



Original Article

A study on Awareness and attitude of the School Students of Ernakulam District in Kerala Related to Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is an important concern in India, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, strongly supports the protection of children. It can originate from grievous crimes of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and pornography. It is a robust legal framework for addressing issues such as reporting, investigation, trial, judgement, compensation, and rehabilitation mechanisms. Therefore, the Act considers the interests of children at every stage of judicial proceedings. This study investigates the awareness and attitude of school students in Ernakulam district, Kerala, regarding the POCSO Act and CSA. We distributed the questionnaire to the selected schools in the Ernakulam district as the base of the study. We found many gaps, such as awareness, reporting, limited knowledge, and other legal safeguards. We have improved communication and education styles with multimedia and Internet facilities. With its progress, it has brought many threats to society, such as cybercrimes and others (UNODC, 2021). With the use of smart phones and the Internet, child sexual abuse, cyberbullying, and grooming have become over powering among children, as noted by the Ministry of Home Affairs (Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA], 2023). This study brings to each one of us the improvement of awareness programmes on the legal frame work of India.

Keywords: POCSO Act, Child Sexual Abuse, Awareness, Attitude, School Students, Legal Literacy, Kerala.

Introduction

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offence Act, 2012 (POCSO Act) is a comprehensive law enacted to provide protection to children from sexual offences such as sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography.

- Penetrative Sexual Assault (Section 3). It involves penetration of penis in vagina, mouth, urethra, or the anus of a child, or any object/body part, causing penetration.
- Sexual Assault (Section 11): This includes touching the child with sexual intent, excluding penetration.
- Sexual Harassment (Section 11): It includes use of words, gestures, or exhibiting pornography to a child with sexual intent.
- Thus, child sexual abuse involves each act, whether physical or non-physical, when committed against a child below 18 years of age (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012).

Methodology:

A questionnaire-based study was conducted across the Ernakulam district with the help of various government and private schools in urban and rural areas. A total of 520 students, aged 14–18 years, were randomly selected. We randomly selected 520 students aged 14 to 18 years. Eighteen questions were given to them and collected back systematically. Finally, the results were analyzed.

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Objective:

This study assessed the level of awareness, attitude, and source of knowledge, and recommended improvements in legal literacy and policy frameworks in schools.

The replaced sections of IPC in BNS ((Indian Penal Code, 1860) & (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023)

The replaced IPC Sections in the BNS.

Offence	IPC (1860)	BNS (2023)
Rape	Sec. 375	Sec. 63
Punishment for Rape	Sec. 376	Sec. 64–70
Outraging Modesty of Woman	Sec. 354	Sec. 73
Sexual Harassment	Sec. 354A	Sec. 74
Voyeurism	Sec. 354C	Sec. 75
Stalking	Sec. 354D	Sec. 76
Unnatural Offences (non-consensual)	Sec. 377	Covered under Sec. 66–67
Consensual Same-Sex Acts	Criminalized	Not criminalized

The POCSO Act was a comprehensive law addressing all issues and clearing all lacunae, as follows:

- Protection of male children was not adequate
- Only rape was punishable
- Female abusers were not penalized. Oral sex, sexual assault and using any objects
- Against children were not considered as sexual offences.
- Sexual harassment and pornography were not addressed.
- No mechanism of protection of child survivors during trial
- Penetrative and non-penetrative acts were not addressed
- Single time and multiple times were not addressed
- Single offenders and multiple offenders were not addressed.
- Healthy and differently abled children were not differentiated.

Scope and Salient Features of the Pocso Act, 2012

- **Gender Neutral:** Both victim and accused can be of any gender.
- **Mandatory Reporting (Section 19):** Any person (including parents, teachers, and medical personnel) who is aware of such an offence is mandated to report it.
- **Special Courts:** Designated under Section 28 of the Act to try POCSO cases in a time-bound and child-sensitive manner.
- **Child-Friendly Procedures:**
 - No aggressive questioning (Section 24)
 - Assistance with support and special educators
 - Video-recorded testimony if needed.
- **Burden of Proof:** Shifts partially to the accused in certain cases, which is a deviation from general criminal law (Section 29).

