

# Perpetrator's of Sexual Abuse among Adolescent Girls, Kerala - Unveiling the Camouflage

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**Running Title:** *Perpetrators of sexual abuse among adolescent girls*

**Abstract:** *Child Sexual Abuse called as a “hidden pediatric problem” in the late 1970’s has turned as a pandemic moral disaster recently. In India, a study by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) showed that around (63%) girls and (56%) of boys are abused and startlingly (50%) of the perpetrators are persons known to the child or in a position of trust and responsibility. The overall objective of the current study was to identify the perpetrator’s characteristics among adolescent girls in Kerala. An Explorative Cross-Sectional design using a modified standardized tool and a multistage sampling technique among 1087 adolescent girls belonging to eight and ninth standard by a school based survey was amended. The tool was validated by subject experts and content validity index was 0.92. Majority (87.6%) of the perpetrators were male. Though a known friend (28.3%) was the culprit in showing pornographic film and taking photograph in nude, strangers (31.59%), were the principal perpetrators in exhibitionism. Around (77%) of the perpetrators are the same in victims of sexual abuse who faced it more than one time and (23.65%) of the perpetrator are a known family friend in victims of sexual abuse. This study highlights that sexual abuse is rambling everywhere and as persons in trust are the prime perpetrators, it is important to bring the hidden conspiracy to the limelight to pause the sedition of silence around the pandemic moral disaster.*

**Keywords:** Perpetrator, Sexual abuse, Adolescent girls, Kerala

## 1. Introduction

**“Beware of perpetrators in disguise.... some people set fires wherever they go and have mastered the art of playing the burn victim”**

– Steve Maraboli

Child Sexual Abuse called as a “hidden pediatric problem” in the late 1970’s, has turned as a pandemic moral disaster [1] recently. Sexual abuse among children is a momentous public health and societal concern leaving a tremendous burden in the society. The impact crosses cultural boundaries and has been linked to wide range of short term and long term consequences. CSA affects children and young people of all backgrounds, and its prevention requires understanding of the nature of the problem and those involved. An important element of this is identifying the characteristics of individuals who perpetrate the child. The perpetrators usually look and act just like everyone else [2]. They can be neighbors, friends and family members and can be found in families, schools, churches and any other place children gather. Significantly, abusers can be and often are other children.

Abusers often form relationships with potential victims and their families prior to the abuse called “grooming” - a

process by which an offender gradually draws a victim into a sexual relationship and maintains that relationship in secrecy [3] while the perpetrator may fill roles within the victim’s family thereby making them feel trusted; valued and thus enabling the perpetrator a gateway to coerce the child [4]. Grooming causes the offender to experience a sense of excitement that further motivates him until he is at the point of committing the offense. Once the act has occurred, there exists new anxiety provoking thoughts. These thoughts lead to new feelings of guilt, fear and remorse [5] which cause the cycle to come to a halt during which the offender tries to regain a sense of normality. But if they refuse to acknowledge the thoughts and feelings associated with the abuse, the sexual abuse cycle continues

On a meta - analysis on child sexual abuse [6], it was estimated that offenders are overwhelmingly male, ranging from adolescents to the elderly with approximate one - third of offenders are juveniles. It is also identified that women are the abusers in about (14%) of cases reported among boys and (6%) of cases reported among girls. About (23%) of reported cases of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by individuals under the age of eighteen and (40 - 80%) of juvenile sex offenders have themselves been victims of sexual abuse. Sixty percent of children are sexually abused by someone in their social circle and only (14%) of them

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were violated by an unknown perpetrator. There was a paucity of research on exploring the concealed nature of perpetrators of sexual abuse in India and the practicality was the major challenge. Hence it was felt that the problem needs to be probed in depth and detail and this study was embarked upon to understand the nature of the perpetrator and the grooming techniques adapted by them to approach the innocent targets and their immediate response to this situation.

## 2. Methodology

An explorative cross sectional design was adapted to identify the perpetrators characteristics from among 186 victims of sexual abuse which were identified through a school based survey amid 1087 adolescent girls of standard eighth and ninth between October 2015 – March 2017. A multistage cluster sampling was used to cover the schools which come under the NCERT curriculum in the southern district of Kerala. Ethical clearance was obtained from Institutional Ethics Committee, Director of Education, Nodal Office of Child line, Head of the Department of Schools chosen randomly. After explaining the study purpose to the participants, an informed consent from parents and a written assent was obtained prior to tool administration. Participation was voluntary due to the subtle nature and legal commitments. Anonymity and confidentiality were sustained throughout the survey and no facts were seeped out to the public.

