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# **"DARK WEB CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN: A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE"**

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## ***Abstract***

*With digital technology becoming central to education and social life, children now interact and learn in ways that were unimaginable a decade ago. However, these opportunities also bring heightened risks. However, this digital revolution has also exposed children to significant risks, including online grooming, cyberbullying, sextortion, trafficking through digital platforms, and the circulation of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). These forms of digital exploitation not only harm children physically, emotionally, and psychologically but also undermine social values and public morality. This study examines the patterns and mechanisms of online exploitation, focusing on the vulnerabilities that make children targets for such crimes. By reviewing legal frameworks, including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, Juvenile Justice Act, and provisions of the Information Technology Act, alongside survey data collected from parents, educators, and students, the research identifies gaps in awareness, prevention, and enforcement. It also emphasizes the critical role of parents, teachers, law enforcement agencies, and policymakers in creating safe digital environments. The findings highlight that a multi-dimensional approach—combining legal measures, educational initiatives, and community engagement—is essential for effective protection. This study underscores the urgent need for sustained efforts to safeguard children's rights and well-being in the digital era, making their online experiences both safe and empowering.*

**Key Words:** *Dark Web, Child Exploitation, Cybercrime in India, Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities, Online Grooming*

## 1. Introduction

The digital world has transformed the way we communicate, learn, and interact. But along with its benefits, it has brought serious risks, especially for children. Children, as inexperienced internet users, face multiple digital threats—ranging from grooming and bullying to sextortion, trafficking, and exposure to CSAM. These acts are not just crimes against individuals they weaken social values, harm public morality, and create underground markets that have economic consequences. For this reason, digital exploitation of children should be understood not only as a violation of child rights but also as a *socio-economic offence*<sup>1</sup>.

The types of offences affecting children online are varied. **Child sexual exploitation and abuse**, including producing and circulating CSAM, fuels illegal markets. **Human trafficking through digital platforms**, whether for sexual exploitation, forced labour shows how organized crime profits from vulnerable children<sup>2</sup>. **Cyberbullying and online harassment** may seem personal, but they cause long-term psychological harm, leading to school dropouts and social exclusion<sup>3</sup>. **Sextortion and online blackmail** exploit minors through threats, often for money or sexual favours<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, **pornography and obscene material involving children, illegal marketplaces on the dark web, and exploitation through social media or online games** highlight the economic motives behind these crimes and the societal harm they cause. Taken together, these offences demonstrate why digital child exploitation should be seen as a socio-economic crime, affecting both society and the economy.

In India, several laws address these issues. The *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO)* provides safeguards against sexual exploitation<sup>5</sup>. The *Information Technology Act, 2000* criminalizes online obscenity, cyberstalking, and transmission of explicit content<sup>6</sup>. The *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023* also addresses trafficking, criminal intimidation, and digital offences. Despite these legal measures, enforcement challenges, limited technical expertise, and cross-border difficulties make children easy targets online<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), *Crime in India 2022: Statistics*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

<sup>2</sup>National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), *Report on Child Trafficking in India (2021)*

<sup>3</sup>Ministry of Women and Child Development, *Government of India, Study on Child Abuse: India 2007*.

<sup>4</sup>*Delhi High Court, X v. State (NCT of Delhi)*, 2021 SCC OnLine Del 3693.

<sup>5</sup>*Protection of Children from Sexual Offences* [Act, 2012, No. 32 of 2012], § 11–12.

<sup>6</sup>*Information Technology Act, 2000* [No. 21 of 2000], § 66E, 67, 67B.

<sup>7</sup>*Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023* [No. 45 of 2023], § 143-149, 326-340.

Looking at these offences as socio-economic crimes is important. They feed into illegal markets, link to organized crime, and put pressure on public resources such as policing, healthcare, and rehabilitation. The Supreme Court of India, in *Arumugam Servai v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2011) 6 SCC 405, emphasized that offences which harm public morality and exploit vulnerable groups must be treated seriously<sup>8</sup>. At the international level, conventions such as the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* and the *Budapest Convention on Cybercrime* recognize that protecting children online is both a human rights duty and a societal necessity<sup>9</sup>.

This paper, therefore, examines digital exploitation of children as socio-economic offences. It analyses the legal framework, judicial interpretations, and challenges in enforcement, while suggesting reforms to make the digital space safer for children.

### 1.1. Research Gap

Most existing studies on cybercrimes against children focus either on legal frameworks or psychological consequences, while very few examine exploitation on the dark web through a socio-economic lens. The practical enforcement of Indian laws such as the POCSO Act, 2012 and the Information Technology Act, 2000 also remains underexplored. Furthermore, there is limited empirical research reflecting the awareness and perceptions of parents, teachers, and students regarding these offences.

### 1.2. Novelty of the Research

This research stands out by addressing the digital exploitation of children not merely as a legal issue but as a socio-economic and societal concern. It examines how emerging digital trends such as social media, online gaming, and virtual marketplaces facilitate new forms of child abuse and highlights the gaps in existing laws and enforcement mechanisms in India. By providing a critical assessment of these challenges, the study offers original insights into child protection in cyberspace, making it highly relevant to current and future digital environments.

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<sup>8</sup> *Arumugam Servai v. State of Tamil Nadu*, (2011) 6 SCC 405.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989; Council of Europe, *Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention)*, 2001.



### 1.3. Aim and Objectives

1. To examine digital exploitation of children as a socio-economic offence and study its consequences on society.
2. To analyse different forms of online child exploitation such as grooming, cyberbullying, sextortion, trafficking, and the circulation of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM).
3. To review the Indian legal framework, particularly the *POCSO Act, 2012*, the *Information Technology Act, 2000*, and the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023*, in dealing with these offences.
4. To identify the practical challenges faced by law enforcement agencies in detecting and preventing digital exploitation of children.
5. To gather insights from socio-economic conditions, community perspectives, and technological factors that make children vulnerable online.
6. To suggest legal, technological, and policy-based measures for better protection of children in the digital space.

### 1.4. Literature Review

1. **Arunima Singh (2021):** In her article “*Child Exploitation and the Dark Web in India: An Emerging Threat*” published in the *Journal of Indian Law and Technology*, Singh (2021) highlights how the dark web facilitates the distribution of CSAM and stresses that children in rural and semi-urban areas remain particularly vulnerable due to low awareness<sup>10</sup>.
2. **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Report (2022):** The NCRB’s “*Crime in India*” report documents cybercrimes affecting children, such as grooming, sextortion, and trafficking, many of which are facilitated through hidden online platforms. The data indicate that states with greater internet access but weaker digital literacy skills report a higher prevalence of such offences<sup>11</sup>.
3. **Meena Kumari & S. Rajendran (2020):** In their paper published in the *Indian Journal of Criminology*, the authors “Kumari & Rajendran” (2020) emphasize the intersection between socio-economic disadvantage and online exploitation, pointing to poverty and

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<sup>10</sup> Singh, A. (2021). Child exploitation and the dark web in India: An emerging threat. *Journal of Indian Law and Technology*, 17(2), 45–60.

<sup>11</sup> National Crime Records Bureau. (2022). *Crime in India 2022: Statistics*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

low awareness as key risk factors. They also evaluate how the POCSO Act and the IT Act serve as legal safeguards, while pointing out their enforcement limitations<sup>12</sup>.

4. **Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) Report (2021):** The MWCD report “*Impact of Cybercrimes on Children in India*” emphasizes the role of structural disadvantages such as unemployment, rural–urban disparity, and inadequate parental supervision in heightening children’s risk of being exploited through both open and hidden online networks<sup>13</sup>.
5. **Prakash Singh (2019):** Singh’s article in the *Criminal Law Journal of India*, “*Online Grooming and Child Safety in India*”, investigates cases where children were initially targeted via surface web applications and later trafficked using dark web channels. The paper underscores the importance of parental oversight and school-level digital safety initiatives<sup>14</sup>.
6. **Cyber Peace Foundation (2022):** The report “*Child Safety in Digital India*” compiles survey-based evidence from various Indian states, showing how economic inequality, inadequate digital education in schools, and the accessibility of anonymous platforms contribute to child exploitation online<sup>15</sup>.
7. **Shweta Sharma (2023):** Writing in the *Indian Journal of Socio-Legal Studies*, Sharma, in “*Dark Web Crimes against Children: Challenges in Law Enforcement*” analyses difficulties faced by Indian agencies such as the CBI and state cyber cells in identifying and prosecuting offenders operating under the anonymity of the dark web<sup>16</sup>.
8. **Save the Children India (2020):** The organisation’s report “*Online Child Abuse and Exploitation in India*” links digital abuse with broader problems like child labour and trafficking. It argues that poverty, unemployment, and gender-based vulnerabilities significantly increase risks, while calling for community-level rehabilitation and protective measures<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Kumari, M., & Rajendran, S. (2020). Digital exploitation of children: A socio-legal study in the Indian context. *Indian Journal of Criminology*, 48(1), 25–37.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2021). *Impact of cybercrimes on children in India*. Government of India.

<sup>14</sup> Singh, P. (2019). Online grooming and child safety in India. *Criminal Law Journal of India*, 45(3), 112–124.

<sup>15</sup> Cyber Peace Foundation. (2022). *Child safety in Digital India*. Retrieved from <https://www.cyberpeace.org>

<sup>16</sup> Sharma, S. (2023). Dark web crimes against children: Challenges in law enforcement. *Indian Journal of Socio-Legal Studies*, 5(1), 55–68.

