



# Practitioner Views about Online Harms in India

2022



**DRAGON**  
SPOTTER & SHIELD



End Violence  
Against Children

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# Executive Summary

While the true extent of internet usage among children and young people (CYP) in India is unknown, a study conducted in 2021 by the National Commission For Protection of Child Rights ([NCPCR](#)) found that 43% of the surveyed school children had social media accounts. There is also a lack of data on how many children fall victim to online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) in India. [Project DRAGON-S](#)<sup>[1]</sup> is working to keep children safe from this type of abuse. DRAGON-S pioneers the applied integration of Linguistics and Artificial Intelligence research in order to generate two technology solutions that help counter grooming. The first is DRAGON-Shield, a training portal to help upskill safeguarding practitioners in their work with children. The second is DRAGON-Spotter, an online detection system for use by law enforcement agencies. DRAGON-S adopts a strong technology co-creation ethos. Since the project started in January 2021, the project has worked closely with approximately 250 individuals (child safeguarding practitioners, CYP and lived experience expert groups) across 30 organisations in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA.

In June–September 2022 the authors of this report and [Professor Vigneswara Ilavarasan](#), [Professor Arpan Kumar-Kar](#) and Mr Swapnil Sharma – researchers, at the [Indian Institute of Technology Delhi \(IITD\)](#) – teamed up to conduct a project, titled Practitioner Views about Online Harms in India (PVOHI), with Indian child safeguarding practitioners (law enforcement, social work and education) on their views of OCSAE, with a focus on online grooming. This initiative also sought to determine the potential for adapting the technology solutions developed by DRAGON-S to India, specifically the extent to which DRAGON-Spotter and DRAGON-Shield may meet child safeguarding practitioners’ training requirements.

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[1] DRAGON-S stands for Developing Resistance Against Grooming Online – Spot and Shield. The project is headquartered at Swansea University and supported by the [Safe Online initiative within the End Violence Against Children Fund](#).

The project adopted a two-stage methodology and in June–September[2]:

1. A hybrid co-creation workshop, with invited specialists and 39 Indian-based participants from law enforcement, education, safeguarding and social work sectors was held. During the workshop topics such as the prevalence of OCSAE and online grooming in India, how technology could be utilised to detect and prevent OCSAE and online grooming and how much training resources were available to the Indian participants were discussed, which enabled the co-design of a pilot survey.
2. A survey consisting of closed and open-ended questions was sent out to over 100 practitioners and completed by 36.

**Highlight results:**

It was found that estimated numbers of children falling victim to OCSAE and online grooming were low in comparison to [4.7 million reports of suspected OCSAE in India in 2021](#), however there was a call for the development of screening tools and educational material as well as training sessions on spotting signs of OCSAE and online grooming. The repeated call for screening tools among practitioners shows potential for the expansion of the DRAGON-S tools to India.

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[2] Following ethical approval by Swansea University

# The (Online) Child Protection Ecosystem in India

Approximately 658 million individuals in India actively use the internet, and 85% of CYP across India have access to smartphones (Bohra, 2021; Kemp 2022). These numbers are indicative of the scale of internet usage and possible online abuses in India as access to technology has been described as an enabler of online sexual abuse. Technology does not only reduce risk for offenders to be caught but removes geographical boundaries, increasing the availability of potential victims (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2020).

Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (OCSAE) involves, but may not be limited to, sending obscene texts to children, sharing sexual/explicit images, sexual harassment, use of children in production of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), live streaming of a sexual act involving a child, sextortion, and revenge porn. But often the popular understanding of OCSAE is limited to the production or distribution of CSAM (UNICEF, 2016). The Handbook for Adolescents/Students on Cyber Safety developed by the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs defines online grooming as “a practice where someone builds an emotional bond with a child through social media or chat window with an objective of gaining their trust for sexual abuse or exploitation” (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2018, p. 9). However, online grooming is still taken lightly by many on grounds that no ‘actual harm’ occurs.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns pushed more children and their potential abusers towards digital devices and platforms. According to the Global Threat Assessment Report of 2021, there was a 95% increase in internet searches for CSAM in India during the COVID-19 lockdown (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021). The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) in the USA recorded 25,000 cases of suspected child pornography material across social media platforms in India between September 2019 and January 2020 (Thaver, 2020).

