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## RESEARCH 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, renders strong support for the protection of the children. It can be from grievous crimes of sexual harassment, sexual assault and pornography. It is a robust legal framework to address issues like reporting, investigation, trial, judgement, compensation and rehabilitation mechanisms. Thereby the Act takes care of the interests of children at every stage of judicial proceedings. This study investigates the awareness and attitude of school students in Ernakulam district, Kerala, about the POCSO Act and CSA. We have distributed the questionnaire to the selected schools of the Ernakulam district for the base of the study. We find a lot of gaps such as awareness, reporting, limited knowledge and other legal safeguards. We have improved the communication and education styles with its multimedia and internet facilities. With its progress it has brought a lot of threats to the society such as cybercrimes and others (UNODC,2021). By the use of smart phone and internet use, child sexual abuse, cyberbullying and grooming have become over powering among the children as noted by the Ministry of Home Affairs (Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA], 2023). This study brings to each one of us on the improvement of awareness programmes on legal frame work of India. **Methodology:** A questionnaire-based study was organized across Ernakulam district with the help of various government and private schools in urban and rural areas. 520 students aged 14 to 18 were randomly selected. We had selected 520 students randomly from 14 to 18 years of age. There were 18 questions given to them and collected back systematically. Finally, the result was analyzed. **Objective:** The study was to assess the level of awareness, attitude, and source of knowledge and to recommend improvements in legal literacy and policy frameworks in the schools.

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## 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): It includes the touching of 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 of the acts, whether physical or non-physical, when committed

against a child below 18 years of age(Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012).

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

The POCSO Act was a comprehensive law addressing all the issues and cleared all lacunae, such as the following:

- 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 of support persons and special educators
  - Video-recorded testimony, if needed
- **Burden of Proof:** Shifts partially to the accused in certain cases, which is a deviation from the general criminal law (Section 29).

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 population of children under the age of 14 reached approximately two billion as of 2023 (World Population Review, 2025). It accounts for a quarter of the world’s total population. This big population definitely points out the importance of a child-focused legal framework and its implementation. 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 a minor in India. From the first study on child

abuse in 2007, the report 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 was no child-specific act related to CSA (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). The Goa Children’s Act, 2003, was the only Act which was prevalent in Goa (Goa Children's Act, 2003). Though the IPC sections were addressing the issues of child sexual abuse, it was not sufficient enough to deal with all the cases. After the enactment of the POCSO Act in 2012, it has stood as the cornerstone of legal protection for minors against sexual crimes. With the National data, it is showing an increase in reporting and cases, with 205,000 cases under the POCSO Act (U.S. Department of State, 2024). There were about 31171 cases in Kerala between 2016 and 2024. In these years, there were 28,728 arrests (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024). In 2023 alone, 4641 incidents were reported, and later in 2024, 4594 cases were again reported, showing an increase every year (Kumar, 2025). Thiruvananthapuram consistently became the district with 602 cases as the top in the district list in 2024 (Mathrubhumi News Desk, 2025). On a national level, judicial and structural reforms have been initiated to expedite justice. In late 2024, India operated 389 exclusive POCSO courts and a total of 1,023 Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs) (Press Information Bureau, 2024).

- There were about 4663 cases in 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 analyse the report, we understand most of the accused is known to the victims, and the list goes like this: such as known people (873), neighbours (631), family members (439), relatives (435), friends (477), fiancés (692), teachers (210), unknown people (305), people who do not disclose the relation or are not known (896), and drivers (36). This shows that the care of the parents is very much important to reduce the issue (Onmanorama, 2024).

It highlights the responsibility on families, communities and education institutions. Basing on the massive child population globally and nationally, it is very important to assess the awareness of legal protections among the school-going children, especially in Kerala; this is an important concern for the stakeholders and other institutions. These statistics reveal two critical facts: first, the persistent and widespread nature of the CSA; second, structural efficiency and adjudication efficiency remain a fact in society. This backdrop underscores the vital need for increased awareness and education among school-going children and stakeholders. Evaluating students’ knowledge and perceptions of the POCSO Act in Kerala is therefore 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.**

**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 7 years, which can be extended to life imprisonment and a fine (POCSO Act, 2012).