<sup>17</sup> Save the Children India. (2020). *Online child abuse and exploitation in India*. Retrieved from <https://www.savethechildren.in>

### 1.5. Research Methodology

This study uses a mixed research methodology, combining doctrinal and empirical approaches. The doctrinal analysis examines statutory provisions such as the POCSO Act, 2012, the IT Act, 2000, and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, along with relevant case laws and academic writings. The empirical part is based on a Google Form survey of students, parents, and teachers to assess awareness, socio-economic factors, and perceptions regarding the dark web exploitation of children.

### 1.6. Hypotheses

**H1:** Children from economically weaker and marginalized families are more likely to be targeted for dark web exploitation due to limited digital literacy and lack of parental supervision.

**H2:** The growth of underground digital markets and the use of anonymous payment methods (e.g., cryptocurrency) positively correlate with the persistence of child exploitation on the dark web.

**H3:** Weak enforcement mechanisms, fragmented laws, and underreporting are the primary institutional factors enabling the continuation of child exploitation in cyberspace.

### 1.7. Research Questions

1. What socio-economic vulnerabilities make children in India more susceptible to exploitation on the dark web?
2. How effective are Indian laws (POCSO Act, IT Act, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita) in addressing emerging forms of online child exploitation such as grooming, sextortion, trafficking, and CSAM?
3. What role do digital literacy and parental/teacher awareness play in preventing online exploitation of children?
4. Why is there underreporting of dark web crimes against children, and how do stigma and lack of awareness contribute to it?
5. What reforms in law, policy, and technology (AI tools, forensic capabilities, international cooperation) are most needed to strengthen child protection in the digital era?

### 1.8. Nature and Meaning of Digital Exploitation of Children

Digital exploitation of children refers to the manipulation, abuse, or victimization of minors

through online platforms, digital technologies, or internet-enabled devices, primarily for sexual, financial, or psychological purposes. Unlike traditional forms of exploitation, digital exploitation is often hidden, transnational, and technologically sophisticated, making detection, investigation, and prosecution highly complex. The **dark web** a segment of the internet not indexed by standard search engines and accessible only through anonymizing software such as Tor—has emerged as a critical platform for these offences. It allows offenders to communicate, exchange illicit materials, and operate with near-total anonymity, effectively evading conventional policing mechanisms.

Children's vulnerability in digital spaces is multi-dimensional. Factors such as age, curiosity, lack of digital literacy, and reliance on the internet for education and socialization increase the risk of exploitation. Offenders exploit these vulnerabilities through grooming, coercion, or manipulation to obtain explicit material, financial benefit, or personal information. Therefore, digital exploitation of children cannot be viewed solely as a criminal issue; it is also a **socio-economic problem**, as its adverse effects extend beyond individual victims to families, communities, and society at large.

### 1.9. Forms of Digital Exploitation of Children

Digital exploitation of children takes multiple forms, each with distinct characteristics, methods, and consequences. These forms involve the misuse of online platforms, social media, digital devices, and encrypted networks to manipulate or harm minors. Understanding these forms is essential for developing effective prevention and legal strategies.

#### 1.9.1. Online Grooming

Online grooming, also known as *child grooming* or *enticement of minors*, refers to the process where an adult establishes a deceptive emotional connection with a child, typically through digital means, with the ultimate goal of subjecting the child to sexual abuse or exploitation. It may also occur in offline settings, though the internet has become the most common medium for such acts. Studies highlight that men form the overwhelming majority of perpetrators, though female offenders have also been identified in certain cases<sup>18</sup>.

The process usually unfolds in identifiable phases. Initially, the offender selects a target, often by scanning social networking platforms, gaming sites, or messaging applications<sup>19</sup>. Children

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<sup>18</sup> Altamura, A. (2017). Child Grooming: *Definition, Legal Response and Case Studies*. Journal of Child Protection Studies

<sup>19</sup> Winters, G. M., & Jeglic, E. L. (2017). *Stages of Online Grooming: A Qualitative Analysis of Predators' Internet Communications with Minors*. Sexual Abuse, 29(6).

who appear vulnerable such as those expressing loneliness, family conflict, or emotional distress online—are particularly at risk<sup>20</sup>. After identifying a potential victim, the offender initiates contact and gradually develops what appears to be a friendship<sup>21</sup>. This is often achieved by mirroring the child’s interests, hobbies, or personal circumstances, creating a sense of familiarity and trust.

Once trust is established, the offender typically works to isolate the child from protective influences, stresses secrecy in communication, and gauges the risk of detection (e.g., whether parents monitor online activity). Importantly, grooming does not always follow a fixed sequence. Research shows that it is a flexible and manipulative process, shaped by the offender’s intentions and the child’s responses<sup>22</sup>. The end objective is sexual exploitation, which may occur online—for instance, by coercing the child into sharing explicit images—or offline, through arranging physical meetings.

#### 1.9.1.1. International Legal Approaches

Global recognition of grooming as a criminal act has evolved over time. Early treaties such as the *Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (2000)* did not expressly mention grooming. However, later instruments such as the *Council of Europe’s Lanzarote Convention (2007)* and the *EU Directive 2011/92/EU on combating sexual abuse and exploitation of children* explicitly criminalized the practice<sup>23</sup>.

**Article 23 of “The Lanzarote Convention” (2007)** criminalizes situations where an adult proposes meeting a child online for exploitation and takes concrete steps toward carrying out that abuse. Similarly, **Article 6 of the EU Directive** makes it an offence for an adult to propose meeting a child below the age of consent for sexual exploitation, and also criminalizes attempts to induce a child to create pornographic material<sup>24</sup>.

A major criticism of both instruments is the requirement that “material acts” must follow the proposal, suggesting that liability arises only if a physical meeting is arranged. This overlooks cases where the abuse remains digital yet causes severe harm. In 2015, the Lanzarote

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<sup>20</sup> Lanning, K. V. (2010). *Child Molesters: A Behavioural Analysis*. U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>21</sup> O’Connell, R. (2003). *A Typology of Child Cybersexexploitation*. University of Central Lancashire.

<sup>22</sup> Black, P., Wollis, M., Woodworth, M., & Hancock, J. (2015). *A Linguistic Analysis of Grooming Strategies of Online Child Sex Offenders*. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 44. Elliot, I. (2017). Online Grooming: Typologies and Mitigation Strategies. *Criminology & Criminal Justice Review*.

<sup>23</sup> Council of Europe, *Lanzarote Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> *Directive 2011/92/EU* of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography.

Committee clarified that grooming can occur entirely online and still inflict significant damage on a child's wellbeing<sup>25</sup>.

Countries have adopted varying models. Some jurisdictions, such as the UK, link grooming offences to attempts to meet in person<sup>26</sup>. Others including Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Italy, and Portugal criminalize online grooming irrespective of whether a physical meeting is intended<sup>27</sup>.

### 1.9.1.2. Indian Legal Framework

With one of the world's largest populations of internet users, India has experienced a growing number of grooming-related cases facilitated by digital platforms<sup>28</sup>. The country does not have a standalone statute titled "online grooming," but the offence is addressed under existing laws. The **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012** provides a strong legal basis. Under Section 11 of POCSO, sexual harassment is interpreted broadly and covers solicitation or enticement of a child, which can include online interactions and Section 12 prescribes punishment for such harassment. Offenders using online communication with sexual intent fall within this framework<sup>29</sup>. Additionally, Section 67B of the **Information Technology Act, 2000** prohibits creation, transmission, or solicitation of sexually explicit content involving children, thereby covering situations where grooming involves coercing children into producing such material<sup>30</sup>.

Indian courts have interpreted these provisions progressively, recognizing that grooming may take place entirely in virtual spaces without physical interaction. This recognition ensures that offenders who exploit children through online messaging, image requests, or video interactions can be held criminally liable. Cases like *Avinash v. State of Karnataka* and *X v. State (NCT of Delhi)* have strengthened judicial understanding of digital exploitation<sup>31</sup>.

Institutionally, the government has strengthened enforcement through cybercrime reporting

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<sup>25</sup> *Lanzarote Committee*, Opinion on Article 23, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> *R v. Costi*, [2006] EWCA Crim 1340 (Court of Appeal, UK).

<sup>27</sup> International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC). (2017). *Online Grooming of Children: International Legal Framework and Best Practices*.

<sup>28</sup> Kacker, L., Varadan, S., & Kumar, P. (2007). *Study on Child Abuse: India 2007*. Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India.

<sup>29</sup> *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012* [No. 32 of 2012], § 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Information Technology Act, 2000* [No. 21 of 2000], § 67B.

<sup>31</sup> *Avinash v. State of Karnataka*, 2018 SCC OnLine Kar 3445; *X v. State (NCT of Delhi)*, 2017 SCC OnLine Del 10984.

portals, specialized police cells, and awareness campaigns<sup>32</sup>. India is also a signatory to the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** and has harmonized its domestic laws to reflect international commitments, though unlike some European jurisdictions, it has not enacted a dedicated statute focused solely on online grooming.

### 1.9.2. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has emerged as one of the most pervasive forms of online harm against children. It may be defined as the use of digital technologies—including social media platforms, messaging applications, gaming networks, and online forums—to repeatedly harass, threaten, or humiliate a child. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is not confined to physical spaces and can occur at any time, making its reach broader and its effects more enduring. Children who are subjected to such abuse often face significant emotional distress, which can translate into long-term psychological and social consequences<sup>33</sup>.