Although there is very little data showing the true scale of OCSAE and online grooming in India, anecdotal evidence from professionals gathered within newspaper articles (Mehrotra, 2021) and reports (UNICEF, 2016) point to high numbers of OCSAE and online grooming within India. Also, little is known in the Indian context about the social impact of online grooming and OCSAE on children, and no comprehensive analysis on the experiences of children who have been abused exists (UNICEF, 2016).

There are several provisions in the Indian law to address these issues, including within the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act of 2012, the Information Technology (IT) Act of 2000, and sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) 1860. Despite these legislations, there is a significant lack of awareness of what constitutes OCSAE and online grooming, leading to no explicit provisions to combat these issues. This has resulted in a lack of resources within the criminal justice system and limited awareness among law enforcement regarding the legal provisions around these crimes. Furthermore, the lack of accessible resources surrounding online grooming and OCSAE contributes to a widespread social stigma and feelings of shame associated with the reporting of sexual crimes by victims. Attempts at preventing OCSAE remain negligible, although increased awareness has led to the development of portals and hotlines for reporting such crimes. One of these new developments is Sneh AI, a chatbot powered by artificial intelligence, which has been created to raise awareness on OCSAE (SnehAI, 2021).

# The Practitioner Views about Online Harm in India Project

## PVOHI Aims

In June – September 2022, supported by Universities Wales (Global Wales Fund) and under the broad auspices of DRAGON-S, we conducted a collaborative research project with the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD). This sought to form a better understanding on keeping children safe from OCSAE and online grooming through the development of technology-enabled support resources in India.

The main aims of this research project were:

- to better understand the Indian context of OCSAE and online grooming
- to understand child safeguarding practitioners' needs for training on OCSAE and online grooming in India

## PVOHI Methodology

This project was an exploratory study, consisting of two phases:

1. A co-creation workshop, in which a draft survey was discussed, and a final version agreed, on the topic of keeping children safe from OCSAE and online grooming through the development of technology-enabled resources.
2. A survey – specifically, an online questionnaire that collected a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. The survey consisted of 21 questions separated into four parts, contextualisation of OCSAE and online grooming; views on technology driven tools; victimology; and training resources.

Following the workshop, the survey was finalised and suggestions from the workshop were included before it was distributed to all 39 workshop attendees as well as shared with 63 practitioners who were identified as prospective participants by our colleagues at the IITD. Additionally, the survey was also shared within personal networks of the attending delegates as well as our colleagues from the IITD and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). Overall, 36 responses were collected, 5 of them were unusable, 8 were used partially and 23 were full responses. Participants' backgrounds were in social work, law enforcement, education (schools and higher education) and third sector (lived experience NGO).

# PVOHI Results

**62%**

of practitioners indicated that the prevalence of OCSAE in India was between 1 in 1,000 and 1 in 100,000 children, and **58%** believed that the occurrence of online grooming was similarly low. However, these findings must be treated carefully considering a press release from the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) that reports 4.7 million suspected online child sexual abuse cases across India (ICMEC, July 2022). No comparable studies to ours have been conducted, although a study safeguarding groups' perceptions on technology-assisted CSA within the UK revealed that practitioners within the UK often did not take *online* CSA as serious as offline CSA (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021). This lack of risk awareness could be a factor why the participants within our study indicated low prevalence of OCSAE and online grooming.

**71%**

of the practitioners believed that there had been an increase in OCSAE since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic and shared that they thought this was due to access "...more easily accessible now that they are not in structured education" and "children...[having] access to devices, which [were] restricted...before COVID 19". **29%** of practitioners believed that there had been no increase in OCSAE and shared that "[the] statistics are [the] same as before..." and that the children they worked with "...commonly have no access to online technology...". Quotes negating the increase in OCSAE since the beginning of the pandemic speak to a lack of awareness as data shows that there has been an increase in the search for CSAM (Thaver, 2020), which leads to the assumption that OCSAE has also increased to meet the risen demand for CSAM.