The population of children under the age of 14 years has reached approximately two billion as of 2023 (World Population Review, 2025). This accounts for a quarter of the world's total population. This large

population highlights the importance and implementation of a child-focused legal framework. The recent data reports that there are roughly 436.6 million individuals under 18 years of age in the country (UNICEF, 2025). This figure reiterates that one in three Indians is minor. In the first study on child abuse in 2007, the reported presents that 53.22% of children have faced one or more forms of sexual abuse, and most of them did not report to anyone in India. In India, prior to enactment, there were no child-specific acts related to CSA (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). The Goa Children's Act of 2003 was the only Act that was prevalent in Goa (Goa Children's Act, 2003). Although the IPC sections addressed the issues of child sexual abuse, they were not sufficient to deal with all cases. After the enactment of the POCSO Act in 2012, it became the cornerstone of legal protection for minors against sexual crimes. The national data show an increase in reporting and cases, with 205,000 cases under the POCSO Act (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Approximately 31171 cases in Kerala between 2016 and 2024. In recent years, there have been 28,728 arrests (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). In 2023 alone, 4641 incidents were reported, and later in 2024, 4594 cases were reported, showing an increase every year (Kumar, 2025). Thiruvananthapuram consistently became the district with 602 cases at the top in the district list in 2024 (Mathrubhumi News Desk, 2025). Judicial and structural reforms have been initiated at the national level to expedite justice. In late 2024, India operated 389 exclusive POCSO courts and 1,023 fast-track special courts (FTSCs) (Press Information Bureau, 2024).

- There were approximately 4663 cases by 2023 in Kerala (Kerala State Commission Report, 2024). It was an increase from 4582 cases in 2022, as per the Annual Report 2023-2024, Kerala State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (The New Indian Express, 2024).
- As we analyze the report, we understand that most of the accused are known to the victims, and the list goes as follows: known people (873), neighbors (631), family members (439), relatives (435), friends (477), fiancés (692), teachers (210), unknown people (305), people who do not disclose the relationship or are not known (896), and drivers (36). This shows that the care of parents is very important in reducing the issue (Onmanorama, 2024).

It highlights the responsibilities of families, communities, and educational institutions. Based on the massive global and national child population, it is very important to assess the awareness of legal protections among school-going children, especially in Kerala, which is an important concern for stakeholders and other institutions.

These statistics reveal two critical facts: first, the persistent and widespread nature of CSA; second, that structural efficiency and adjudication efficiency remain a fact in society. This underscores the vital need for increased awareness and education among school-going children and stakeholders. Therefore, evaluating students' knowledge

and perceptions of the POCSO Act in Kerala is a timely and necessary step in fortifying legal protection for children.

Features of the POCSO Act

- Special juvenile unit – home visit, but not in uniform
- Special child-friendly court
- Special prosecutor
- non-adversarial procedure
- In camera proceedings
- Survivor is not exposed to the accused
- Recording of the statement of the child by a magistrate in the child's words
- Time-bound court proceedings within one year.

A Detailed Categorisation of Offences Is Provided In the Act

a. Penetrative Sexual Assault – Section 3

Anyone who causes the insertion of a penis/object/another body part in a child's vagina/urethra/anus/mouth, or asks the child to do so with him or someone else, will be punished with a minimum imprisonment of seven years, which can be extended to life imprisonment and a fine (POCSO Act, 2012).

b. Aggravated Penetrative Sexual Assault – Section 5

A penetrative sexual assault becomes an aggravated sexual assault when it is carried out by a person who is in a position of trust, like a relative, police officer, member of the armed forces, public servant, or management or staff of a hospital, educational, or any other religious institution. Any grievous hurt caused to a child, penetrative sexual assault on an already pregnant child, repeated assault, and penetrative assault on a child below 12 years of age is considered to be aggravated sexual assault, and punishment shall be less than for 20 years, which may extend to imprisonment for life, which means imprisonment for the remainder of the natural life of that person, and shall also be liable to a fine or death (POCSO Act, 2012).