#### 1.9.2.1. Forms of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can manifest in multiple ways. Common forms include:

1. **Harassment through messages:** sending abusive, threatening, or offensive communications.
2. **Public humiliation:** sharing embarrassing photos, videos, or information in online spaces.
3. **Exclusion:** deliberately removing or isolating a child from online groups or communities.
4. **Impersonation:** creating fake profiles to damage a child's reputation.
5. **Cyberstalking:** sustained monitoring and intimidation of a child's online activity<sup>34</sup>.

Each of these forms affects a child's dignity and personal security. Importantly, because of the permanent nature of digital content, the harm caused by cyberbullying often extends far beyond the immediate incident<sup>35</sup>.

#### 1.9.2.2. Legal Approaches

Globally, cyberbullying is increasingly recognized as a threat to children's rights and well-

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<sup>32</sup> European Commission. (2020). *Evaluation of the Implementation of Directive 2011/92/EU on Combatting Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children*. Brussels: EU Publications.

<sup>33</sup> Livingstone, S., & Smith, P. K. (2014). Annual Research Review: *Harms experienced by child users of online and mobile technologies*. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(6), 635–654.E

<sup>34</sup> Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2015). *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying*. Sage Publications.

<sup>35</sup> UNICEF (2021). *Digital Safety for Children: Policy Guidance Brief*. UNICEF Office of Research.

being. The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**, through General Comment No. 25 (2021), obliges states to ensure children's protection from violence in digital spaces<sup>36</sup>. The **European Union** has incorporated online safety within its **Strategy for a Better Internet for Children (2020)**, emphasizing preventive measures, reporting mechanisms, and accountability of digital platforms<sup>37</sup>. Jurisdictions such as the **United Kingdom** and **Australia** have introduced specific codes of conduct and legislation addressing online harassment and bullying, holding platforms responsible for user safety<sup>38</sup>.

### 1.9.2.3. Indian Legal Framework

In India, there is no single statute exclusively dealing with cyberbullying. However, the behaviour is punishable under several provisions of existing laws:

1. **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023**: Section 78 criminalizes stalking, including online stalking; Sections 351 address criminal intimidation, including anonymous threats; and Section 79 penalizes obscene or insulting communication, including online harassment<sup>39</sup>.
2. **Information Technology Act, 2000**: Section 66E punishes violation of privacy through capturing or sharing images without consent, while Section 67B prohibits publishing or transmitting sexually explicit content involving children<sup>40</sup>.
3. **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**: Provides protection from abuse and exploitation, which may include cases overlapping with cyberbullying<sup>41</sup>.

Judicial pronouncements have also contributed to the legal response. In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act for violating free speech, but simultaneously acknowledged the challenges posed by online abuse and the state's responsibility to safeguard individuals, especially children, from harassment<sup>42</sup>. High Courts across India have also recognized cyberstalking and online harassment as serious

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<sup>36</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, CRC/C/GC/25 (2021).

<sup>37</sup> European Commission. (2020). *Strategy for a Better Internet for Children*. Brussels: EU Publications.

<sup>38</sup> Office of the safety Commissioner (Australia). (2021). *Cyberbullying and Online Safety Programs*. Canberra: Australian Government; UK Department for Education. (2017). *Preventing and Tackling Bullying: Advice for Headteachers, Staff and Governing Bodies*. London: HMSO.

<sup>39</sup> *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023* [No. 45 of 2023], § 78, 79, 351.

<sup>40</sup> *Information Technology Act, 2000* [No. 21 of 2000], § 66E, 67, 67B

<sup>41</sup> *Juvenile Justice [Care and Protection of Children] Act, 2015* [No. 2 of 2016].

<sup>42</sup> *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, (2015) 5 SCC 1.



offences requiring prompt investigation<sup>43</sup>.

### 1.9.2.3. Socio-Economic Impact

Cyberbullying is not only a personal offence but also a socio-economic problem. At the individual level, it results in trauma, depression, and in severe cases, self-harm or suicide. At the educational level, it leads to absenteeism, decline in academic performance, and in some instances, school dropouts. At the societal level, cyberbullying erodes trust in digital platforms and places additional burdens on healthcare, policing, and the judicial system<sup>44</sup>. Its cumulative effect weakens social cohesion and reduces children's confidence in participating in online education and communication, thereby hampering digital inclusion.

### 1.9.2.4. Institutional and Policy Initiatives in India

The Government of India has launched initiatives such as the **National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal**, which allows citizens to report incidents of cybercrime, including cyberbullying. The **National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)** and various state education boards have also issued guidelines urging schools to adopt anti-bullying policies and set up mechanisms for safe reporting<sup>45</sup>. Despite these efforts, challenges remain in enforcement, including limited digital literacy among parents and children, inadequate training of law enforcement agencies, and lack of platform accountability. Strengthening these institutional mechanisms is essential for providing comprehensive protection to children in the digital environment.

### 1.9.3. Sextortion

Sextortion is one of the fastest-growing threats in the digital environment, particularly affecting children and adolescents. It refers to situations where an offender coerces a minor into sharing sexual images, videos, or engaging in sexual activity by threatening to expose private information or previously obtained material. In many cases, the pressure involves either demands for additional sexual content or monetary payments<sup>46</sup>. What makes sextortion distinct

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<sup>43</sup> *Kameshwar v. State of NCT of Delhi*, 2017 SCC OnLine Del 10984 (example of Delhi HC recognising seriousness of online harassment).

<sup>44</sup> Hinduja, S., & Patchin, J. W. (2018). *Connecting Adolescent Suicide to the Severity of Bullying and Cyberbullying*. *Journal of School Violence*, 17(4), 479–492.

<sup>45</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). (2021). *Guidelines for Eliminating Corporal Punishment and Bullying in Schools*. New Delhi: NCPCR.

<sup>46</sup> Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., & Mitchell, K. (2016). *Sextortion of Minors: Characteristics and Dynamics*. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59(1), 10–18.

is that it combines two forms of abuse sexual exploitation and extortion leaving the victim trapped in fear of exposure and unable to seek help easily.

### 1.9.3.1. Methods and Characteristics

Offenders use different strategies to carry out sextortion. Some build trust with a child through false online identities before turning that relationship into a tool for coercion. Others hack devices or accounts to steal private photographs and then threaten disclosure unless further demands are met. Impersonation is also common, where perpetrators pose as peers to obtain intimate content. In almost every case, threats of public exposure—sharing material with family, friends, or online platforms—become the primary weapon of control<sup>47</sup>.

The digital nature of sextortion worsens its impact. Once an image or video is shared, it can be duplicated endlessly and remain online permanently. For children, this creates a sense of helplessness and long-lasting anxiety, making the harm much greater than in traditional cases of harassment.

### 1.9.3.2. International Legal Approaches

International bodies increasingly recognize sextortion as a serious form of online exploitation. According to **Interpol's Global Report on Online Sexual Extortion of Children (2022)**, organized groups now engage in sextortion, often targeting hundreds of children at once<sup>48</sup>. The **Lanzarote Convention (2007)** criminalizes solicitation of children for sexual purposes, a provision that extends to cases involving threats for sexual material. Likewise, the **Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001)** obliges member states to penalize computer-enabled coercion and exploitation<sup>49</sup>.

Several countries have prosecuted sextortion under broader laws. The United States and Canada treat it as both child pornography and extortion, while EU states increasingly frame sextortion as a combined sexual offence and cybercrime. This dual approach allows prosecutors to impose stronger penalties and acknowledge the multi-layered harm caused to victims.

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<sup>47</sup> UNICEF. (2021). *Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Policy Guidance Brief*. New York: UNICEF.

<sup>48</sup> Interpol. (2022). *Global Report on Online Sexual Extortion of Children*. Lyon: Interpol

<sup>49</sup> Council of Europe, *Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse* (Lanzarote Convention), 2007; Council of Europe, *Convention on Cybercrime* (Budapest Convention), 2001.

### 1.9.3. 3. Indian Legal Framework

Although India does not use the term “sextortion” in its statutes, the behaviour is punishable under several existing provisions.

1. Under the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023**, Section 75 covers sexual harassment, Section 77 addresses voyeurism, Section 78 criminalizes stalking (including cyberstalking), while Sections 351 penalize threats and intimidation<sup>50</sup>.
2. The **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012** treats any act of solicitation, use of children for sexual gratification, or coercion into creating explicit material as a punishable offence (Sections 11–13)<sup>51</sup>.
3. The **Information Technology Act, 2000** supplements these provisions: Section 66E punishes privacy violations, and Sections 67 and 67B criminalize the creation and transmission of obscene and sexually explicit content involving children<sup>52</sup>.

Judicial interpretation has reinforced this framework. In *State v. Mahesh Kumar* (2019), the Himachal Pradesh High Court held that threatening a woman or a minor with exposure of intimate images amounts to both sexual harassment and criminal intimidation<sup>53</sup>. More recently, the Supreme Court stressed that online blackmail targeting children must be dealt with firmly, since it undermines personal dignity and public morality.

### 1.9.3.4. Socio-Economic Impact

The consequences of sextortion extend far beyond the individual child. Victims often develop depression, withdrawal from school, or even suicidal thoughts. Families struggle with stigma and the costs of legal or psychological support. At the societal level, sextortion contributes to underground digital markets where explicit child material circulates, often linked with organized crime<sup>54</sup>. These ripple effects drain public resources, damage social trust, and weaken the promise of safe digital spaces for children.

