undisputed that such free access is beneficial and provides entertainment, educational benefits and enhances their general knowledge, skills and participation; but, extensive usage by children without proper supervision possess potential risks and challenges.

“Students in college and graduate school are largely within the age range - eighteen to twenty-four years - at which vulnerability to sexual violence is highest.”⁴ “Such sexual harassment and child abuse is finding new forms and channels through mobile and digital technologies.”⁵

It can now happen through various online mediums inclusive and not limited to social networking sites, e-mails, online chat rooms, pop-up messages, internet advertising, photo sharing applications, spam messages etc.

Media reports and research has indicated that sexual harassment and abuse of children through internet mediums is growing exponentially where the children and young adults are both the victims and perpetrators of the crime. Through the prevalence of such offensive activities are known yet, their magnitude and effect has become difficult to quantify. Some government and non-government organizations in Indian are taking initiative to control it however, significant gap still remains in terms of awareness, complaint mechanism, response service and law enforcement.

Objectives

Through this paper the author intends to peel the sugar-coated truth and intends to shed light on the dark reality of child exploitation through e- resources. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the current prevailing situations in India while giving sharp reference to laws and enforcement procedures made for the protection of children from online harassment and to give suitable recommendations and suggestions that can be incorporated in the Indian regime for their better implementation.

Structure

For an elaborate discussion, this paper has been divided into four chapters. The First Chapter Introduces the issue and, sheds light on the prevailing conditions in India with respect to online sexual harassment. Followed by the Second Chapter that prolongs the discussion on the Online risks and threats to children prevailing across the globe. While the Third Chapter details the laws

³ UNICEF, (2016) *Online Child Protection in India-an-assessment*, New Delhi, India, p. 5 [UNICEF].

⁴ Bureau of Justice Statistics, (2014) *Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization Among College-Age Females, 1995-2013*, U.S. Dep't Just. 34, Available: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsavcaf9513.pdf> [10 Mar 2017].

⁵ Press Information Bureau, Govt. of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, *The Ministry of Women and Child Development to setup National Alliance against online Child sexual abuse and exploitation*, New Delhi, India, 16-Jan, 2017, Available at: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=157384> [10 Mar 2017].

enforced and the lacunas that still remain. While in Fourth Chapter the author gives conclusive remarks and attempts to give recommendations to fill in the widening gap and to highlight the way forward.

Methodology

This paper is a doctrinal report, a wide range of national and international reports, papers, guidelines and grey literature was reviewed before being incorporated into this paper. Data from recent surveys exhibiting the online abuse of children were also reviewed as literature.

Limitation

The absence of acceptable definitions for various terminologies describing sexual harassment was a limitation. Gathering timely and highly qualified data on abuses faced by children online was a challenge. Efforts were made to access and review a wide variety of literature available, but gaps still remained.

2. Online risks and threats to children

2.1. Children's use of Internet and communication technology.

Owing to the easy access, the children born in this 21st century tend to adapt to new technology swiftly and at an early age, therefore, no accurately comprehensive and consistent data of the use of ICT by children disaggregated by age and gender is available. However, the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) survey has indicated that about 28 million of the approx. 400 million internet users were school going children.⁶

Due to the multidimensional application of internet as mentioned previously, it can be alleged that children access internet for various reasons apart from education as well and such usage, when unsupervised can pose threat and challenge. "Increased unsupervised Internet access magnifies the existing online modes of child abuse, stalking and sexual harassment."⁷

Commonly online sexual harassment involves harasser sending unwanted, obscene, threatening or abusive messages to the victim or even posting obscene, abusive or threatening comments about the victim on social networking sites, blogs or discussion forum.

With the advance in technology, the modes of sexual harassment have expanded to include sending pictures to or sharing pictures of the victim without permission to social networking applications and forums such as Snapchat, where they disappear after viewing from the mobile application but can be stored by using third party applications or phone's screenshot mechanism.

⁶ Internet and Mobile Association of India, *Internet in India*, New Delhi, Nov. 2015, Available at: www.iamai.in/media/details/4486 [10 Mar 2017].

⁷ UNICEF, *supra* note 3.