c. Sexual Assault – Section 7

Sexual assault is any sexual act with sexual intent that thereby touches the vagina, penis, anus, or breast of such a person or any other person or does any other act with sexual intent that involves physical contact without penetration (POCSO Act, Act, 2012). The punishment for the Act is imprisonment for a term of less than three years or may extend to five years, and the offender shall be liable to a fine (POCSO Act, 2012).

d. Aggravated Sexual Assault – Section 9

Aggravated sexual assault is accused of a person who is in a position of trust, like a relative, police officer, member of the armed forces, public servant, management or staff of a hospital, education, or any other religious institution. The punishment is a minimum of five years but may extend up to seven years, and the offender shall also be liable for a fine too (POCSO Act, 2012).

e. Sexual Harassment – Section 11

It is considered to be a sexually related remark, sexual gesture/noise, repeatedly following, flashing, or making the child exhibit any part of their body to be seen by such a person or any other person. The POCSO Act

provides punishment, which can go up to three years, and the accused shall also be liable to a fine (POCSO Act, 2012).

f. Child use for pornographic purposes – Section 13

This can be the use of a child in any form of media for sexual gratification. The punishment for such an act is not less than five years, and the accused shall be given a fine, and a subsequent conviction with imprisonment for a term shall not be less than seven years and shall also include a fine in the event of a second time (POCSO Act, 2012).

The POCSO Amendment Act, 2019 (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Amendment Act, 2019) aimed to uphold a law that was more stringent in addressing the increasing instances of sexual offences against children. Features of amendment

1. **Enhanced punishment:** This was introduced as the death penalty for aggravated penetrative sexual assault and increased minimum punishment.
 2. **Expansion of definition:** Child pornography making possession, distribution, and transmission are defined explicitly and made punishable.
 3. **Aggravated offences:** The Act added new categories, such as offences by persons in authority or during disasters.
 4. **Fine and Compensation:** Fines are directed toward the medical treatment and rehabilitation of children.
1. The POCSO Rules, 2020 (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Rules, 2020) were introduced with the following features:
 2. Support for child victims
 3. Legal aid and assistance
 4. Enhanced the role of SJPU
 5. Increased Awareness and capacity building
 6. Strict monitoring and reporting.

The Track of the Conviction Rate

According to the New Indian Express, the conviction rate under the POCSO Act (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012) in Kerala dropped from 35.98% in 2018 to 15.14% in 2022, with 301 convictions compared to 1,465 acquittals in 2022 (Shan, 2024).

1/1/2019 to 31/12/2024 is about 22855, and the number of the cases disposed of is 22377 (High Court of

Kerala, Public Relations Office, 2025). The total number of POCSO cases in which convictions were ordered was approximately 2915 only ((High Court of Kerala, 2025) (RAJYA SABHA SESSION – 265 UNSTARRED QUESTION No 422. ANSWERED ON, 25TH JULY 2024).

Finally, to control and reduce the number of crimes against children, the government and other stakeholders should incorporate integral legal literacy rights at the beginning of the school lives of children. The formulation of policies in imparting awareness in this digital age and with easy electronic methods is the concern of the government, judiciary, and other stakeholders. This will increase the knowledge and attitude toward preventing and eliminating such heinous crimes in our society.

Analysis of Awareness and Attitude of Students about the PocsO Act in Ernakulam District

Settings: Students from various schools in Ernakulam District, Kerala, were used for the study.

Study Design: This was a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study. The researcher approached both private and public schools with 475 students. The CSA knowledge and attitudes of the students in various schools were checked by this survey. Randomly selected students were taken for the survey, and they were from the 8th to 12th standard students. The questionnaire contained multiple-choice questions (MCQs) related to the POCSO Act. These questions were distributed to the participants with the help of volunteers. The questionnaire comprised a basic demographic profile, along with 18 multiple-choice, binary choice, and open-ended questions. It is related to knowledge, attitude, sources of information, and further programs of POCSO Act awareness. The questionnaire was finalized after modifying unsuitable questions based on the pre test and consultation.