Offered suggestions on how technology-driven solutions could be used to aid in the detection and prevention of OCSAE were homogenous, the three most prevalent responses revolved around screening (**44%**), “buzzword screening”, “filters and blockers that automatically block any sexually explicit content...”, restrictions (**39%**), “verify every account...”, “by blocking children using them”, and education (**17%**) on the topics of OCSAE and online grooming, “awareness...[on] how children are exploited online”. While in line with the general protectionist and paternalistic treatment of children, the call for restrictions could create more harm than good, as children may be even more inclined to be online and their use would be hidden. CYPs reinforce relationships with their peers via the use of social media platforms. If usage is restricted, CYPs have been found to sneak back online and avoid parental restrictions as the need for them to be ‘with their friends’ is stronger than feared punishments (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008). Instead of restrictions trust relationships need to be established to enable children to speak to grown-ups in cases of potential harms. Establishing trust relationships within the children’s lives is especially important as these relationships have been found to be most influential in disclosures of child sexual abuse (Lam, 2014; Somer and Szwarcberg, 2011) as well as in aiding the child’s recovery process (Godbout et al., 2014). Awareness and education, not just for teachers and people who safeguard but also children, need to be established.

**69%**

of the practitioners reported they had no access to training about protecting children from OCSAE and **93%** indicated they had no access to training on protecting children from online grooming. Practitioners flagged that there was either a lack of training, “not yet come across any [training]”, “...as a teacher I have not had training...”, or that they had only received sessions on supporting abused children, “[I had]training on how to support abused children” and “...[I] had training on how to question abused children”. These statements illustrate the existing structural problems within official understanding of abuse, where practitioners may know how to deal with the aftermath of abuse but not how to prevent it. Focusing on trying to fix the outcomes of a problem, however, does not fix the issue, which is why training should prioritise prevention over trying to heal trauma that could have been prevented in the first place.

Within the **31%** of practitioners who had received sessions on protecting children from OCSAE most shared that it was not enough, “yes, but not enough”, or that the offered courses lacked prevention focus and only touched prosecuting the abuse, “yes, training on how to prosecute offence[s] not to prevent abuse”. Only two practitioners had been part of comprehensive training sessions on “... [how to spot] signs [of abuse]”. Delving deeper into assessing training needs, the questionnaire results revealed that practitioners were split into two groups: a majority who did not feel like they had sufficient sessions to spot signs of OCSAE or online grooming and a minority who stated that it was “...easy to spot” signs of abuse or that they could spot them through their “...gut feeling...”. These views are quite problematic as the practitioners suggest that spotting signs of abuse only required highly subjective, gut feeling. However, with OCSAE and online grooming entailing complex manipulation by offenders (Lorenzo-Dus, 2022/23; Lorenzo-Dus et al 2020; forthcoming), it is doubtful that simple common sense is enough for practitioners to be able to prevent the abuse. When the focus came to online grooming specifically a rather contradictory view was shared by one practitioner who believed that “grooming [is] not something we deal with [since] no real harm [was] done when no contact [was established] with the children”. This statement shows that more awareness on the harms of OCSAE, especially online grooming, is needed. It resonates with the findings of a UK-based study that showed that offline child sexual abuse was given priority when it came to prosecuting and safeguarding (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2021).

**79%**

of practitioners thought that receiving additional training would be beneficial and only a few thought it was “not needed...” for them or that it was “...a waste of [their] time”. Asked about what types of topics should be covered within training sessions, a majority of practitioners referred to training on spotting signs of OCSAE and online grooming, “training around signs would be good” and more general session around creating awareness, as “it is something not really talked about in India...one doesn’t consider talking to someone online as harmful...if there is knowledge and awareness around how it [speaking to someone online] can lead to abuse it would help in protecting oneself”.

# Key Recommendations

- Development of online grooming screening tools for law enforcement.
- Development of online training for cross-sector child safeguarding groups about how online grooming works as a complex practice of manipulation.

## Development of Online Grooming Screening Tools for Law Enforcement

Screening tools have been identified as one of the main preventative tools by practitioners within this study, which shows that there is potential for the DRAGON-S Spotter tool to be adapted to the Indian context. Adaptation requires access to, and linguistic analysis of, online grooming chatlog data in Indian English (and Indian languages). Data access by a trusted research team should be enabled by law enforcement, with whom the research team should work to ensure the adapted tool meets their requirements, for example, for case triaging.

## Development of Online Grooming Prevention Training for Cross-Sector Child Safeguarding

Findings show that child safeguarding practitioners in India would benefit from an expansion of the DRAGON-S Shield tool to India. Practitioners within this sample asked for increased online training sessions that would allow them to upskill and provide better informed prevention-oriented advice. DRAGON-S Shield is a training portal designed to help upskill safeguarding practitioners in their work with children and, through this benefit, the children coming into contact with the services.

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