

Decade after POCSO, campaign aims to highlight male sexual abuse

A sensitisation campaign named Blue Umbrella Day will be held on April 16



By Sneha Bhura

Updated: April 13, 2022 18:10 IST



Representational image

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, defines forms of sexual offence against children. A gender-neutral law, it recognises that boys, too, can be victims of sexual abuse unlike the Indian Penal Code where Section 375 maintains that rape is something that only a man can perpetrate on a woman. Section 377 of the IPC, 1860, talks about “sodomy”, which has mostly been used to target homosexual couples.

The POCSO Act has further expanded the definition of sexual offences to include acts like aggravated penetrative sexual assault and non-penetrative sexual assault as well. "But when a boy goes to a police station to report that he has been sexually abused, the vocabulary is rather limited. Especially in local languages. Police stations will not easily believe that boys too can be subjected to penetrative sexual offence. How can that happen to boys, is the common reaction," said J.B. Oli, head of programmes at noted child rights NGO Butterflies, which works with street and working children, especially in Delhi. "At best, they will just use the word sodomy. But mostly they won't even use that. They will just say sexual assault or 'kuchh galat hua hai', (something bad has happened). Barriers exist because there is a reluctance to use the right words for forms of sexual offence when men are the victims," said Oli, at the release of the report *Breaking the Silence on Sexual Violence Against Boys*, a study conducted in India, Nepal, Philippines and Cambodia over six months in 2017 as part of the Blue Umbrella Campaign.

Organised by Family for Every Child (FFEC), UK, a global alliance of 41 local CSOs (including Butterflies) from 37 countries, the Blue Umbrella Campaign aims to highlight that boys being sexually abused remain largely unknown, unacknowledged and not responded to, across a wide range of contexts and cultures. A sensitisation campaign titled Blue Umbrella Day is being organised on April 16 to recognise it as an international day to encourage adults to play a larger role in protecting boys from such harm.

Across the four countries, 122 boys and youngsters between 12 and 25 who have experienced sexual abuse or have been actors (or perpetrators) in harmful sexual behaviour were interviewed, along with 87 parents or caregivers and 75 key informants as part of this report. A further 215 boys and girls and 35 parents and caregivers from the general population, selected through a simple random sampling,

were involved in focus group discussions following ethical participatory techniques and protocols like the gender of the interviewer had to be male.

The qualitative findings of this cross-country study reinforced age-old stereotypes that patriarchy engenders, including cultural representations of the dominant male, questions on what constitutes virility, repressed emotions, ambiguities around sex and sexuality and entitlement to use aggression. Other interesting findings included that in India, some of the boys in the sample study were abused by women too, which was not found in other participating countries. The India report went further with the narrative of physical strength to include independence and knowledge about how to have sex. Or only in India did some of the respondents state the expectation for men to know about 'how to have sex'. What was suggested in all the reports was that boys do not appear to understand that boys can be sexually abused. They could give examples of sexual abuse, but the focus always appeared to be the abuse of girls. That is, many of the male respondents did not know what they had experienced was abuse, and often what is legally defined as abuse was described by a boy as experimentation or even as transactional. The report also pointed out that men mostly learn "how to be male" through friends, television, films and social media and not through direct teaching from family members, caregivers and teachers. This is especially important as the National Education Policy 2020 does not talk about mandatory inclusion of sex education in the school curriculum.

In 2007, the ministry of women and child development conducted a national study to understand the magnitude of child abuse in India and found that 53.22 per cent children faced one or more forms of sexual abuse and among them, the number of boys abused was 52.94 per cent. The outcome of this study was the 2012 POCSO Act. "There hasn't been any follow-up study undertaken on a similar scale. But this is the 10th year of the POCSO Act and it is time to evaluate if the law has been effective or has been a deterrent," Oli said.