Results: The response rate was 95% out of 500 distributed questionnaires. A total of 475 participants fulfilled all criteria and were included in the study. The survey covered a significant number of students, with a higher representation of male students. Age and school students demarcate a focus on young children about their awareness of the POCSO Act and other details.

1. Demographic details are summarized in Figure No.1.

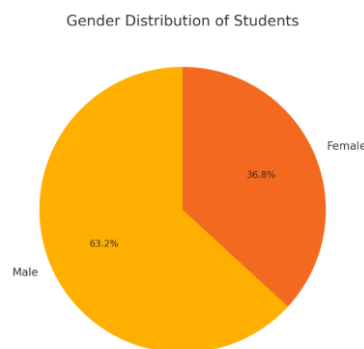


Figure 1. Total No. of students: 475 from Ernakulam District with 300 male and 175 female

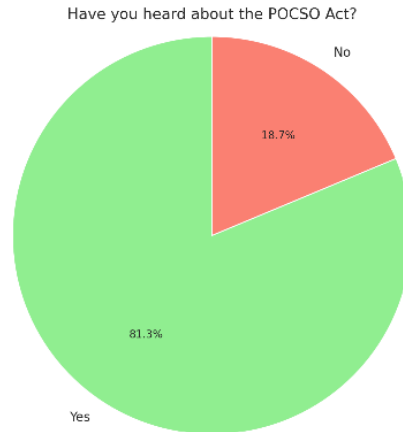
2. General Awareness of POCSO Act

• **Heard about the POCSO Act?**

○ Yes: 383 students (81.3%)

○ No: 88 students (18.7%)

○ (look at the Chart below)



• **First Source of Learning about POCSO Act (for those who said 'Yes'):**

○ Media (TV, Newspapers, Internet): 233 students (48.8%)

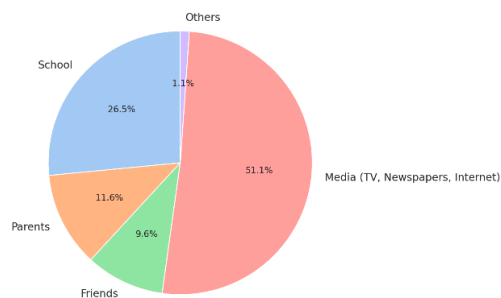
○ School: 121 students (25.4%)

○ Parents: 53 students (11.1%)

○ Friends: 44 students (9.3%)

○ Others: 5 students (1.0%)

Where did you first learn about the POCSO Act?



Analysis: It is clear that the vast majority of students (over 80%) are aware of the POCSO Act, which is a positive indicator. However, it should be noted that media plays the most significant role as a primary source of information, surpassing schools and parents. This brings to our notice that, while formal education and parental guidance are important, informal sources such as the media have a substantial impact on initial awareness.

3. Understanding of POCSO Act

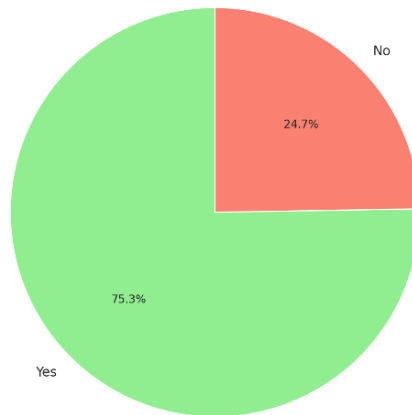
• **Know what the POCSO Act is designed to protect against?**

○ Yes: 356 students (75.2%)

○ No: 117 students (24.8%)

○ (look at the chart below)

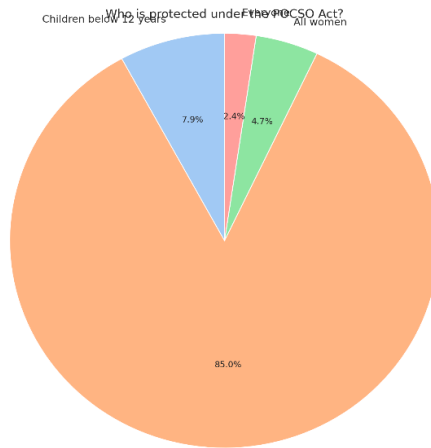
Do you know what the POCSO Act is designed to protect against?