“Such usage facilitates the sexual exploitation of children through the production and dissemination of child sexual abuse materials and by facilitating the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children.”⁸

Furthermore, “the lack of digital literacy and online safety measures also expose children to high risks of online crimes and abuses such as cyberbullying, harmful material, grooming and sexual exploitation.”⁹

2.2. Cyberbullying

Bullying may involve demonstration of strength by one over another by specifically aiming at their sensitivities. Cyberbullying may involve “abuse and/or harassment by teasing or insulting victim’s body shape, intellect, family background, mother tongue, place of origin, race, class, caste using modern day telecommunication networks and internet.”¹⁰ In 2012, A study conducted by Microsoft ranked India third out of 25 countries for its high online bullying rates (after China).¹¹

An Indian Parliamentary Committee on ICT in its report in 2014 recognized that online bullying of children by their peers was a far more common offense than any other.¹² Cruel and offensive statement on the internet can have devastating effect on the victim and it can publicly defame him and can break his self-esteem.

2.3. Online Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse of children involves sexual activity between a child and another person who may or may not be an adult but is who uses the child for his own sexual gratification or satisfaction. Online sexual harassment of the children could be passive as in the case of exposing the child to inappropriate online content or active sexual solicitation.¹³

It is not necessary that the abuser may be an adult or an out-sider. Students connecting with each other through social media and online after the turn of the present century produced an explosion in the exposure of, and response to, sexual harassment of students by other students.¹⁴

⁸ *Supra* note 5.

⁹ UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p. 28.

¹⁰ Jaishankar, k., *Cyber bullying: Profile and Policy Guidelines*, Tirunelveli: Dept. of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Manomaniam, Sundaranar University, 2009 [Jaishankar].

¹¹ Microsoft, Global Youth Online Behavior Survey, (2012), Available: https://news.microsoft.com/2012/06/26/online-bullying-is-a-top-concern-among-youth/#sm.0001yvlp6yzzrqdifuyy_20mc1mkt8[10 Mar 2017].

¹² Standing Committee on Information Technology (2013-2014) Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, *Cybercrime, Cybersecurity and right to Privacy*, 52nd Report, New Delhi, Feb. 2014.

¹³ Barrios L., Sosa, K., ‘*Sexual Harassment on The Internet*’, Available: http://www.unc.edu/courses/2010_spring/law/357c/001/internetharassment/internet-harassment.html[10 Mar 2017].

¹⁴ Catharine A. MacKinnon, “In Their Hands: Restoring Institutional Liability for Sexual Harassment in Education”, *YLJ*, vol. 125, 2015-2016, no. 7 May 2016 1820-2181.

Furthermore, “according to the International Association of Internet hotlines, the number of webpages containing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) increased 147 percent from 2012 to 2014, with children under the age group of 10 or younger were portrayed in 80 percent of the material.”¹⁵ Instances like these make child pornography one of the most shared and commonly used medium for child sexual abuse, through which young children are ‘groomed’¹⁶, enticed and solicited into sexual activity for financial gains.

With the boom in technology, new modus operandi of CSAM have emerged that involve sharing of sexual explicit videos, photos, clips, mails, sexting, live streaming videos on webcam or circulation of self-generated content to or about the victim with an intention to blackmail, extort (sextortion) or to take revenge (revenge porn).

The appalling factor about such online sexual harassment is that it becomes difficult to ascertain the identity of the abuser. The Parliamentary Committee in its 2014 Report on Information Technology¹⁷ also recognizes “the threat posed to children by predatory paedophiles, who conceal their true identity while using the internet to groom the potential victim.”¹⁸

It is pertinent to mention that child sexual abuse is a multi-layered problem which negatively impacts children’s safety, health and well-being. Research from world-wide indicates that children’s exposure to violence and abuse leads to an association with long-term physical, psychological, and emotional harm.¹⁹

2.4. Cyber Extremism

Cyber extremism is an emerging global phenomenon where some non-state entities use the internet and social media sources to propagate, promulgate and implement radicalized thoughts and threaten the national security. The risk of naive children and young people being indoctrinated is increasing as a result of serious threat terrorism poses to global security.²⁰ The absence of a coherent international agreements on cyber extremism and divergent national approaches restricts implementation of cyber security.

2.5. Online Financial Frauds

The exponential amplification of internet retail websites and mobile apps have increased an ever-increasing number of minor online shoppers, who are vulnerable targets of online commercial frauds. A recent survey has highlighted that the number of teenage shoppers have increased from 37 percent in the year

¹⁵ UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p. 36.