**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 shall mean imprisonment for the remainder of the natural life of that person, and shall also be liable to a fine or death (POCSO Act, 2012).

**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 which involves physical contact without penetration (POCSO Act, Act, 2012). The punishment for the act is imprisonment for a term less than 3 years or may extend to five years, and the offender shall be liable to a fine (POCSO Act, 2012).

**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, or management or staff of a hospital or 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 be liable for a fine too (POCSO Act, 2012).

**Sexual Harassment – Section 11:** It is considered to be the sexually related remark, sexual gesture/noise, repeatedly following, flashing or making the child exhibit any part of his body to be seen by such a person or any other person. The POCSO Act provides the punishment, which can go up to 3 years, and the accused shall be liable to a fine too (POCSO Act, 2012).

**Child use for pornographic purposes – Section 13:** It can be the use of a child in any form of media for the purpose of sexual gratification. The punishment of 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 at upholding a law more stringent in addressing the increasing instance of sexual offences against children. The features of the amendment:

- Enhanced punishment: This is introduced like the death penalty for aggravated penetrative sexual assault and increased minimum punishment.
- Expansion of definition: The child pornography making possession, distribution and transmission are defined explicitly and made punishable
- Aggravated offences; The Act added new categories such as offences by persons in authority or during disasters.
- Fine and Compensation: Fines are directed for the medical treatment and rehabilitation of the children.

POCSO Rules, 2020, (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Rules, 2020) were introduced with the following features:

- Support for child victims
- Legal aid and assistance
- Enhanced the role of SJPU
- Increased Awareness and capacity building
- 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 conviction was ordered was about 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 are to incorporate integral legal literacy right at the beginning of the school lives of the children. The formulation of policies in imparting the awareness in this digital age and with electronic easy methods is to be the concern of the government, judiciary and other stakeholders. This will increase the knowledge and attitude in preventing and eliminating such heinous crimes from our society.

### **V.ANALYSIS OF AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE OF STUDENTS ABOUT THE POCSO ACT IN ERNAKULAM DISTRICT**

**Settings:** The students of various schools of Ernakulam district, Kerala, are used for the study.

**Study Design:** The study design is a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study. The researcher approached both private and public schools for 475 students as participants. This CSA knowledge and attitude of the students of various schools are checked by this survey. The randomly selected students are taken for the survey, and they are from 8th to 12th standard students. The questionnaire had multiple-choice questions (MCQs) related to the POCSO Act. These questions were distributed among participants with the help of volunteers. The questionnaire comprised a basic demographic profile along with 18 multiple-choice questions, binary choice questions and open-ended questions. It is quite related to knowledge, attitude, source of information and further programmes of POCSO Act awareness. The questionnaire was

finalised after modifying unsuitable questions based on the pre-test and consultation.

## RESULTS

The response rate was 95% out of 500 distributed questionnaires. 475 participants fulfilled all the criteria, and the same were included in the study. The survey covered a significant number of students with higher representation of male students. The 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.

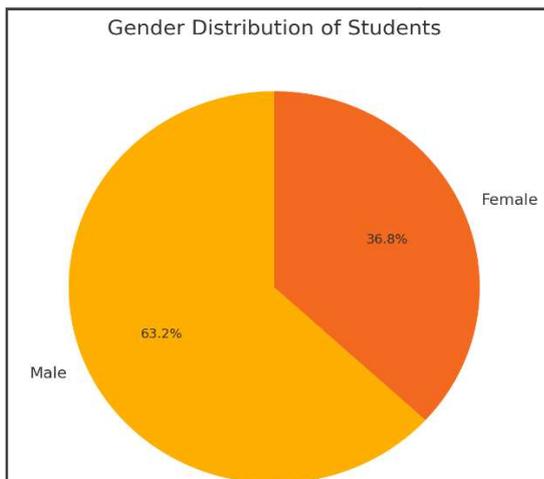
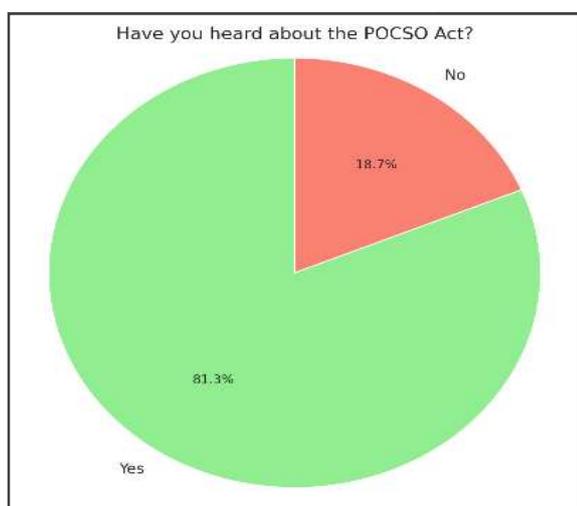