Who is protected under the POCSO Act?

- Children below 18 years: 396 students (83.4%)
- Children below 12 years: 37 students (7.8%)

- All women: 22 students (4.6%)
- Everyone: 11 students (2.3%)
- (See Chart: Who is protected under the POCSO Act?)



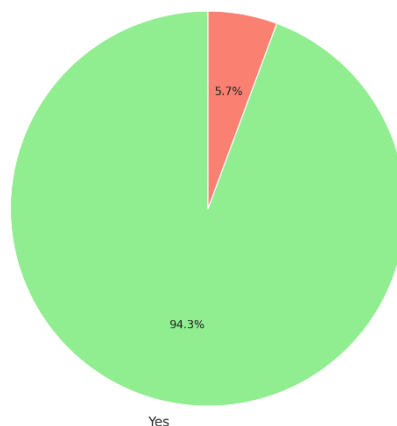
Analysis: A large number (83.4%) identified that children under 18 years are protected under the Act. This indicates a relatively good foundational understanding of the Act's core purpose and its beneficiaries among the surveyed students. Even then, 24.8% remained with the knowledge incorrectly, and it shows the areas of improvement in conceptual clarity.

4. Specific Knowledge of Legal Provisions

POCSO Act specifically meant to protect children from sexual offences?

- Yes: 450 students (94.7%)
- No: 27 students (5.7%)
- (See Chart: Do you know that the POCSO Act is specifically meant to protect children from sexual offences?)

Do you know that the POCSO Act is specifically meant to protect children from sexual offences?

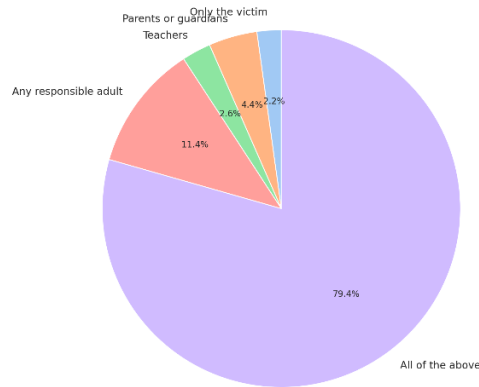


• **Who can intimate instance of sexual abuse against a child?**

- All of the above (victims, guardians, teachers, and responsible adults): 363 students (76.4%)
- Any responsible adult: 52 students (10.9%)

- Parents or guardians: 20 students (4.2%)
- Teachers: 12 students (2.5%)
- Only the victim: 10 students (2.1%)
- (See Chart: According to the POCSO Act, who can report a sexual offence against a child?)

According to the POCSO Act, who can report a sexual offence against a child?

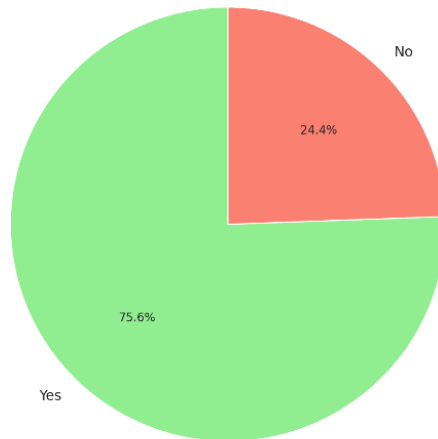


• **Mandatory for schools to report any suspected or known incidents of child sexual abuse?**

- Yes: 331 students (69.7%)
- No: 107 students (22.5%)

- (See Chart: Are you aware that under the POCSO Act, it is mandatory for schools to report any suspected or known incidents of child sexual abuse?)

Act, it is mandatory for schools to report any suspected or known incidents of child sexual abuse?