¹⁶ Grooming entrails luring a child into sexual conversations to prepare him/her for child sexual abuse, exploitation, to radicalize him for religious violence, terror, drug or any other illegal activities. Refer: UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p. 46.

¹⁷ *Supra* note 12.

¹⁸ Jaishankar, *supra* note 10.

¹⁹ *Supra* note at 5.

²⁰ UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p. 40.

2012-13 to 69 percent in 2013-14.²¹ Children become targets of identity theft, hacking and other forms of pharming and phishing where their personal information, passwords and bank details gets saved online through the websites infested with malwares and viruses leading to commercial frauds. Naïve children also tend to accept friends request of strangers or click onto pop-ups or web links imbibed in emails that instill soliciting and phishing malwares into their computers compromising their identity and precious information.

3. Legislations in India to protect children

3.1. The Existing laws

The existing laws and policies enforced in Indian to protect children from online threats and risks are evolving. Though there are some shortcomings that shall be briefly discusses, however, the laws are fairly enabling.

The Constitution of India

To begin with, the grund-norm of the country, the Constitution of India embodies special legislations, policies and framework for protection of all the children from any category of abuse, which can be interpreted to include online abuse as well.²² It enshrines provisions that give children opportunities to grow with good health and dignity and protects them from possible harm which is said to be inclusive of exploitation through ICT.²³

The Information Technology Act

The Information Technology Act²⁴ (hereinafter referred to as the IT Act) mainly concerns itself with regulating online activities. It categorizes various acts to be offensive against children, and punishes whoever:

- “publishes or transmits or causes to be published or transmitted material in any electronic form which depicts children engaged in sexually explicit act or conduct or
- creates text or digital images, collects, seeks, browses, downloads, advertises, promotes, exchanges or distributes material in any electronic form depicting children in obscene or indecent or sexually explicit manner or
- cultivates, entices or induces children to online relationship with one or more children for and on sexually explicit act or in a manner that may offend a reasonable adult on the computer resource or
- facilitates abusing children online or

²¹ Survey by TATA Consultancy Services, TCS GenY Survey 2015-2016, Available: <http://sites.tcs.com/genysurvey/> [10 Mar 2017].

²² Art. 21, Constitution of India, 1950.

²³ Id Art. 39.

²⁴ The Information Technology Act, 2000 and Information Technology Amendment Act 2008, India.

- records in any electronic form own abuse or that of others pertaining to sexually explicit act with children.”²⁵

The Provisions of the IT Act have been intensified by POCSO Act²⁶ which deals with multiple online offences including offensive like sexual abuse and child pornography.

It makes the following acts offences as per law:

- Sexual harassment of a child by showing any object in electronic form for pornographic purposes, or repeatedly making contact with the child digitally or threatening the child to use any form of media;²⁷
- Using real or stimulated images of a child for pornographic purposes or enticing of children for sexual gratification or pornography;²⁸
- Using or engaging a child in any medium like print, electronic, computer or other technology for preparing, producing, drafting, offering, transmitting, publishing, facilitating and distributing pornographic material;²⁹
- Storing any pornographic material in any form involving a child for commercial purposes;³⁰
- Abetment to commit any of the above-mentioned offence.³¹

“The IT Act also provides guidelines for Cyber cafes by insisting on the proof of identity; an adult accompanying a child; and the use of commercially available safety or filtering software to avoid, to the extent possible, any access to websites relating to pornography, including child pornography or obscene information; Cyber cafes are mandated to maintain identity proof of users, user logs and necessary documents and data for a period of one year.”³²

It is the duty of Cyber cafe owners to report any viewing or downloading of pornographic materials or any material prohibited under law.³³ However, due to lack of proper monitoring, supervision and reporting mechanism in the cyber cafes, the provisions aren’t able to bring in the desired results.

The IT Act also addresses issues pertinent to intermediary liability for transmitting third party contents.³⁴ They entail that intermediaries be liable for the acts of the third parties if, they conspired, aided, abetted or induced the commission of an unlawful act as described under the IT Act or if they receive knowledge or notification by government or it agency about circulation of any

²⁵ *Id.* Sec. 67B.

²⁶ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012

²⁷ *Id.*, Sec. 11 (ii),(iii),(iv).

