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## A study on the awareness and perceptions regarding child sexual abuse and the laws against it in a South Indian adult female population

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### Abstract

**Background:** Awareness of Child sexual abuse and the laws against it are key to rid the society of the widely prevalent evil.

**Objectives:** To estimate the awareness and perceptions toward child sexual abuse and the laws against it in an adult woman population.

**Materials and Methods:** This was a study done on 2500 women residing in Chennai through a semi-structured proforma. It was a descriptive cross-sectional study. The data was collected through google forms and data analysis was done using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 28.

**Results:**The study found that only 47.1% of participants were made aware of the possibility of sexual abuse, and only 5.4% were fully aware of the POCSO Act. Younger and more educated participants had higher awareness but were less likely to think sexual abuse should be reported or report it in their families.

**Conclusion:**The study shows the need to increase awareness regarding child sexual abuse and the existing laws against the social evil as only 5.4% of the study subjects were fully aware of the POCSO (Protection of Children from sexual offences)act - 2012.

**Keywords:** Child sexual abuse (CSA), POCSO act, awareness

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## **Introduction**

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global public health concern with significant physical, psychological, and social consequences for the victims.<sup>[1]</sup> The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, was enacted in India to protect children from sexual offenses and to provide a child-friendly justice system.<sup>[2]</sup> However, the effectiveness of this legislation depends on the awareness and perceptions of the general public, particularly the adult female population, who are often the primary caregivers of children. The association between demographic factors and awareness of CSA and POCSO is also crucial to identify target groups for intervention and education programs.

Existing literature suggests that the awareness and understanding of CSA and related laws among the Indian population are often limited.<sup>[3]</sup> A study conducted in Bangalore (a major cosmopolitan city in India), found that even though 95.3% parents were significantly aware of the child sexual abuse, only 68% were aware of the POCSO act 2012 and the punishments prescribed and its amendments.<sup>[4]</sup> Another study done in Punjab, India, reported that only about 7.5% of parents were aware about the POCSO Act.<sup>[5]</sup> These findings highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the awareness and perceptions of CSA and POCSO among the Indian population.

To address this gap in the literature, the present study aims to investigate the awareness and perceptions of CSA and POCSO among a sample of adult female residents in Chennai, South India. Specifically, the study will examine the associations between age, educational status, and the participants' awareness and perceptions of CSA and POCSO. The findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the factors influencing the awareness and perceptions of CSA and POCSO in the Indian context, which can inform the development of effective intervention and awareness programs.

## Materials and Methods

**Study design:** Analytical Cross-sectional study.

**Sample size:** A study done among health care workers in Chandigarh found that 68%<sup>[6]</sup> were aware of the POCSO act. Since this study was done in the general population the errors were kept at a minimum

$$N = \frac{(Z_{1-\alpha/2})^2 * P*(1-P)}{L^2}$$

where L = 3% of P = 2.04

$$= \frac{3.84*68*32}{(2.04)^2} = 2008 \text{ (A sample of 2500 was studied based on feasibility)}$$

**Sampling method:** A random sample of 250 women from each of the 10 corporation zones in Chennai was taken.

**Study population:** The study was done on an adult women population selected from Chennai.

**Inclusion criteria:** Currently adult women from the study area after obtaining informed consent.

**Exclusion criteria:** Those unwilling to participate or mentally unfit to participate will be excluded from the study.

**Ethical considerations with all required forms:** The study has been approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of our University. The study is a questionnaire-based study with less than minimal risk for the participants.

**Plan of analysis/ statistical tools:**The data entry and analysis was done using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). Descriptive data was tabulated into percentages and 95% confidence intervals were calculated wherever appropriate. The associations were analyzed by crosstabs and Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test will be used for statistical significance. Strength of Associations was assessed through odds ratio and 95% confidence interval of the odds ratio.