### 1.9.3.5 Institutional and Policy Initiatives in India

To address sextortion, the Government of India has included such offences under the **National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal**, where cases of “child sexual abuse/exploitation” can be reported. The Ministry of Home Affairs and the NCPCR have also initiated awareness

<sup>50</sup> *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023* [No. 45 of 2023], § 77, 78, 351.

<sup>51</sup> *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012* [No. 32 of 2012], § 11–13

<sup>52</sup> *Information Technology Act, 2000* [No. 21 of 2000], §§ 66E, 67, 67B

<sup>53</sup> *State v. Mahesh Kumar, 2019 SCC OnLine HP 1272.*

<sup>54</sup> Europol. (2020). *Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA)*. The Hague: Europol.

campaigns to encourage safe internet practices among students and parents. However, reporting remains low, largely due to stigma and fear of exposure. Strengthening law enforcement training, ensuring accountability of digital platforms, and providing victim-friendly reporting channels are essential to effectively combat sextortion.

#### **1.9.4. Child Trafficking**

Child trafficking is one of the gravest violations of human rights, combining elements of exploitation, organized crime, and systemic abuse. The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) defines it as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for purposes of exploitation, irrespective of consent<sup>55</sup>. Traditionally carried out through physical networks, trafficking has increasingly migrated into the digital space, where traffickers leverage social media, encrypted platforms, online gaming communities, and the dark web to recruit, control, and exploit children. Cryptocurrencies and digital anonymity further obscure financial trails, making detection and prosecution more difficult<sup>56</sup>.

##### **1.9.4. 1. Methods of Digital Child Trafficking**

Traffickers adopt both traditional coercion and modern cyber tools to exploit children. The following are the most prominent methods:

###### **1. Deceptive Recruitment via Online Platforms**

Traffickers post false job advertisements, modelling contracts, or educational opportunities on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and local classifieds. Children from economically weak households are particularly vulnerable<sup>57</sup>.

###### **2. Online Grooming**

A calculated psychological process where offenders gain the trust of a child through friendship, flattery, or emotional dependency. Once trust is established, traffickers introduce ideas of migration, employment, or sexual exploitation<sup>58</sup>.

###### **3. Use of Encrypted Apps and Dark Web Markets**

Traffickers communicate through Telegram, Signal, or the dark web, where they

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<sup>55</sup>Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, *Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, Nov. 15, 2000, 2237 U.N.T.S. 319.

<sup>56</sup> INTERPOL, *Global Guidelines on Online Child Trafficking* (2022).

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2023).

<sup>58</sup> NCRB, *Crime in India 2022: Human Trafficking*.

coordinate logistics, share CSAM (Child Sexual Abuse Material), and even auction victims<sup>59</sup>.

#### 4. Digital Forgery of Identity Documents

With access to digital tools, traffickers create fake Aadhaar cards, passports, and school records to facilitate illegal cross-border movement<sup>60</sup>.

#### 5. Cryptocurrency and Hawala Channels

Payments for trafficking and exploitation are increasingly routed through crypto wallets or informal banking (hawala), making detection challenging<sup>61</sup>.

### 1.9.4.2. International Legal Framework

1. **Palermo Protocol (2000)** – cornerstone instrument obligating states to criminalize trafficking and adopt the “3Ps approach” (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution)<sup>62</sup>.
2. **ILO Convention No. 182 (1999)** – identifies trafficking as one of the worst forms of child labour demanding immediate elimination<sup>63</sup>.
3. **UNCRC (1989) and Optional Protocol on Sale of Children (2000)** – India’s ratification requires aligning domestic law with global standards of child rights.
4. **Council of Europe Convention (2005)** – emphasizes **rehabilitation and reintegration** of victims, going beyond prosecution<sup>64</sup>.

### 1.9.4.3. Indian Legal Framework

India has enacted several statutes to tackle child trafficking, though fragmented.

#### Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023

1. **Section 143 BNS** – Defines and criminalizes trafficking, with enhanced penalties where minors are involved<sup>65</sup>.
2. **Sections 98-99 BNS** – Prohibit selling and buying of minors for prostitution<sup>66</sup>.

#### Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA), 1956

1. Criminalizes running brothels, procuring minors, and detaining children for sexual exploitation.

<sup>59</sup> Europol, *Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (2021)*.

<sup>60</sup> INTERPOL, *Global Guidelines on Online Child Trafficking (2022)*.

<sup>61</sup> UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2020)*.

<sup>62</sup> Palermo Protocol, Nov. 15, 2000, 2237 U.N.T.S. 319.

<sup>63</sup> ILO, *Convention No. 182, 1999*.

<sup>64</sup> *Council of Europe Convention*, May 16, 2005, C.E.T.S. No. 197.

<sup>65</sup> *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023* [No. 45 of 2023], § 143.

<sup>66</sup> *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023* [No. 45 of 2023], § 89 & 99.

2. While progressive for its time, critics argue it **focuses more on prostitution control than child rights**.

#### **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012**

1. **Sections 11–13** penalize online solicitation, harassment, and pornography.
2. Covers the **digital dimensions** of trafficking by criminalizing online grooming and CSAM<sup>67</sup>.

#### **Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**

1. Ensures trafficked children are treated as **victims, not offenders**.
2. Provides for institutional care, rehabilitation, and Child Welfare Committee (CWC) oversight<sup>68</sup>.

#### **1.9.4. 4. Judicial Recognition**

1. *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2011)* –

In *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2011)*, the Supreme Court recognized child trafficking as a violation of fundamental rights, specifically **Articles 14, 21, and 23** of the Constitution. The Court emphasized that trafficking is not merely a criminal offense but a breach of children's rights to equality, life, and protection from forced labor, and it stressed the **State's responsibility to rescue and rehabilitate trafficked children**<sup>69</sup>.

1. *Gaurav Jain v. Union of India (1997)* –

The Court highlighted the need for **state intervention to protect children of sex workers**, preventing inter-generational trafficking and ensuring that these children are not exploited due to the socio-economic status of their parents<sup>70</sup>.

#### **1.9.4. 5. Socio-Economic Impact of Child Trafficking**

The socio-economic consequences of child trafficking in the digital era are both immediate and long-term, extending beyond the individual victim to families, communities, and national development. At the individual level, trafficked children endure psychological trauma, physical abuse, malnutrition, and the denial of education, which gravely impairs their ability to

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<sup>67</sup> *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012* [No. 32 of 2012], § 11–13.

<sup>68</sup> *Juvenile Justice [Care and Protection of Children] Act, 2015* [No. 2 of 2016], Ch. IV.

<sup>69</sup> *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India, (2011)* 5 SCC 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Gaurav Jain v. Union of India, (1997)* 8 SCC 114, Supreme Court of India.

reintegrate into society<sup>71</sup>. Many survivors develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or anxiety, which not only affects their well-being but also reduces their capacity to participate productively in the economy.

For families, trafficking often results in the loss of a crucial member, especially when children contribute to household income or caregiving responsibilities. In rural and economically disadvantaged households, this loss can lead to deeper cycles of poverty, debt, and marginalization. Families also face social stigma, as survivors of trafficking are often shunned or blamed by their own communities, particularly when sexual exploitation is involved<sup>72</sup>. This stigma creates barriers to rehabilitation, further isolating victims and families.

At the community level, trafficking undermines social cohesion by fostering distrust, fear, and normalization of illicit practices. When entire regions become known for being “source areas” of trafficking, they often attract organized crime syndicates that thrive on corruption, bribery, and exploitation of local vulnerabilities<sup>73</sup>. This results in the establishment of parallel underground economies, where trafficked children are treated as commodities. Such economies thrive on illegal profits but weaken legitimate markets and deter long-term investment in affected regions.

On a national scale, trafficking has macro-economic and governance implications. Trafficking deprives the country of its demographic dividend, as children who should be receiving education and vocational training are instead exploited. This loss translates into reduced productivity, weaker labour markets, and increased dependency ratios. Furthermore, the costs of law enforcement operations, victim rehabilitation programs, and healthcare expenditures strain public resources. Trafficking also undermines the rule of law, as it fosters corruption among officials, police, and border authorities, eroding public trust in state institutions<sup>74</sup>. In this sense, child trafficking is not just a human rights violation but also a developmental roadblock that perpetuates inequality and slows national progress toward Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those concerning education, decent work, and strong institutions.

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<sup>71</sup> ECPAT International. (2020). *Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism*. Bangkok: ECPAT.

<sup>72</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2020). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*. Vienna: UNODC.

<sup>73</sup> LO. (2017). *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*. Geneva: International Labour Office.

<sup>74</sup> UNICEF. (2021). *Ending Child Trafficking: A Handbook for Parliamentarians*. New York: UNICEF.

#### 1.9.4. 6. Institutional Policy Responses in India

India has developed a wide-ranging institutional and policy framework to combat child trafficking, though challenges remain in implementation. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has played a central role in shaping anti-trafficking measures, issuing guidelines and setting up Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) across states and districts. These specialized units are designed to ensure quicker investigations, inter-agency coordination, and victim rescue. However, studies show that many AHTUs remain understaffed and underfunded, limiting their effectiveness<sup>75</sup>.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has developed data systems to track human trafficking crimes, but underreporting and lack of cyber-specific categories continue to obscure the true scale of online child trafficking. The National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal has been another step forward, allowing citizens to anonymously report trafficking and exploitation cases involving children in cyberspace. Yet, the portal's accessibility is limited in rural areas due to the digital divide, which traffickers exploit to target communities with weak awareness<sup>76</sup>.