²⁸ *Id.*, Sec. 13(a), (b),(c).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*, Sec. 15.

³¹ *Id.*, Sec. 16.

³² UNICEF, *supra* note 2 at p. 81.

³³ IT (Guidelines for Cyber Café) Rules, 2011.

³⁴ Refer IT Act and Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules, New Delhi, 2008.

unlawful material which is obscene, pornographic or harmful to minors on their websites and fail to remove them.³⁵

The Indecent Representation of Women Act

Along with the IT Act, The Indecent Representation of Women Act³⁶, prohibits and make indecent representation of Women and circulation of such material in any form or medium a punishable offence, however, it does not make the person who makes other do the act or the audiences guilty of any offence.³⁷

The Indian Penal Code, 1860

The Indian Penal Code (hereinafter referred to as the IPC) is a supplementary enactment and it gives stern punishment to offenders who commit crimes such as Cheating by Impersonation³⁸, cheating³⁹, publishing defamatory content⁴⁰, criminal intimidation⁴¹, criminal intimidation by anonymous communication⁴², prohibition on possession of obscene material.⁴³

“The application of IPC in conjunction with the Information Technology Act, however, can contribute to problems of interpretation and challenges the capacities of law enforcement officials and the judiciary.”⁴⁴

3.2. The Lacunas

There are multiple laws enacted with an aim to curb online sexual abuse of children, however the exponential increase in the number of reported cases suggest that there is still a wide gap between the preached and the prayed. Accumulated herewith are some off of the many loopholes that still haunt the Indian legal system.

Lack of uniform terminology and definition

Universal terminology that clearly defines online sexual abuse and harassment of children is imperative for clear and unambiguous interpretation and implementation of the laws. Due to disagreement pertaining to the actual translation and meaning of terms, confusion and challenges have ensued for their proper implementation. For instance, “the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, the leading international instrument prohibiting sexual exploitation of children, does not criminalize live-streaming of child sexual abuse or online

³⁵ Id. Sec. 79.

³⁶ The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986.

³⁷ Id. Sec. 3, 4.

³⁸ Sec. 419 IPC.

³⁹ Id. Sec 420.

⁴⁰ Id. Sec. 500.

⁴¹ Id. Sec. 506.

⁴² Id. Sec. 507.

⁴³ Id. Sec. 292.

⁴⁴ UNICEF, *supra* note 2 at p.81.

sexual grooming.”⁴⁵ However, the Luxembourg guidelines have helped in this arena to make meaning of terms comprehensive.

Legal loopholes

Despite multiple laws enforced, still some immoral acts, against the favor of children, prevails that have not been categorized as offences. Such actions include sexting, grooming and cyberbullying etc. Categorizing them as offences is again a challenging task and their incorporation might necessitate amendment of laws and might lead to potential misuse of laws.

It is pertinent to mention that categorizing *bonafide* intimate relationships, conversations, exchange of information and inquiries of minors cannot be straightway termed as unlawful or offensive and differentiating them from potential threats of grooming is a challenging task.

The appalling factor about such online sexual harassment is that it becomes difficult to mark its origin. Online abuse knows no national boundaries.⁴⁶ An anonymous person sitting in one corner of the world can effortlessly through internet harass and bully a child on the other side of the globe.

“The law also does not recognize extraterritorial jurisdiction over child pornography offences when the victim is an Indian and is silent on the criminal liability of children involved in pornography.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, it also does not provide for confiscation of the proceeds that may be derived due to offences involving child pornography.

Subjectivity in interpretation of laws

“There is considerable scope for subjectivity in interpretation of legal provisions pertaining to online safety of children, particularly in the absence of SOPs/guidelines for Indian law enforcement agencies, including police and cyber forensic labs, to handle digital evidence related to illicit images/videos of sexually exploited children.”⁴⁸

Also it is pertinent to mention that “offensiveness” or the intensity of “harassment” is subjective in nature depending on the jurisdiction, the background of the victim and the abuser and the societal norms merely demarcating every action to be “offensive” based upon personal opinions might be prejudicial.⁴⁹ Categorizing any act as offensive or abuse without comprehensive guidelines is a challenge.

Moreover, just though looking at offensive or pornographic photos and videos, it becomes difficult to ascertain the age of the person involved and to establish if the person concerned is a child close to maturity or a young adult.