**Study tools:**A tailor made proforma was created to assess the awareness of Child Sexual Abuse and POCSO act and to test their perceptions regarding the same. The data was part of the adjunct data of a doctoral thesis on Child Sexual Abuse

**Results:**

Age of the study subjects was classified into 2 categories as  $\leq 35$  years and more than 35 years and 71.4% of the study subjects were aged greater than or equal to 35 years of age. Among the study subjects 33.9% were employed and 34% were still students and the rest were unemployed. When asked about the educational status, 80.5% had greater than middle school education. Details can be found in Table 1

Among the study subjects 1177 (47.1%) were made aware of the possibility of sexual abuse during their childhood, 57.6% were aware of the # Me Too moment, only 5.4% said that they were aware of the POCSO Act completely and 17.4% of the study subjects could correctly write/tell the expansion of the POCSO Act. Details can be found in Table 2. When asked about the details of who created awareness of sexual abuse during their childhood, 52.9% said that no awareness was created, 21.2% said that only their family members created awareness. Details can be found in Figure 1.

When it came to the perception of sexual abuse and the laws against it, 56.5% of the study subjects said that sexual abuse decreased the purity of the person and 81.1% said that sexual abuse should be legally reported though only 68.1% said that they would report sexual abuse in their family hypothetically. When asked if they were happy with the current laws against Child Sexual Abuse 40.3% said that they were not aware of the laws and 29.8% said that they were happy with the current laws and 29.9% said that they were not happy with the current laws. Details can be found in Table 3

Subjects belonging to the  $\leq 35$  years age group were 1.57 times more likely to have been made aware of Child Sexual Abuse, 1.49 times less likely to think that sexual abuse should be legally reported and 1.79 times less likely to legally report sexual abuse in their families, and these associations were statistically significant ( $P$  value  $< 0.05$ ), however the other associations were not statistically significant. Details can be found in table 4

Subjects having educational status greater than middle school were 1.71 times more likely to have been made aware of Child Sexual Abuse, 1.67 times more aware of the # Me Too moment, 1.38 times less likely to think that sexual abuse decreases the purity of a person and 1.41 times less likely to legally report sexual abuse in their families, and these associations were statistically significant ( $P$  value  $< 0.05$ ), however the other associations were not statistically significant. Details can be found in table 5.

## **Discussion**

The findings of the present study provide valuable insights into the awareness and perceptions of child sexual abuse (CSA) and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act among adult female residents in Chennai, South India. The results can be compared and contrasted with the findings of similar studies conducted in other parts of India.

The present study found that only 47.1% of the participants were made aware of the possibility of sexual abuse during their childhood, which is higher than the findings of a study conducted in Coimbatore, India, where only 23% of the participants were aware about CSA.<sup>[7]</sup> A different study conducted among Junior and Senior Resident doctors in Chandigarh, India reported that 81% of respondents had knowledge about child sexual abuse. However, only 34% were aware of the repercussions of non-reporting of a child abuse case.<sup>[6]</sup> These differences may be attributed to variations in the effectiveness of awareness campaigns and educational interventions across different regions.

Regarding the association between demographic factors and awareness of CSA and POCSO, the current study found that participants aged  $\leq 35$  years were 1.57 times more likely to have

been made aware of CSA compared to those aged > 35 years. This observation suggests that younger women may have greater exposure to CSA education programs, reflecting the increased prominence of discussions surrounding CSA in recent years compared to previous decades, particularly during the childhood of older participants.

While the present study revealed that 22.8% of respondents had at least some awareness of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, this proportion contrasts with the findings of a study conducted exclusively among higher secondary students in Kerala, India, which reported a higher awareness rate of almost 48%.<sup>[8]</sup> This could be because the present study included participants with varying levels of literacy, whereas the aforementioned study focused solely on school students.

The present study also found that participants with educational status greater than middle school were 1.71 times more likely to have been made aware of CSA and 1.67 times more aware of the #MeToo moment. These findings demonstrate the positive association between educational status and awareness of CSA and related legislation.

Notably, the study revealed that participants with educational attainment beyond middle school were 1.41 times less likely to report instances of abuse within their families legally. This observation suggests that individuals with higher educational status, possibly representing higher echelons of society, may exhibit heightened concern regarding the social stigma and implications associated with legal reporting of sexual abuse.

The observed associations between age, educational status, and awareness of CSA and POCSO underscore the importance of targeted intervention and education programs. Previous studies have emphasized the need for comprehensive awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to improve the understanding of CSA and related laws among the general population.<sup>[9]</sup> The findings of the present study further reinforce the importance of prioritizing these efforts, particularly in addressing the gaps in awareness and perceptions among older adults and individuals with lower educational attainment.