On the child protection front, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCRs) oversee implementation of laws such as the POCSO Act and the Juvenile Justice Act. These bodies have the mandate to monitor institutions, review complaints, and recommend policy reforms. In practice, however, delays in case disposal and inadequate victim rehabilitation measures weaken their impact. For instance, while rescue operations are often successful, survivors face limited access to long-term counselling, skill development, and livelihood programs, leading to re-victimization or re-trafficking<sup>77</sup>.

Civil society and NGOs such as Bachpan Bachao Andolan, Prayas, and Save the Children have been critical in bridging policy gaps. They provide legal aid, awareness campaigns, and rehabilitation services, while also partnering with law enforcement in rescue operations. Nonetheless, coordination between state institutions and non-state actors remains fragmented,

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<sup>75</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India. (2019). *Advisory on Preventing and Combating Human Trafficking in India*.

<sup>76</sup> National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). (2022). *Crime in India Report 2021*. New Delhi: NCRB.

<sup>77</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). (2021). *Annual Report 2020-21*. New Delhi: NCPCR.



with duplication of efforts in some areas and absence of support in others.

From a policy standpoint, India has taken steps towards a comprehensive anti-trafficking law. The draft Trafficking in Persons (Prevention, Care and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2021 aims to consolidate provisions spread across IPC, ITPA, JJ Act, and POCSO into a single framework while creating specialized anti-trafficking courts and national bureaus. However, the Bill has faced criticism for being overly punitive and insufficiently victim-centric, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that emphasizes rehabilitation over criminalization<sup>78</sup>.

Ultimately, the institutional response in India remains a work in progress. While the country has developed a layered legal and administrative system to address trafficking, structural issues—such as lack of cyber-forensic expertise, insufficient victim rehabilitation, and weak inter-state coordination—continue to undermine its efficacy. Strengthening these responses requires investment in capacity building, better inter-agency coordination, and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that policies translate into measurable outcomes for vulnerable children.

#### **1.9.5. Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)**

Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) refers to any visual or digital representation—photographs, videos, or other media depicting sexual abuse or exploitation of children. CSAM may be produced with or without the child’s consent and is often shared online for sexual gratification or commercial gain. Unlike sextortion, which involves coercion for immediate benefit, CSAM contributes to a persistent underground market, perpetuating trauma and exploitation for the victim.

##### **1.9.5.1. Methods and Channels of Distribution**

CSAM is typically disseminated through multiple digital channels:

1. Encrypted messaging applications and private online groups.
2. Dark web marketplaces and peer-to-peer networks.
3. Social media platforms and online gaming communities, sometimes disguised as innocuous content.

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<sup>78</sup> Trafficking in Persons (*Prevention, Care and Rehabilitation*) Bill, 2021, Government of India.

4. Coercive production, where children are forced to create explicit material under threats or manipulation.

The anonymity provided by the internet and use of cryptocurrencies complicates detection and prosecution, allowing offenders to evade law enforcement.

### 1.9.5.2. International Legal Approaches

The international community has recognized the severe nature of CSAM:

1. The **Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (2000)** obliges states to criminalize production, distribution, and possession of sexual material involving children<sup>79</sup>.
2. The **Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001)** mandates member states to penalize child pornography offenses and implement preventive and investigative measures<sup>80</sup>.
3. The **Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention (2007)** obliges states to hold individuals accountable for producing, distributing, or facilitating CSAM, including online offenses<sup>81</sup>.

### 1.9.5.3. Indian Legal Framework

India addresses CSAM under existing laws, combining protection of children with cybercrime provisions:

1. **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012:** Sections 11–13 criminalize sexual harassment, exploitation, and using children to produce obscene material<sup>82</sup>.
2. **Information Technology Act, 2000:** Section 67 criminalizes publishing or transmitting obscene material electronically, while Section 67B specifically addresses sexually explicit content involving children<sup>83</sup>.
3. **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023:** Sections 78 and 351 penalize online stalking, harassment, and intimidation linked to child exploitation<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> United Nations. (2000). *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography*. United Nations Treaty Series.

<sup>80</sup> Council of Europe. (2001). *Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

<sup>81</sup> Council of Europe. (2007). *Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

<sup>82</sup> *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, No. 32 of 2012*, § 11–13.

<sup>83</sup> *Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000*, § 67, 67B.

<sup>84</sup> *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023*, [No. 45 of 2023] § 78, 351.

#### 1.9.5.4. Social, Economic and Institutional Implications

CSAM has significant social, economic, and institutional consequences. Socially, victims endure long-term trauma, depression, withdrawal from education, and psychological distress, while families face stigma, social ostracism, and financial burdens related to therapy or legal support. Economically, the persistent circulation of CSAM fuels underground markets, incentivizes criminal networks, and imposes costs on law enforcement, judicial systems, and digital monitoring mechanisms. At the institutional level, India has implemented measures such as the **National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal**<sup>85</sup>, allowing citizens to report CSAM anonymously, and the **National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)**, which promotes awareness in schools and communities regarding safe digital practices and reporting mechanisms<sup>86</sup>. Civil society organizations, including **Bachpan Bachao Andolan** and **Save the Children**, provide legal aid, rehabilitation, and awareness campaigns<sup>87</sup>. Together, these initiatives aim to mitigate the multi-layered harms of CSAM and protect children in cyberspace.

#### 1.9.6. Exploitation via Online Gaming and Social Media

Digital gaming platforms and social media networks are integral to children's online experiences, offering entertainment, social interaction, and learning opportunities. However, these platforms also pose significant risks, as offenders exploit them to manipulate, coerce, or abuse children<sup>88</sup>.

##### 1.9.6.1. Methods of Exploitation

1. **Online Gaming:** Multiplayer and interactive games, especially those with chat features and virtual economies, present opportunities for exploitation:
  1. Offenders build trust with children through shared gameplay and in-game activities.
  2. Virtual currencies, rewards, or "loot" can be manipulated to coerce children into revealing personal information or performing undesirable actions<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>85</sup> National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal. (2023). *Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.*

<sup>86</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. (2021). *Guidelines for Child Safety Online. Government of India.*

<sup>87</sup> Bachpan Bachao Andolan. (2022). *Annual Report on Child Protection Initiatives.*

<sup>88</sup> Livingstone, S., & Smith, P. K. (2014). *Annual research review: Harms experienced by child users of online and mobile technologies: The nature, prevalence, and management of sexual and aggressive risks in the digital age.* *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(6), 635–654.

<sup>89</sup> Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P. (2013). *Psychological, physical, and academic correlates of cyberbullying and traditional bullying.* *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53(1), S13–S20.

3. Promises of free in-game gifts or advantages may serve as bait for grooming or financial exploitation.
2. **Social Media:** Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Discord are misused in various ways:
  1. Soliciting sexually explicit images or videos from children through private messaging.
  2. Recruiting children into illicit networks, such as those circulating CSAM or engaging in sexualized activities.
  3. Encouraging participation in harmful challenges, dares, or content creation that compromises child safety<sup>90</sup>.

### 1.9.6.2. Social, Economic and Institutional Implications

The socio-economic consequences of such exploitation are significant. Socially, victims may experience psychological trauma, withdrawal, reputational harm, and cyberbullying, while families struggle with stigma, emotional distress, and challenges in supporting the child<sup>91</sup>. Economically, offenders can gain tangible benefits through manipulation of in-game purchases, virtual currencies, or extortion, contributing to underground markets and online fraud that affect both families and digital platforms<sup>92</sup>. Recognizing these risks, India has implemented multiple measures: the **Information Technology Act, 2000** criminalizes sexual exploitation and harassment through digital platforms<sup>93</sup>; the **POCSO Act, 2012** addresses sexual harassment, coercion, and solicitation via digital channels<sup>94</sup>; and initiatives such as the **National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal** and NCPCR awareness campaigns educate children, parents, and educators on online safety and reporting mechanisms<sup>95</sup>.

Overall, the exploitation of children via online gaming and social media highlights the need to view digital abuse as both a social and economic problem. The integration of virtual economies and social networks into children's lives increases vulnerability to manipulation and financial exploitation, demonstrating the importance of legal safeguards, platform accountability, digital literacy, and social awareness to ensure safer digital environments.

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<sup>90</sup> Wolak, J., Mitchell, K. J., & Finkelhor, D. (2007). *Does online harassment constitute bullying? An exploration of online harassment by known peers and online-only contacts*. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41(6), S51–S58.

<sup>91</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. (2021). *Guidelines for Child Safety Online*. Government of India.

<sup>92</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. (2021). *Guidelines for Child Safety Online*. Government of India.

<sup>93</sup> *Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000*, § 66E, 67, 67B.

<sup>94</sup> *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, No. 32 of 2012*, § 11–13.

<sup>95</sup> National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal. (2023). *Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India*.

## **1.10. Case Studies & Illustrative Examples**

### **1.10.1. Somnath – Hansi, Haryana (Online Sexual Exploitation of Children)**

In Hansi, Haryana, police arrested a local Common Service Centre (CSC) operator named Somnath for exploiting minor girls. He reportedly gained their trust by offering gifts and then coerced them into inappropriate acts, which he recorded and uploaded online. Cyber forensic investigation played a crucial role in recovering digital evidence and ensuring conviction. This incident highlights both the dangers of community-level digital access points being misused for child exploitation and the role of technology in tracing and prosecuting offenders. Socially, the case caused fear and distrust within the community, while economically it added costs related to counselling, rehabilitation, and law enforcement resources.<sup>96</sup>.