⁴⁵ UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p. 83.

⁴⁶ *Supra* note at 5.

⁴⁷ UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p.84.

⁴⁸ UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p. 86.

⁴⁹ Sec 66A of the IT Act struck down in 2015 for being in violation of Article 19 and Article 21 of the Constitution of India.

Punishment of Children accused of e-offences

As mentioned previously, children can be both victims and perpetrators of cyber offences. The IT Act only classifies ‘child’ as the victim but makes no distinction when the offender is also a child. “How persons below the age of 18 years accused of cyber offences are to be treated by law in view of the proliferation of laws dealing with related issues needs to be subjected to a thorough enquiry.”⁵⁰

A recent amendment in the Juvenile Justice Act states that if a child who is within 18-16 years of age commits any heinous crime, then he may be tried as an adult for his crimes (post recommendations by the Juvenile Justice Board).⁵¹ However, the act is silent about inclusion of cyber offences and makes the interpretation of the term “heinous” subjective.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The rapid expansion and adaptation of ICT in India together with government initiatives such as Digital India made the country witness an unprecedented cyber growth. Such rapid progress necessitates adoption of strategic policies for the development of children and their protection against cyber offences.

It must be understood that cyber offences such as online sexual harassment and solicitation are a reality and they are now growing with an exponential rate. In fact, “online sexual harassment is not a local phenomenon, but exists in all countries and cultures, although its perceptions and judgment, and consequently definitions, significantly differ from one culture to another.”⁵²

Although there are inadequate comprehensive data about cyber violence, threat, violence, cyber bullying committed on children however, it is evident that they are affecting Indian children in more ways than one can imagine. For all rounded protection of children from cyber abuse and violence in India, the author makes following recommendations:

Proper research and data collection

It is necessary to carry out proper studies and surveys and to accumulate data depicting the prevalence and effect of cyber abuse and the awareness level amongst children.

Coordination and partnership of organizations

It is recommended that key organizations and agencies coordinate to formulate a multi-layered action plan with skillful implementation to ensure appropriate prevention and response to child abuse cases.

⁵⁰ UNICEF, *supra* note 3 at p. 89.

⁵¹ Section 15 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, Delhi 2016.

⁵² Mohamed Chawki, Yassin el Shazly, “Online Sexual Harassment: Issues & Solutions” *JIPITEC 2 (2013) 4, para 71*. Refer, A. Barak, (2005), “Sexual Harassment on the Internet”, *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 23 no. 1.

Digital Literacy

An age appropriate Digital safety and Digital literacy curriculum is necessary to be incorporated in the school curriculum across the country.

It is pertinent to spread awareness amongst not just students but also their parents to make them appreciate healthy supervision for cyber access.

Success stories can be documented and showcased to motivate people and to show best practices.

Revision and amendment of legislations

The existing laws related to cyber abuse must be reviewed and revised to incorporate expanding crimes and to give comprehensive meaning to ambiguous definitions (as under IT Act and POSCO).

Punishment of children accused of cyber offences must be sketched out to cover all bases and to make sure that they are not criminalized like adults.

Proper implementation of laws is the utmost necessity.

Proper reporting and removal of explicit material

The government must ensure that there is a proper reporting system of child sexual abusive material, help of intergovernmental agencies and ISP can be taken.

An orderly response system between cybercells, police and other IT response teams must be established.

Initiatives like POSCO ‘E-box’⁵³ if implemented properly, might actually assist the child victims to easily register their complaint without compromising with their confidentiality.

Specific services for child victims

The responsibilities of the key actors such as the law enforcement officials, child service providers, must be drawn comprehensively so as to effectively protect children from online abuse.

Sensitization program must be launched and responders must be skilled in the art of counselling and handling such sensitive cases.

Appropriate programs for Counseling and rehabilitation of both, child victims and child offenders must be incorporated in the system.

Child sexual abuse, no matter whether online or offline, is a heinous crime nonetheless and leaves permanent scars on the psyche of the child. Therefore, it is pertinent that the law enforcement organizations around the world wake up from their deep sleep and realize the importance of protection of children from cyber offences and cyber threats.

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⁵³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Women and Child Development, December 2016. Available: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=155662> [10 Mar 2017].

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