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## Tables and Figures

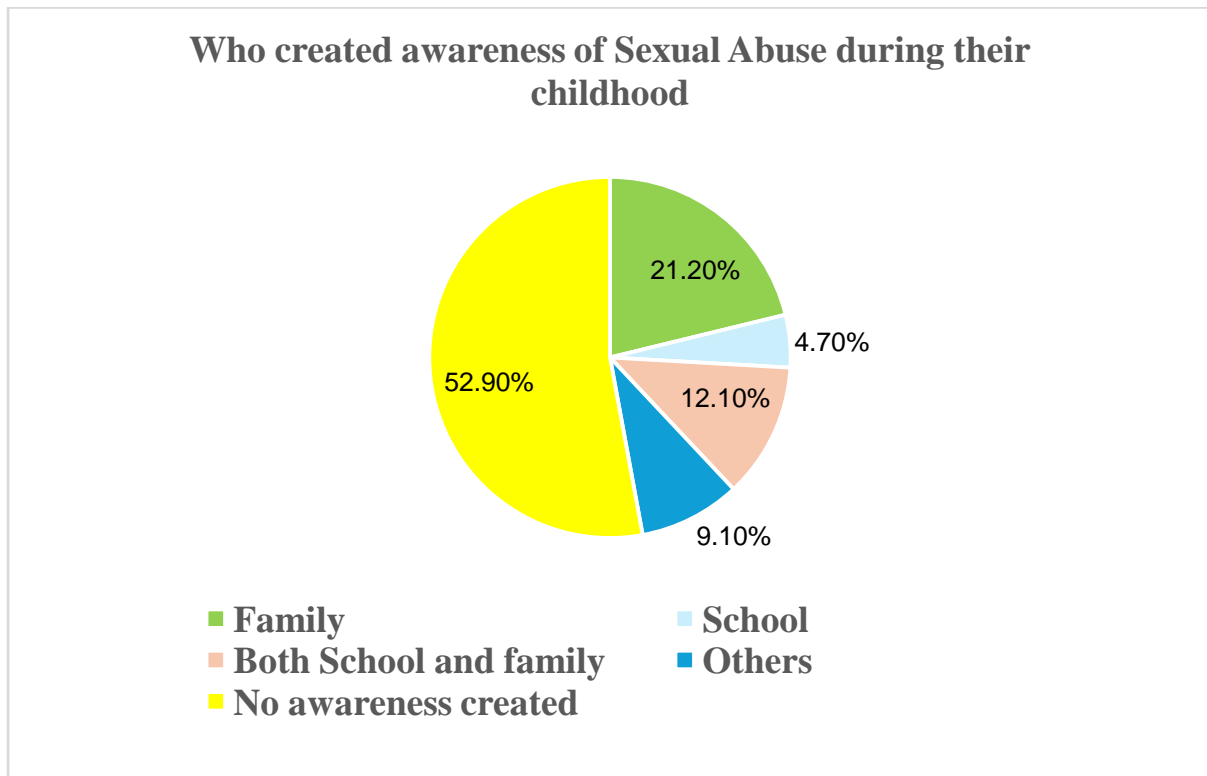
**Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the study participants**

<b>Variable (Classification of variable)</b>	<b>Frequency (%) (Out of 2500)</b>
<b>Current age</b> ≤ 35 years > 35 years	1784(71.4) 716(28.6)
<b>Employment status</b> Unemployed Employed Student	803 (32.1) 848 (33.9) 849 (34.0)
<b>Educational status of the subject</b> ≤ Middle school > Middle school	487 (19.5) 2013 (80.5)