The standardized tool developed by Halpern & Bouvier [7], modified for the Indian setting was used to unveil the camouflage of the perpetrator by recognizing their characteristics like age, sex, relationship with the abuser and grooming techniques adapted. Permission was obtained from the author. The questions comprise mostly of Yes/No type questions, a few multiple response questions and closed type questions. It also gives additional information about the victims response to abuse Tool validation was done by subject experts and content validity index was (CVI = 0.92). Test - Retest reliability also was done and the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient is 0.85 which indicated high level of internal consistency. Pilot study was done and the study was found to be feasible.

Participants who have got written parental consent and assent were administered this questionnaire. The students were made to feel secure in maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of their response as they were provided with a large envelope to put her filled questionnaire and the envelope was sealed in front of the participants. A drop box was circulated in the hall for clarification of doubts. Reported cases (remote/non - remote) found from the anonymous survey from schools, were intimated to the school authorities along with legal proceedings [POSCO ACT]. As the number of intrafamilial and interfamilial abuse is likely to be high, it was also made sure to get the number of participants who didn't get parental consent; who got parental consent but didn't give assent and who withdraw assent during data collection. Data was entered in Microsoft excel and was analyzed by descriptive statistics like frequency and percentage using statistical software SPSS trial version 21.0.

## 3. Results

### Demographic characteristics of the victims

There was a near equal distribution of adolescent girls in both groups with majority (51.6%) of them belonging to ninth standard. About (54.3%) of them were BPL card holders. Largest proportions of samples reside in rural areas (89.8%) and belong to nuclear family (68.3%). Around (59.7%) of fathers were working on daily wages basis while most (47.3%) of the mothers were home makers. Parents (72.6%) were the mainstream caretakers and (66.1%) of them stay with their parents.

### Characteristics of the perpetrators:

Majority (87.6%) of the perpetrators was male and the age group of the perpetrator varied as shown in figure 1.

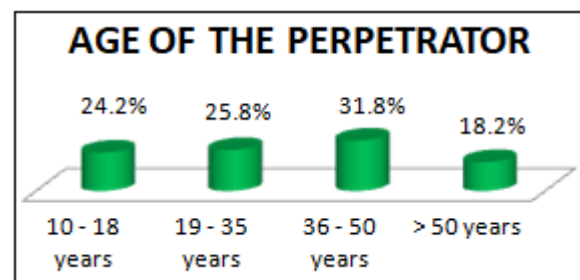


Figure 1: Distribution based on age of the perpetrator (N = 186)

Around (77%) of the perpetrators are the same in victims of sexual abuse who faced it more than one time and (23.65%) of the perpetrator are a known family friend in victims of sexual abuse. In repeated abuse of 342 occasions, majority of the perpetrators were known to the victims of sexual abuse and are those who are in a position of trust like blood relatives (34.4%) and family friend (25.8%). A known friend (28.3%) was the chief culprit in showing pornographic film and taking photograph in nude (31.59%). An unknown person or a stranger (44.45%) was found to be the principal perpetrator in exhibitionism. In the penetrative type of abuse (50%) of them was done by a known family friend. It was identified that (24.7%) of them has advanced these girls by giving them special attention; (21.5%) of the perpetrator blackmailed the victim; while (5.3%) didn't use any techniques to approach them as in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of study subjects based on grooming techniques of the perpetrator

S. No	Grooming Technique	N	%
1	Brought you expensive gifts	11	6
2	Gave you special attention	46	24.7
3	Made you feel special	32	17.2
4	Took you for outing	13	7
5	Forced	34	18.3
6	Blackmailed	40	21.5
7	None of the above	10	5.3

In retort to the situation, nearly (40.3%) of the victims felt threatened in danger; (24.8%) totally lost while only (0.5%) was unable to avoid situations. Although (53.8%) of the victims had reported the abuse, (13.4%) disclosure was contingent on the child's request that nothing should be done and (43.6%) were told that the matter should be kept as a

secret as in Figure 2. Among the victims who reported the abuse, (4.7%) thought they had not been believed, (26.2%) considered that nothing had come out of the disclosure and

only (26.8%) of them reported been helped by the disclosure.