Figure 1. Total No. of students: 475 from Ernakulam District with 300 male and 175 female

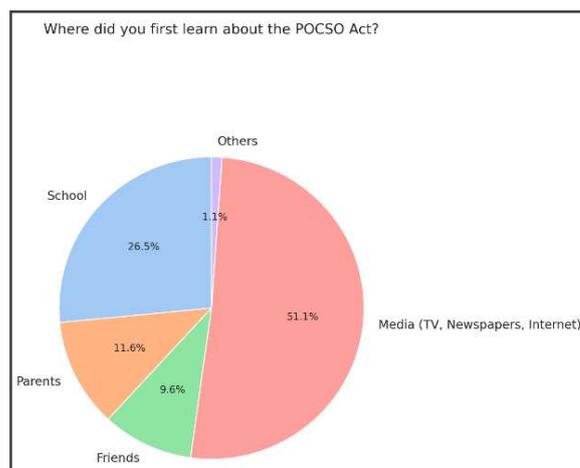
### 2. General Awareness of POCSO Act

- **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%)

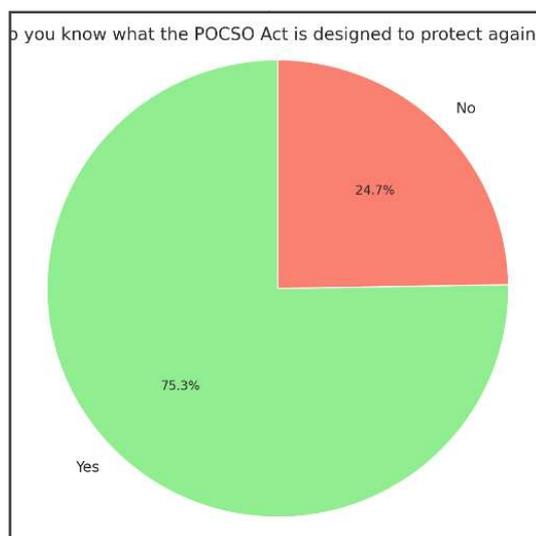


**Analysis:** it is clear that a vast majority of students (over 80%) are aware of the POCSO Act, which is a positive indicator. However, it is to be noticed that media take the most significant role as a primary source of information, surpassing schools and parents.

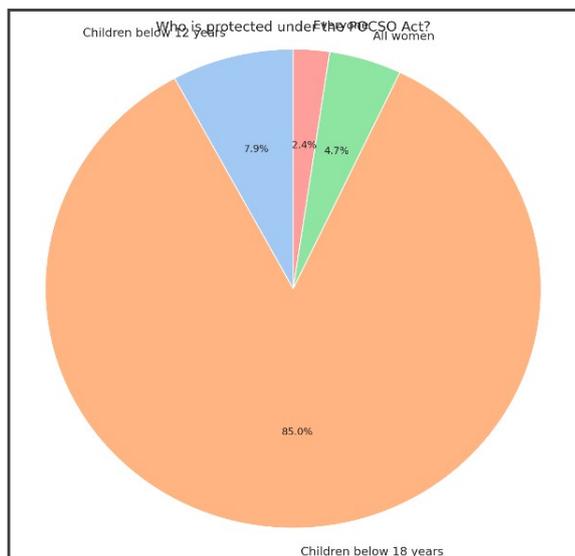
This brings to our notice that while formal education and parental guidance are important, informal sources like the media have a substantial impact on initial awareness.

