

Child grooming: India must take measures to protect children from online sexual abuse

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Earlier this month, newspapers reported that a 13-year-old girl from Tirupur was lured and raped by a 21-year-old man in Chennai. What makes this incident even more shocking is that the rapist had befriended the victim first on Facebook and sexually assaulted her after having gained her trust online. This incident brings to light a growing concern surrounding child safety issues on the internet, namely, 'online grooming'.



Child grooming incidents in India

Child grooming is generally understood as the practice of befriending and forming an emotional bond with a child by a

person with the objective of sexual abuse. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'grooming' was first used in connection with a paedophile in a 1985 story by *Chicago Tribune* which stated, "These 'friendly molesters' become acquainted with their targeted victim, gaining their trust while secretly grooming the child as a sexual partner."

Child grooming incidents have increased with the advent of the internet, where such incidents are increasingly taking place online, through public chatrooms and social media. In India too, such instances have been reported in the past. Last year, two teenagers were arrested in Kolkata for kidnapping and rape of a 15-year-old girl whom they had befriended on Facebook. Another instance of online grooming was reported in December 2016 where a teenage girl was raped by a Facebook friend in Mumbai. More recently, in January 2017, a minor girl in Cuttack alleged rape by a boy whom she had met through a social networking site. With the proliferation of smartphone users in India, child grooming incidents can only be expected to rise in future.

How the internet abets child grooming

A unique feature of child grooming which takes place on the internet is the relative ease with which groomers are able to operate and gain a child's trust online. The anonymity provided by the internet and the social media addiction (which is prevalent today among children before they even enter teenage) are factors which have contributed to the rise of child grooming online.

Another reason could be that it is difficult for parents to monitor the activities of their children on the internet. This makes it easier for child groomers to approach children online with the intent of befriending unsuspecting victims. Further, social media interaction has grown by leaps and bounds in the

recent past making it the perfect modus operandi for child groomers.

Social media policies are also conducive to child participation in social networking. Facebook's 'Statement of Rights and Responsibilities' permits children as young as 13 years of age to sign up for an account. The minimum age restriction is regularly flouted by children by lying about their age on Facebook. Given the tendency of social media users to share (and even over-share) their personal details such as residential addresses, location (information about their favourite hangouts) and family details, one can imagine how easy it is for a child groomer to lure kids online with the intent to sexually abuse them.

Indian laws dealing with child grooming

At present, the law in India to protect children from sexual offences is The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO). Section 11(vi) of POCSO provides that a person who entices a child for pornographic purposes or gratification, with sexual intent is said to commit sexual harassment upon a child. Further, section 11(iv) of POCSO states that a person is said to commit sexual harassment when such person "repeatedly or constantly follows or watches or contacts a child either directly or through electronic, digital or any other means" with sexual intent.

Section 67B(c) of Information Technology Act, 2008 also punishes the enticement of children in an online relationship with the purpose of publishing or transmitting of material depicting children in sexually explicit act in electronic form. These provisions, however, do not use the term 'grooming' explicitly. In 2016, a UNICEF report titled, '[Child Online Protection in India](#)', highlighted the inefficacy of Indian laws to

protect children from online abuse including grooming. The report notes that limitations in the law include lack of clear-cut and uniform terminology in legislations, risk of subjective interpretation of legal provisions and absence of any legal duty on intermediaries (such as internet service providers) to protect children from online threats.

Recommendations aimed at preventing online grooming

To make laws against grooming more robust in India, 'grooming' needs to be explicitly recognised as an offence in India. The legislature must formulate a definition of 'grooming' to avoid any ambiguity in the meaning of the term. In June 2016, the [International Labour Organisation](#) [issued](#) *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse* to bring about consensus on terminology related to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse against children. The Guidelines define 'grooming' as "the process of establishing/building a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of the Internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person." India could adopt this definition to ensure that country's understanding of 'grooming' is in line with international standards.

While there is a need to strengthen Indian laws to protect children from online grooming, legal provisions are more in the nature of 'cure' than 'preventive' measures. This necessitates that alternative measures aimed at preventing online grooming are also explored. One way of doing this could be through stringent social media policies against grooming- Section 4 clause 6 of Facebook's [Statement of Rights and Responsibilities](#) states, 'You will not use Facebook if you are a convicted sex offender'. Facebook further outlines steps to report a convicted sex offender on Facebook, following which

Facebook disables the account of the said person. Facebook's 'Friend Verifier App' further aids in identifying whether a particular Facebook user is a registered sex offender. These measures are helpful to the extent that they prevent the use of Facebook by sex offenders including paedophiles and child groomers who have been convicted in the past.

However, these can be implemented in India only when the Indian government maintains a national register of convicted sex offenders in India which could be accessed by Facebook. (India has been deliberating the setting up of a national registry of sex offenders especially after the Jyoti Singh gang-rape case, however, a law to implement the same has not been enacted yet.) It is only through collaborative measures such as these between the Indian government and social networking sites that we can effectively tackle online grooming and protect children from online abuse.

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