### **1.10.2. Mangaluru, Karnataka – Sextortion Case**

A 14-year-old girl in Mangaluru was coerced into sharing explicit images, which were later used to blackmail her. The trauma led to a suicide attempt, highlighting the severe psychological impact of sextortion. Law enforcement intervention, including the cybercrime cell, helped rescue the victim and apprehend the offenders. This case emphasizes the need for parental supervision, digital literacy, and timely mental health support. Socio-economically, families faced stigma, therapy costs, and disruption in education, while the local system bore the burden of investigation and rehabilitation efforts<sup>97</sup>.

### **1.10.3. Delhi – Online Grooming and CSAM Distribution**

In Delhi, a 25-year-old man was arrested for grooming children online via social media platforms and coercing them into creating sexual content, which he circulated across dark web forums. The Delhi Police cybercrime unit used digital forensics and online tracking to apprehend the offender. The case revealed the role of socio-economic vulnerabilities, as many victims belonged to low-income households and were attracted by promises of gifts or money. Economically, the crime fuelled underground markets, and socially, it disrupted the mental well-being and trust of victims and their families<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> Central Bureau of Investigation. (2025). *Investigation report on Hansi child exploitation case*. Government of India.

<sup>97</sup> The Hindu. (2024). 14-year-old girl in Mangaluru attempts suicide after sextortion. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka>.

<sup>98</sup> Delhi Police Cybercrime Cell. (2023). *Grooming and CSAM distribution case report*. Government of Delhi.

#### 1.10.4. Maharashtra – Child Trafficking via Digital Platforms

In Maharashtra, a syndicate used online platforms to recruit and traffic children for forced labor and sexual exploitation. The offenders used fake job advertisements, social media connections, and encrypted messaging apps to lure minors. The Maharashtra Anti-Human Trafficking Unit (AHTU) coordinated with NGOs for victim rescue and rehabilitation. This case underlined the intersection of socio-economic deprivation and digital vulnerability, demonstrating how traffickers exploit poverty and lack of awareness. Social consequences included trauma, stigma, and disruption of education; economic consequences included loss of potential productivity and costs for rescue operations and rehabilitation<sup>99</sup>.

### 1.11. Empirical Study / Field Data

#### 1. Demographics

1. **Gender:** Majority respondents were female students (approx. 60%), followed by male students, and then teachers/parents.
2. **Age Groups:** Two clusters were dominant—14–18 years (school students) and 18–30 years (college/university level).
3. **Residence:** Mostly urban respondents, with notable participation from semi-urban and rural areas.
4. **Education Levels:** From below 10th standard to postgraduates, indicating broad coverage.

#### 2. Internet Usage Patterns

**Daily Internet Use:** Nearly **all respondents** reported using the internet daily.

#### Average Online Time:

- a. **Students:** 3–5 hours/day (majority)
- b. **Some extreme cases:** >5 hours/day

#### Devices Used:

- a. **Smartphones** were the most common device (70%).
- b. **Laptops/Tablets** were secondary, often used for online learning.

**Main Online Activities:** Social media, OTT/video platforms, gaming, and online learning.

#### 4. Online Risks & Exploitation

#### Most Common Threats:

1. **Messages from strangers (highest)**

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<sup>99</sup> Maharashtra Anti-Human Trafficking Unit. (2024). *Digital child trafficking case report*. Government of Maharashtra.

2. **Requests for photos/videos & meeting offline**
3. **Threats/blackmailing**
4. **Financial fraud**
5. **Bullying/harassment**

**Frequency:** Majority reported facing such issues **2–3 times**, with some reporting **frequent occurrences**.

**Reporting:**

1. Many **did not report** due to **shame, fear, or lack of awareness**.
2. When reported, action was **limited to counselling by parents/teachers**, with **few police/cyber complaints**.

**5. Awareness of Law**

1. Awareness of **POCSO Act (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences)** and **IT Act/BNS (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita)** was **moderate but inconsistent**.
2. Some students had **no awareness** of cyber laws.
3. Teachers showed higher awareness compared to students and parents.

**6. Impact on Victims**

Reported consequences included:

1. **Fear of going online**
2. **Depression & trouble sleeping**
3. **Drop in academic performance**
4. **Social withdrawal**

This indicates a **direct psychological and academic impact** of online exploitation.

**7. Suggested Solutions (Respondents' Views)**

Respondents strongly emphasized:

1. **Stronger parental monitoring** (most frequent response)
2. **Digital literacy education** in schools/colleges
3. **Strict platform policies** against offenders
4. **Faster police response & counselling centres**
5. **Stricter punishments** for cyber criminals

Teachers/parents added advanced suggestions like:

1. **Community-level interventions**
2. **Cross-border cooperation against dark web crimes**
3. **Investment in cyber forensic infrastructure**
4. **NGO–government collaboration**

### 5. International funding for child protection

### 8. Socio-Economic Insights

1. **Urban respondents** faced more **blackmail/extortion** cases linked to social media.
2. **Rural/semi-urban respondents** showed **lower awareness of reporting mechanisms**.
3. **Lower education levels** correlated with **higher vulnerability** and less awareness of legal protections.
4. Economic background influenced **device type** (shared family devices vs. personal smartphones/laptops), which in turn affected vulnerability.
5. Teachers stressed the link between **poverty, lack of awareness, and increased risk** of dark web exploitation.

The survey highlights that **children and young adults are significantly exposed to online exploitation**, ranging from **stranger contact to financial fraud and blackmail**. While legal frameworks like **POCSO and IT Act/BNS** exist, **reporting remains low** due to stigma and lack of awareness. The responses underline the urgent need for:

1. **Digital literacy education** as part of the curriculum
2. **Parental/teacher awareness campaigns**
3. **Stricter cyber platform accountability**
4. **Community and cross-border legal collaboration**
5. **Counselling and victim rehabilitation programs**

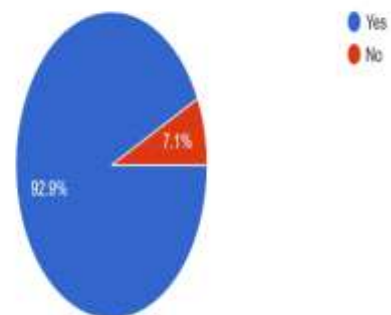
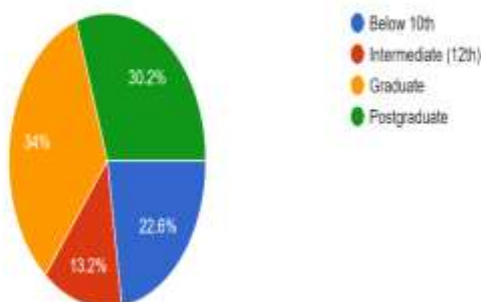
This empirical evidence confirms that **socio-economic conditions, digital illiteracy, and weak enforcement mechanisms** are driving factors behind children’s vulnerability to online crimes, particularly on the **dark web**.

1. You are a :  
56 responses

2. Gender :  
56 responses

5. Education level (for Students):  
53 responses

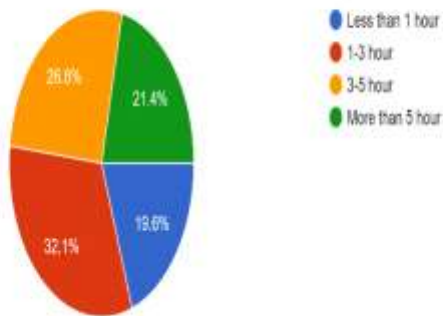
6. Do you (or your child/student) use the internet daily?  
56 responses





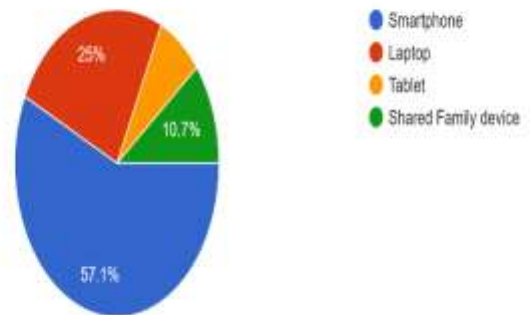
7. Average online time per day:

56 responses



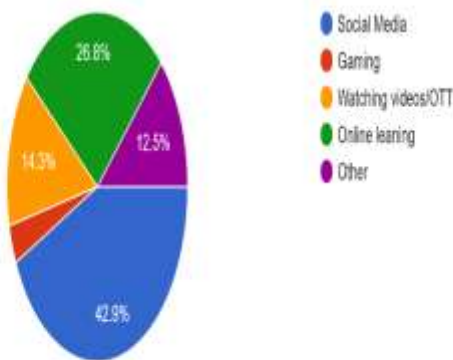
8. Devices used most often:

56 responses



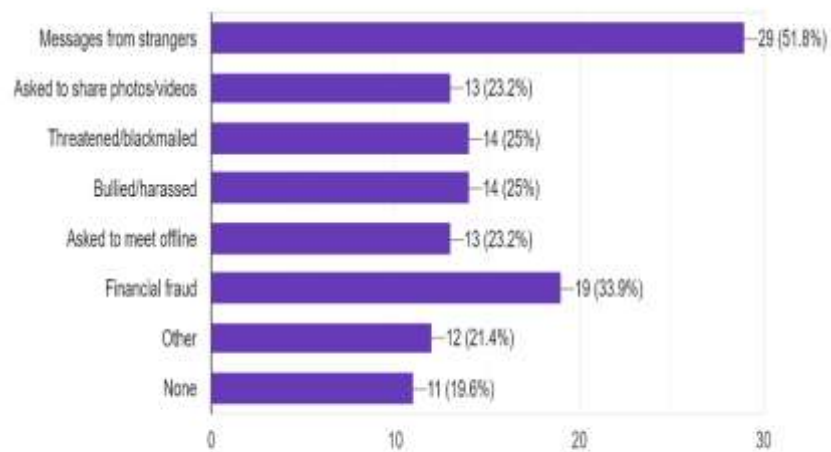
9. Main online activities:

56 responses



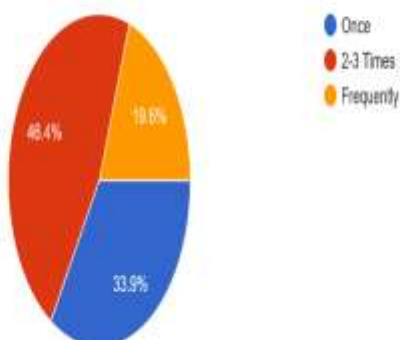
10. In the past, have you (or your child/student) faced any of the following online?