### 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)



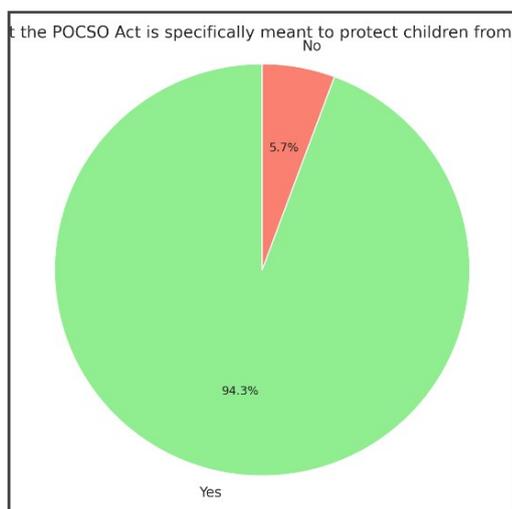
- **Who is protected under the POCSO Act?**
  - Children below 18 years: 396 students (83.4%)
  - Children below 12 years: 37 students (7.8%)
  - All women: 22 students (4.6%)
  - Everyone: 11 students (2.3%)
  - (See Chart: Who is protected under the POCSO Act?)



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

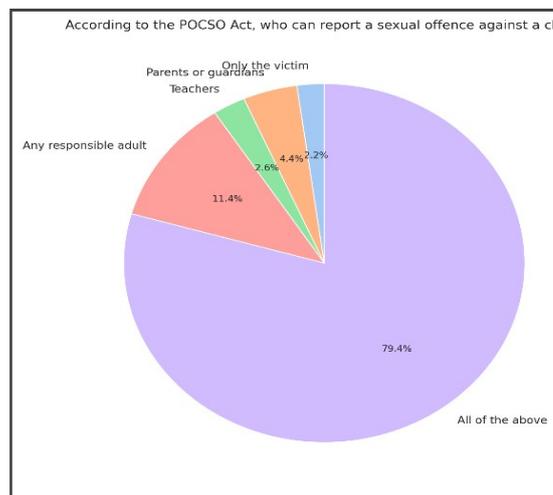
**Specific Knowledge of Legal Provisions**

- **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?)

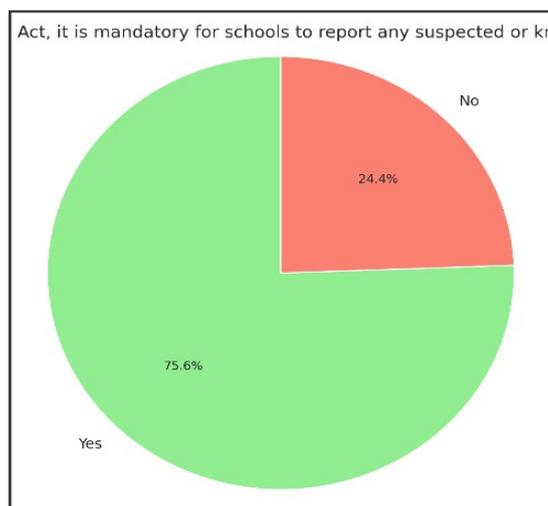


**Who can intimate instance of sexual abuse against a child?**

- All of the above (Victim, Parents/Guardians, Teachers, Any responsible adult): 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?)



- **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?)