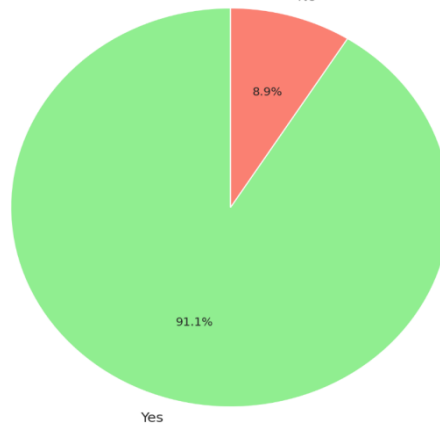
Analysis: Students showed a very high knowledge that the POCSO Act is specifically for sexual offences against children (94.7%). A commendable 76.4% correctly understood the broad scope of reporting, recognizing that multiple individuals could report offences. Care is needed in this area; there are students who are unaware of the mandatory reporting obligation for schools. The important gap is to be addressed by educational institutions.

5. Legal Rights of the child and its procedures.

The residence of a comfortable place can be used to record the children's statements.

- 42 students (90.1%) have responded with answer -"yes"
- 42 students (8.8%) have responded with answer -"No".
- (Look at the chart below: Do you understand that a child's resident or a comfortable place can be used for recording the statement?)

statements can be recorded at their residence or a place where

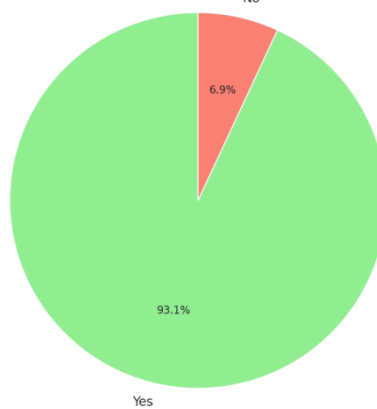


• **The child's identity is to be kept confidential during investigation and trial?**

- Yes: 443 students (93.3%)
- No: 33 students (6.9%)

○ (See Chart below: Are you aware that a child's identity should be kept confidential during the investigation and trial?)

at a child's identity is to be kept confidential during the investigation

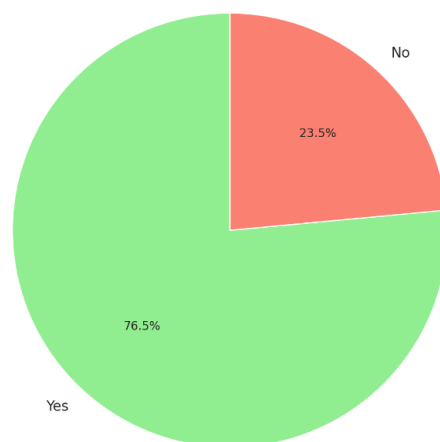


• **Is it the mandate for speedy trials of the cases in special courts?**

- Yes: 361 students (76.0%)
- No: 111 students (23.4%)

○ (See Chart below: Do you understand that there is a mandate for special courts for the speedy trial of the cases?)

know that the POCSO Act mandates special courts for speedy trials



Analysis: With over 90% knowing about the flexibility in recording statements and the confidentiality of the child's identity, the awareness of procedural safeguards and the

child's rights was generally high. A good grasp of the child-friendly aspects of the POCSO Act is presented in this report. 76% of the students were aware of special courts for speedy trials. A quarter of the students were unaware of

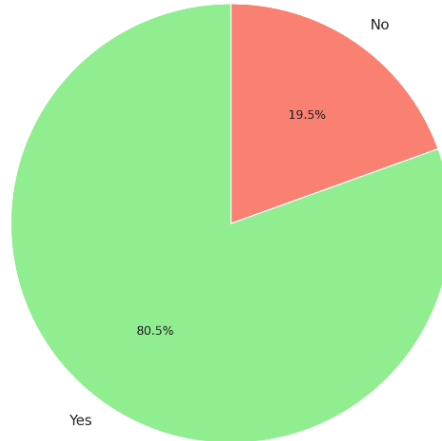
this. This suggests a need to reinforce the knowledge of the judicial mechanism under POCSO.