**Table 2: Awareness of Child Sexual abuse (CSA) and POCSO among the study participants**

<b>Variable (Classification of the variable)</b>	<b>Frequency (%) (Out of 2500)</b>	<b>95% C. I</b>
<b>Were you made aware of the possibility of sexual abuse as a child?</b>		
Yes	1177 (47.1%)	45.1 – 49.1
No	1323 (52.9%)	50.9 – 54.9
<b>Who created awareness of CSA?</b>		
Family	531 (21.2%)	19.7 – 22.9
School	118 (4.7%)	3.9 – 5.6
School and family	301 (12.1%)	10.8 – 13.4
Others	227 (9.1%)	7.9 – 10.3
Not Applicable	1323 (52.9%)	50.9 – 54.9
<b>Are you aware of the # Me too moment?</b>		
Yes	1440 (57.6%)	55.6 – 59.6
No	1060 (42.4%)	40.5 – 44.4
<b>Are you aware of the POCSO act 2012?</b>		
Yes, fully aware.	134 (5.4%)	4.5 – 6.3
Yes, partially aware.	1359 (54.3%)	52.4 – 56.3
No	1007 (40.3%)	38.4 – 42.2
<b>Can you expand POCSO?</b>		
Correctly written/told.	434 (17.4%)	15.9 – 18.9
Wrongly written/told	2066 (82.6%)	81.1 – 84.1

**Figure 1: Details of who created awareness about sexual abuse during their childhood.**



**Table 3: Perceptions regarding CSA and POCSO of the study participants**

Variable (Classification of the variable)	Frequency (%) (Out of 2500)	95% C. I
<b>Do you think sexual abuse decreases the purity of a person?</b>		
Yes	1413 (56.5%)	54.6 – 58.5
No	1087 (43.5%)	41.5 – 45.5
<b>Do you think Sexual abuse should be legally reported?</b>		
Yes	2027 (81.1%)	79.5 – 82.6
No	473 (18.9)	17.4 – 20.5
<b>Would you legally report sexual abuse in your family?</b>		
Yes	1703 (68.1%)	66.3 – 69.9
No	797 (31.9 %)	30.1 – 33.7
<b>Are you happy with the current laws against CSA?</b>		
Yes	744 (29.8%)	28.0 – 31.6
No	749 (29.9%)	28.2 – 31.8
Not aware of the laws	1007 (40.3%)	38.4 – 42.2

**Table 4: Association between age and awareness and perception of CSA and POCSO**

Variable	Grouping of	Subjects	Subjects	Odds ratio	Chi	p-value
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	<b>Variable (Number)</b>	<b>with Age ≤ 35 years (out of 1784)</b>	<b>with Age &gt; 35 years (716)</b>	<b>(95% C.I of odds ratio)</b>	<b>square value</b>	
Made aware of sexual abuse as a child	Yes (1177)	897	280	1.57 (1.32 – 1.89)	25.60	0.00000042*
	No (1323)	887	436	1.00		
Aware of #Me too moment	Yes (1440)	1048	392	1.18 (0.99 – 1.40)	3.34	0.068
	No (1060)	736	324	1.00		
Thinks Sexual abuse decreases purity of a person	Yes (1413)	1011	402	1.02 (0.86 – 1.22)	0.06	0.81
	No (1087)	773	314	1.00		
Thinks sexual abuse should be legally reported	No (473)	367	106	1.49 (1.18 – 1.89)	11.07	0.00088*
	Yes (2027)	1417	610	1.00		
Would legally report sexual abuse in their family	No (797)	630	167	1.79 (1.47 – 2.19)	33.81	0.0000000*
	Yes (1703)	1154	549	1.00		

(\* - Statistically significant)

**Table 5: Association between Educational status and awareness and perception of CSA and POCSO**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Grouping of Variable</b>	<b>Subjects with</b>	<b>Subjects with</b>	<b>Odds ratio (95% C.I of</b>	<b>Chi square</b>	<b>p-value</b>
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	(Number)	educational status >Middle school (2013)	educational status ≤ Middle school (487)	odds ratio)	value	
Made aware of sexual abuse as a child	Yes (1177)	999	178	1.71 (1.40 – 2.10)	26.90	0.00000021*
	No (1323)	1014	309	1.00		
Aware of #Me too moment	Yes (1440)	1209	231	1.67 (1.34 – 2.03)	25.60	0.00000042*
	No (1060)	804	256	1.00		
Thinks Sexual abuse decreases purity of a person	No (1087)	906	181	1.38 (1.13 – 1.70)	9.81	0.0017
	Yes (1413)	1107	306	1.00		
Thinks sexual abuse should be legally reported	No (473)	389	84	1.14 (0.89 – 1.49)	1.10	0.29
	Yes (2027)	1624	403	1.00		
Would report sexual abuse in their family	No (797)	670	127	1.41 (1.13 – 1.77)	9.37	0.0022
	Yes (1703)	1343	360	1.00		

(\* - Statistically significant)