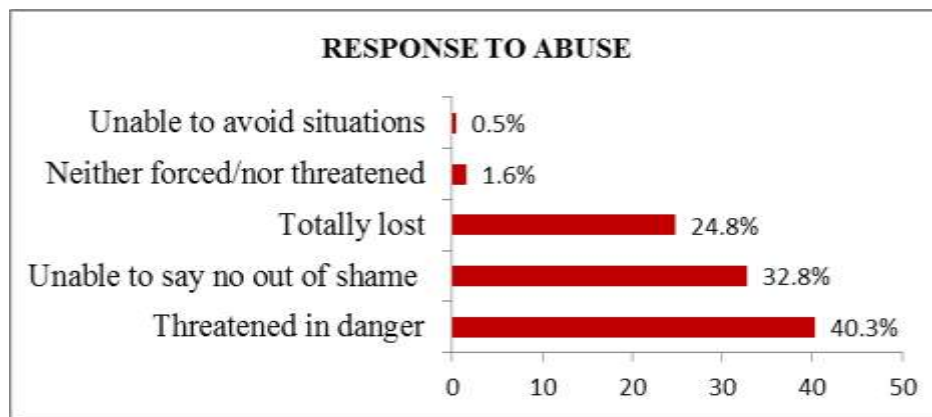


Figure 2: Distribution based on the victim's response to abuse

#### 4. Discussion

After estimating the prevalence rate, further analysis was done to identify the perpetrator's characteristics. Maintaining anonymity and confidentiality versus sexual abuse a public crime was the greatest challenge faced by the researcher during the conduct of the study. But the researcher at every point of data collection considered the criticality of the issue and informed the school authorities simultaneously.

One quarter (23.65%) of the victims being sexually abused was by a known family friend that was more of a contact type of abuse. Non - contact type of abuse like exhibitionism (44.45%) was mostly done by strangers. This has mainly happened in isolated places like bus waiting stations. As (31.59%) of the perpetrators was a known friend in taking photography in nude and the target age group was children above 10 years, it also raise the notion whether the photography was taken out of voluntary acceptance of the adolescent girls; or on the other hand out of mere ignorance which was misused by the perpetrator.

In the current study majority (87.6%) of the perpetrators were male and (31.7%) were in the age group of 36 - 50years. As the age group of the perpetrator is on the higher side it rarely gives inkling to the parents, since the members of this age group are always kept in the place of trust and authority. In repeated abuse, majority of the perpetrators are known to the victims of sexual abuse and are those who are in a position of trust like blood relatives, family friend etc. The perpetrator's, who are in the position of trust by age and responsibility would have entered in to their private life after gaining reliance from their parents, while leaving no signs that their daughter is being abused.

It is also surprising to see that (24.2%) of the perpetrators are less than 18 years of age which raises the suspicion of sibling sexual abuse. It does caution us about the need to enforce gender identity and values among tomorrow's citizens. Most of the perpetrators (24.7%) gave special attention to these girls as a grooming technique which would have made these adolescent girls to blindly follow them.

Hence it is pivotal to impose sex education among adolescent girls which in turn enable them to differentiate amid right and wrong.

About (40.3%) of the victims felt threatened in danger during the act and around (46.2%) kept the abusive act to themselves as probably they would have been blackmailed or threatened by the perpetrator. The embarrassment, shame or fear of being blamed and a desire to keep the abuse secret would have been the reason of the person in trust to tell these victims to keep the act in secret. Majority of the victims did not tell anyone that they were abused, even when directly asked by parents or other authority figures. Victims of sexual abuse were often too afraid that the news will hurt their parents and they won't be believed or they would have been threatened in some way by the offender.

The characteristic of perpetrators observed in this study is consistent with previous studies of Halperin [7] et. al, that most of the perpetrators were known to the respondents prior to the episode of the abuse and majority (90.1%) of the perpetrators were males acting alone, Although (74.3%) of the victims had reported the abuse, (13.4%) disclosure was reliant on the child's request that nothing should be done and (43.6%) were told that the matter should be kept as a secret.

Thus this study concludes that the concealed nature of perpetrator is perplexing. As these tiny tots are threatened and blackmailed by the perpetrator it is high time to teach the children that "My body belongs to me"; and they still have a chance of control over themselves.

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