Preventive Measures and Support Structures

- **Has the school conducted any sessions or workshops about child safety and the POCSO Act?**

- Yes: 376 students (79.2%)
- No: 91 students (19.2%)
- (See Chart below: Has your school conducted any sessions or workshops on child safety and the POCSO Act?)

conducted any sessions or workshops about child safety and

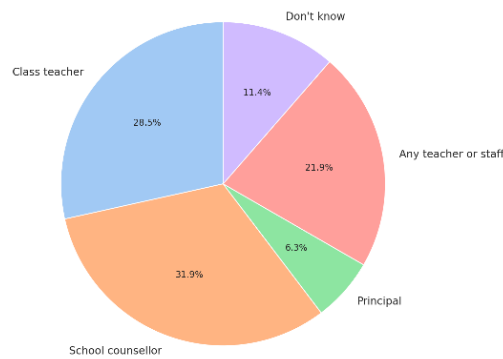


- **Whom to approach in school if facing sexual abuse?**

- School counsellor: 151 students (31.8%)
- Class teacher: 135 students (28.4%)
- Any teacher or staff: 104 students (21.9%)

- Don't know: 54 students (11.4%)
- Principal: 30 students (6.3%)
- (See Chart below: Do you know who to approach in your school if you or someone you know is facing any form of sexual abuse?)

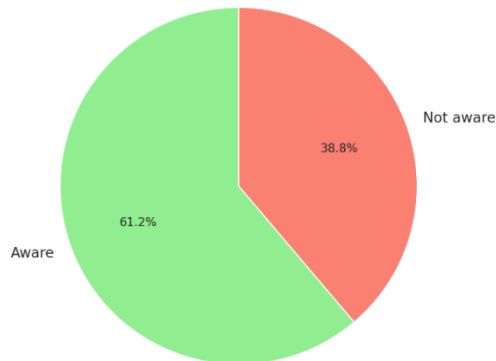
to approach in your school if you or someone you know is facing any form of sexuz



- **Do you know any helpline numbers or organizations for helping the children affected with sexual abuse?**

- I am aware: 287 students (60.4%)
- I am not aware: 182 students (38.3%)
- (See Chart below for the clarification.)

f any helpline or organizations that support children facing si



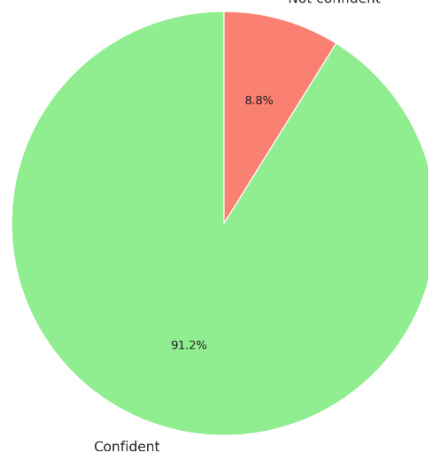
Analysis: It is encouraging that Nearly 80% of schools had taken the initiative to conduct sessions or workshops, highlighting proactive efforts in child safety education. When it comes to who to approach in schools, it is surprising that a majority would turn to school counsellors or class teachers, indicating trust in these figures. Even then, 11% of them were not aware whom to approach, which is an important concern. There is a suggestion to promote and circulate the information about the support systems as

the only 60.4% of the children, moderate percentage is aware of it.

Perception and Attitude

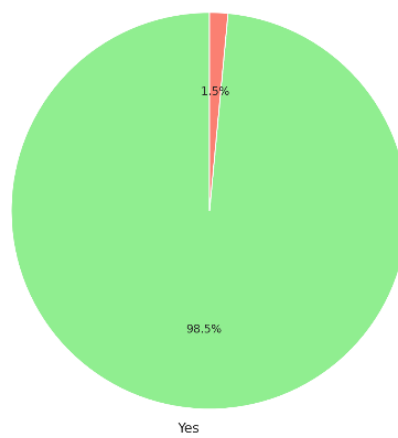
- Do you feel confident that your school brings forward adequate measures to save students from sexual abuse?
 - I am confident: 433 students (91.2%)
 - I am not confident: 42 students (8.8%)
 - (look at the chart below).