56 responses



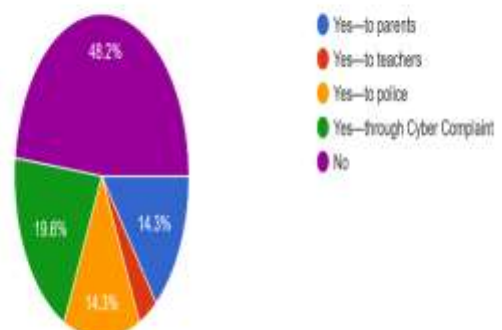
11. Frequency:

56 responses



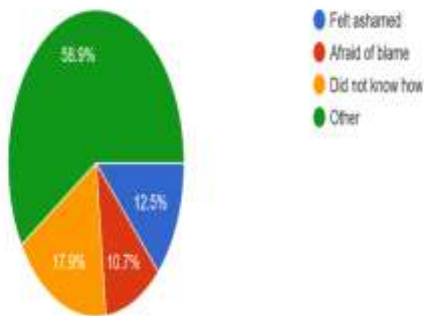
12. Was the incident reported?

56 responses



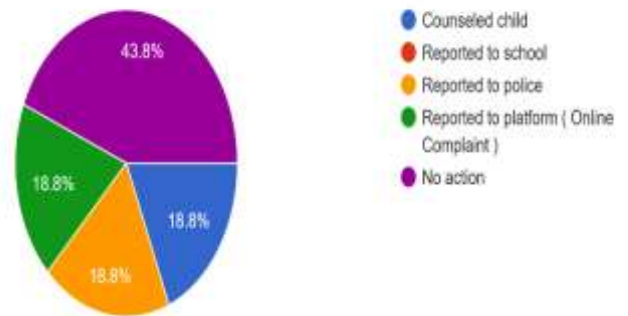
13. If not reported, why?

56 responses



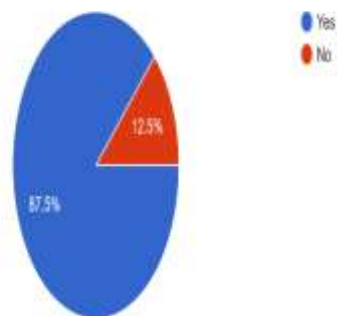
14. For parents/teachers: When reported, what action was taken?

48 responses



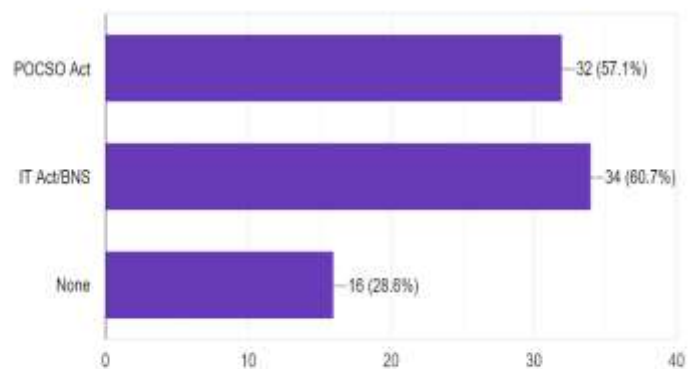
15. Do you know certain online activities are crimes in India?

56 responses



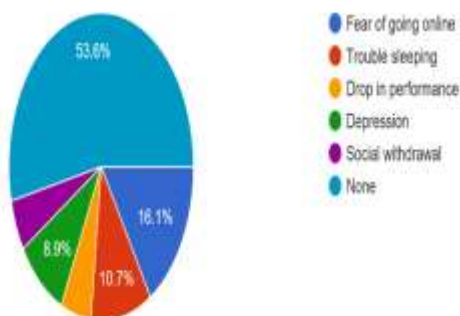
16. Heard of:

56 responses



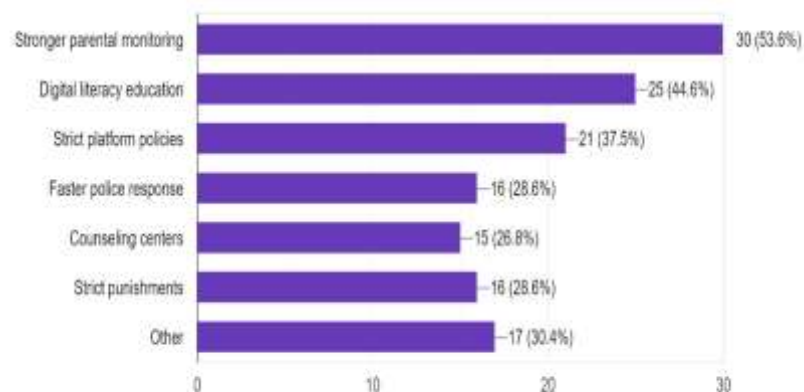
17. After facing online problems, did you/your child experience:

56 responses



18. Most effective way to protect children online?

56 responses



## 1.12. Challenges and Gaps in Combating Digital Exploitation of Children

India has made significant progress in creating a legal and institutional framework to protect children from digital exploitation. However, persistent challenges remain, which hinder effective enforcement and protection. These challenges can be broadly categorized into enforcement difficulties, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and policy or implementation gaps. Understanding these obstacles is crucial to designing interventions that are practical, comprehensive, and contextually relevant.

### 1.12.1. Enforcement Challenges

#### 1. Technical Limitations

Digital crimes against children often involve sophisticated technology, making detection, investigation, and prosecution highly complex. Crimes such as sextortion, online grooming, and distribution of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) are increasingly conducted through encrypted messaging apps, virtual private networks (VPNs), and dark web forums. Law enforcement agencies frequently lack access to the latest cyber forensic tools, software for tracing cryptocurrency transactions, and expertise in digital investigation. For example, cases reported by the Delhi Cybercrime Unit in 2022 highlighted how offenders leveraged encrypted apps to coerce children into sharing explicit content, and tracing the offenders required international cooperation, which delayed justice<sup>100</sup>.

#### 2. Legal Ambiguities

While India has enacted laws such as the **POCSO Act, 2012**, the **Information Technology Act, 2000**, and the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023**, certain forms of digital exploitation remain undefined. For instance, “online grooming” as a standalone offence is not codified, which can lead to inconsistent judicial interpretations. This legal ambiguity has been observed in cases across Karnataka and Maharashtra, where courts had to rely on a combination of provisions to prosecute offenders involved in digital coercion of minors<sup>101</sup>.

#### 3. Administrative Hurdles

Coordination between different agencies—central ministries, state police, cybercrime cells, and child protection authorities—is often fragmented. This fragmentation leads to duplication of work, delayed investigations, and inefficiencies in rescue operations. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2022 report indicates that only 37% of cybercrime cases involving

<sup>100</sup> Delhi Police Cybercrime Unit. (2023). *Annual Report on Digital Exploitation Cases*. Government of Delhi.

<sup>101</sup> *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, No. 32 of 2012*, §§ 11–13.

children were resolved within a year, highlighting the administrative bottlenecks faced by law enforcement agencies<sup>102</sup>.

### 1.12.2. Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities

#### 1. Poverty and Marginalization

Children from low-income families are disproportionately targeted for online exploitation. Offenders often use financial incentives, such as promises of money, gifts, or scholarships, to manipulate children. Several cases in Maharashtra and Haryana have revealed that traffickers and online predators specifically target children from marginalized communities, exploiting their socio-economic conditions. Poverty not only increases susceptibility to manipulation but also reduces families' ability to supervise and protect children online<sup>103</sup>.

#### 2. Limited Digital Literacy

Digital literacy remains uneven across India. While urban children often have access to smartphones and internet connectivity, their understanding of online risks is limited. In rural areas, children may use shared devices or internet cafes, making supervision challenging. Parents and guardians often lack awareness of online dangers, such as grooming, sextortion, or participation in exploitative challenges, which increases the likelihood of victimization<sup>104</sup>.

#### 3. Urban -Rural Divide

The risks associated with digital exploitation vary by geography. Urban children face exposure through social media, online gaming, and virtual communities, whereas rural children are more vulnerable to targeted recruitment for trafficking or coerced content creation. Limited internet access in rural regions ironically increases vulnerability because children are less aware of online safety measures, and law enforcement resources are sparse<sup>105</sup>.

### 1.12.3. Policy Gaps and Implementation Issues

#### 1. Fragmented Legal Framework

India's laws addressing digital child exploitation are scattered across multiple statutes. While the **POCSO Act, 2012** criminalizes sexual offences against children, and the **IT Act, 2000** addresses digital harassment and obscenity, there is no single, consolidated legislation for

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<sup>102</sup> National Crime Records Bureau. (2022). *Crime in India 2022: Digital Offences*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

<sup>103</sup> Maharashtra Anti-Human Trafficking Unit. (2024). *Digital Child Trafficking Case Study*. Government of Maharashtra.

<sup>104</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. (2021). *Guidelines for Child Safety Online*. Government of India.

<sup>105</sup> Bachpan Bachao Andolan. (2022). *Annual Report on Child Protection and Rehabilitation*. NGO Report.

online child protection. The draft **Trafficking in Persons (Prevention, Care, and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2021** attempts to unify these provisions, but it remains unpassed, leaving enforcement fragmented and inconsistent<sup>106</sup>.

## 2. Weak Victim Support System

Rescue operations are often the first step in combating exploitation, but rehabilitation is equally critical. Many survivors, especially from rural or marginalized backgrounds, do not have access to counselling, education, or vocational training. The lack of comprehensive rehabilitation programs can lead to re-victimization, psychological trauma, and social isolation. NGO reports indicate that children rescued from trafficking or online abuse often return to environments where economic or social pressures make them vulnerable again<sup>107</sup>.

## 3. Limited Platform Accountability

Digital platforms, including social media networks and online gaming services, frequently lack effective reporting and moderation mechanisms. For example, private messaging apps and gaming chats may be exploited to solicit explicit content from minors. While platforms often implement some form of reporting, there is minimal transparency regarding how cases are handled, leaving children exposed to ongoing risks<sup>108</sup>.

## 4. Awareness and Training Gaps

Law enforcement personnel, educators, and parents require specialized training to recognize, report, and prevent digital child exploitation. Without adequate awareness campaigns and continuous training programs, frontline responders are often unable to detect subtle forms of online abuse or take timely action<sup>109</sup>.

### 1.12.4. Socio-Economic Implications

Digital exploitation of children is not only a violation of rights but also a socio-economic concern.

- **Individual Level:** Victims face long-term psychological trauma, depression, withdrawal from school, and in severe cases, suicidal tendencies. These outcomes affect their ability to contribute to society as educated and productive individuals<sup>110</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> *Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000*, §§ 66E, 67, 67B.

<sup>107</sup> Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2021). *Draft Trafficking in Persons (Prevention, Care, and Rehabilitation) Bill*. Government of India.

<sup>108</sup> Interpol. (2022). *Global Report on Online Sexual Exploitation of Children*. International Criminal Police Organization.

<sup>109</sup> National Commission for Protection of Child Rights. (2022). *Capacity Building and Training Guidelines for Cybercrime Prevention*. Government of India.

<sup>110</sup> Livingstone, S., & Smith, P. K. (2014). *Annual research review: Harms experienced by child users of online and mobile technologies*. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(6), 635–654.

- **Family Level:** Families bear emotional, social, and financial burdens while attempting to support victims. Stigma and social ostracism may prevent full reintegration into communities, particularly in cases involving sexual exploitation<sup>111</sup>.
- **Community and National Level:** Exploitation contributes to underground economies and organized crime, undermining local governance and community cohesion. Nationally, it leads to resource strain on law enforcement, judicial systems, healthcare, and welfare services. It also affects the demographic dividend by preventing children from accessing education and skills necessary for economic participation<sup>112</sup>.

### 1.13. Comparative Analysis: Digital Child Exploitation

*Table 1: Legal Frameworks for Digital Child Exploitation*

Country/Region	Key Laws / Statutes	Coverage & Focus
India	POCSO Act, 2012; IT Act, 2000; Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023	Offers fragmented protection against child sexual abuse, grooming, trafficking, and CSAM. No single consolidated law dedicated solely to online child protection.
United Kingdom	Sexual Offences Act, 2003; Children and Families Act, 2014; Online Safety Act, 2023	Provides clear offences for grooming and exploitation while placing statutory duties on platforms to ensure child safety.
Australia	Criminal Code Act, 1995; eSafety Commissioner Act, 2015	Criminalizes grooming, harassment, and CSAM; unique in empowering an independent regulator to enforce platform compliance.
Canada	Criminal Code (Sections 151 & 163.1); Canadian Centre for Child Protection mandate	Focuses on sexual exploitation, online solicitation, and child pornography, supported by the national Cybertip.ca reporting system.
European Union	Directive 2011/93/EU; GDPR	Requires member states to criminalize grooming, exploitation, and CSAM while also embedding strict data protection safeguards.

<sup>111</sup> Kowalski, R. M., & Limber, S. P. (2013). *Psychological, physical, and academic correlates of cyberbullying and traditional bullying*. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 53*(1), S13–S20.

<sup>112</sup> Interpol. (2022). *Global Report on Online Sexual Exploitation of Children*.

**Table 2: Enforcement Strategies**

Country/Region	Agencies / Institutions	Key Measures	Challenges
India	State Cybercrime Cells; National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal	Investigation, awareness drives, reporting portals	Limited technical expertise, underfunding, and cross-border difficulties
United Kingdom	NCA; CEOP	Digital forensics, child protection units, global collaboration	Rapidly evolving tech and offender anonymity
Australia	AFP; eSafety Commissioner	Platform monitoring, online content removal, school safety initiatives	Weak rural reach and encrypted app challenges
Canada	RCMP; Cybertip.ca	Strong inter-agency coordination, national reporting system	Geographic spread limits uniform enforcement
European Union	INHOPE Network; EU task forces	Cross-border cooperation, fast reporting/removal, standardized training	Diverse legal systems across member states

**Table 3: Socio-Economic Interventions & Best Practices**

Country/Region	Programs / Initiatives	Socio-Economic Impact	Best Practices
India	NCPCR awareness campaigns, school safety programs	Increases awareness and reduces trauma but rural outreach remains weak	Nationwide digital literacy and platform accountability
United Kingdom	NSPCC initiatives, mandatory school programs	Counselling, early detection, and reduced exploitation	Strong rehabilitation focus and legal duty of care on platforms
Australia	eSafety workshops, community outreach	Improves prevention and victim support	Independent regulator ensures compliance

Canada	Cybertip.ca, school prevention programs	Strengthens reporting culture and victim rehabilitation	Robust inter-agency cooperation and victim-centred approach
European Union	Child helplines, child-sensitive courts	Reduces secondary trauma and enhances protection	Harmonized legal frameworks with cross-border mechanisms

### 1.14. Recommendations

#### 1. Legal Reforms

- Bring together all provisions on child online safety into a single comprehensive statute, rather than scattering them across multiple laws.
- Clearly define online grooming and sextortion as independent offences to prevent gaps in enforcement.
- Establish fast-track courts for cyber offences involving children so that cases are resolved without unnecessary delay.

#### 2. Institutional Strengthening

- Provide adequate funding and staffing for Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) and cybercrime investigation cells in every state.
- Conduct specialized training programs for police officers, prosecutors, and judges on the investigation of digital crimes against minors.
- Empower the National and State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights to regularly monitor online platforms and oversee government initiatives on child safety.

#### 3. Accountability of Digital Platforms

- Make it a legal duty for social media and gaming platforms to detect and promptly report cases of child exploitation.
- Impose financial penalties and compliance audits on platforms that fail to remove harmful content in a timely manner.
- Introduce mandatory age-verification systems for websites and applications that allow chatting, streaming, or content-sharing.

#### 4. Awareness and Education

- Include digital safety modules in school syllabi to teach children safe online behaviour and reporting methods.



- Conduct parent–teacher workshops in both rural and urban areas to spread awareness about online threats.
- Encourage peer-to-peer awareness drives where young people educate their classmates and friends about online risks.

### **5. Support for Victims**

- Develop victim-friendly mechanisms such as anonymous reporting portals and confidential helplines.
- Ensure psychological counselling, medical assistance, and financial support for children rescued from online exploitation.
- Create long-term rehabilitation schemes that include schooling, vocational training, and reintegration into society.

### **6. Technology and International Cooperation**

- Invest in modern forensic tools to track digital footprints, encrypted communications, and cryptocurrency transactions linked to child exploitation.
- Strengthen international collaborations under conventions like the Budapest Convention to ensure quick sharing of intelligence and evidence.
- Partner with technology companies, NGOs, and universities to develop AI-driven tools for early detection of CSAM and grooming activities.

### **1.15. Conclusion**

The digital age has transformed childhood, offering immense opportunities for learning and growth but simultaneously exposing children to severe risks of exploitation. This study demonstrates that online crimes against children—including grooming, sextortion, cyberbullying, trafficking, and CSAM—cannot be understood merely as criminal offences; they must be recognized as socio-economic crimes that undermine public morality, fuel illegal markets, and strain national resources.

The analysis of Indian laws such as the POCSO Act, Information Technology Act, Juvenile Justice Act, and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita reveals progress in statutory protections but also exposes critical challenges, including legal ambiguities, weak enforcement, and lack of coordinated institutional response. Judicial decisions such as *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* and *Bachpan Bachao Andolan v. Union of India* highlight the judiciary’s proactive role, yet consistent implementation remains a gap.

The socio-economic perspective underscores that children from marginalized communities, with limited digital literacy and fewer protective resources, remain disproportionately vulnerable. The persistence of underground markets and the use of cryptocurrencies further complicate enforcement, showing the need for enhanced cyber-forensic expertise and cross-border collaboration

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