that your school takes adequate measures to protect student



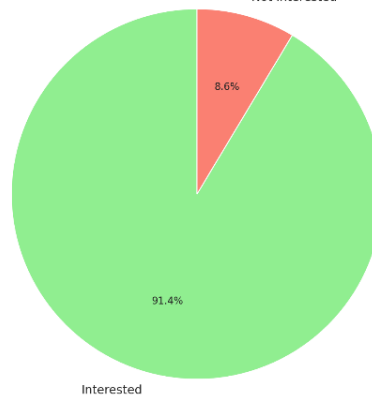
- Is it important for students to learn about child safety under the POCSO Act?
 - Yes, it is important for 462 students (97.3%)
 - No, it is not important for seven students (1.5%)
 - (Look at Chart given below:

important for students to be educated about the POCSO Act .



- Are you interested in getting more sessions or workshops on the POCSO Act and child safety?
 - 426 students are interested (89.7%),
 - 40 students are not interested (8.4%) (look at the chart given below:

sted in attending more sessions or workshops on child safety



Analysis: With over 91% expressing confidence, the students' perception of their school's protective measure was overwhelmingly positive and it shows the sage environment within schools. Crucially, Almost all students (97.3%) affirmed that education on the POCSO Act and child safety is important. A high percentage (89.7 %) they are interested in attending more such sessions. This shows a strong willingness among the students to become more empowered with knowledge.

Feedback and Suggestions

- **Suggestions on how schools can better educate students about the POCSO Act and child safety:**
 - 300 students preferred more sessions in the POCSO Act.
 - Suggestions include interactive sessions and parental awareness.

Analysis: The general desire for more education in the POCSO Act is the main thrust of the open-ended feedback system. The demand on "interactive sessions" indicates the need for interactive and participatory teaching methods than traditional lectures. The students suggested a parental awareness program in all educational initiatives. This will

definitely help achieve a holistic and supportive system for the safety of children in and around schools.

Recommendations and general findings

A high level of awareness was observed in this survey. We found a positive attitude and understanding in the Ernakulam district regarding the POCSO Act.

The attractive and strong impressions include:

1. Common awareness is high; among the students, a significant majority are aware of the Act.
2. Good Foundational Understanding: Most students correctly identified the core purpose and beneficiaries of the Act.
3. Strong awareness of the legal provisions: Most of the students are well aware of the Act's specific focus on sexual offences and the broad scope of reporting.
4. Knowledge of child rights: Awareness about child-friendly legal procedures, such as statement recording at comfortable locations and identifying confidentiality, was found to be high among students.
5. High perception of schools: Students feel confident about their schools' protective measures.
6. High demand for further sessions and education: Students expressed a strong interest in attending more



sessions and workshops on child safety, both for them and for their parents.

The survey also identifies certain important critical areas for improvement:

1. Reliance on Media for Initial Awareness: While media is a strong source, schools and parents need to enhance their proactive roles in disseminating information because media entry into the lives of children has to be properly guided.
2. Gaps in specific knowledge: The mandatory reporting obligations for schools and the role of special courts are not at the notice of many students.
3. Unaware factor in help-seeking in schools: A significant portion of students remain unsure of who to approach in schools in cases of abuse and unaware of helpline mechanisms
4. Necessity of interactive learning: Students' suggestions highlight a preference for more engaging and interactive educational approaches for the safety of children.
5. Importance of parental involvement: The most explicit feedback given by the students about the need for parents' awareness of the safety of children and child sexual abuse is highly remarkable and the requirement in the digital era. h in the digital age group, respectively.

Conclusions

Basic knowledge regarding the POCSO Act is present in the students, but an in-depth understanding is to be given through the initiative of teachers and parents. A multidisciplinary approach involving children and parents must enhance child-friendly information, educative materials about POCSO, and contact information must be made available to institutions for awareness and support mechanisms. Special training for teachers must be enhanced in order to increase the knowledge of students entrusted to them.

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Nil.

Conflicts of interest

I declare that there are no conflict of interest, and consent was obtained from the participants of the survey.

Ethical Approval: This study was conducted with essential ethical standards.

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