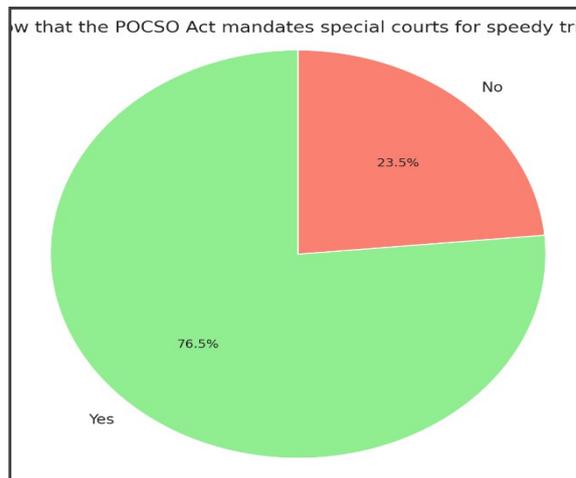
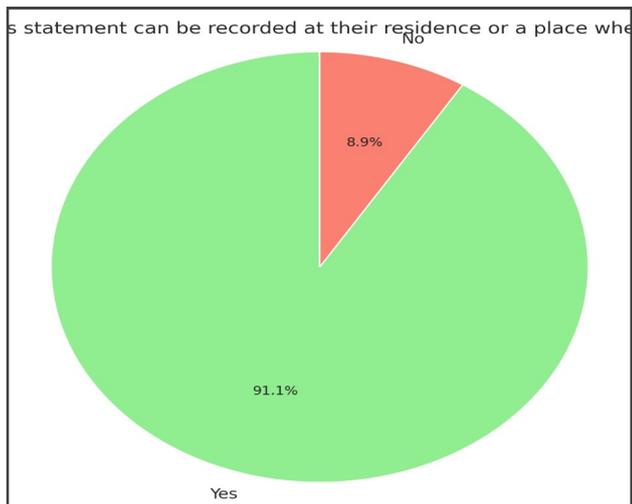


**Analysis:** Students show a very high knowledge that the POCSO Act is specifically for sexual offences against children (94.7%). A commendable 76.4% correctly understand the broad scope of reporting, recognizing that multiple individuals can report offences. Care is needed in that area; there are students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

**Legal Rights of the child and its procedures**

The residence of a comfortable place can be taken for recording the statement of the children.

- 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 children’s resident or a comfortable place can be used for recording the statement?)



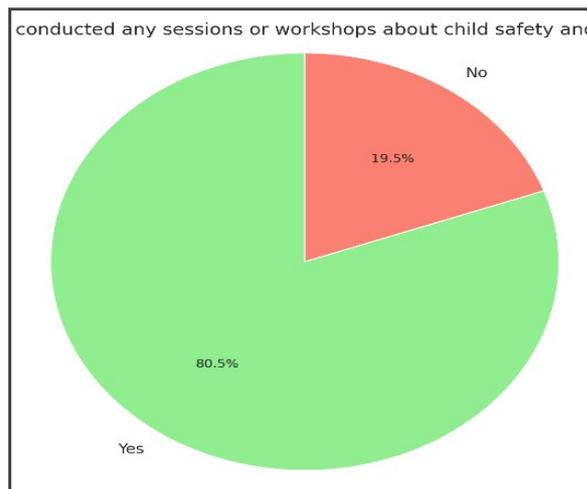
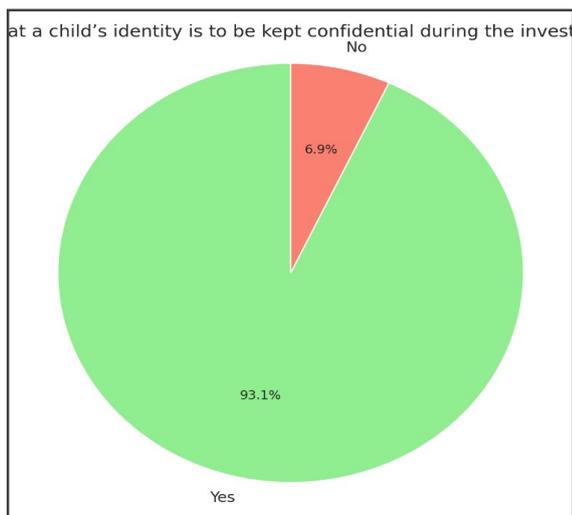
**Preventive Measures and Support Structures**

**• 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 is to be kept confidential during the investigation and trial?)

**• 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 about child safety and the POCSO Act?)



**• 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?)

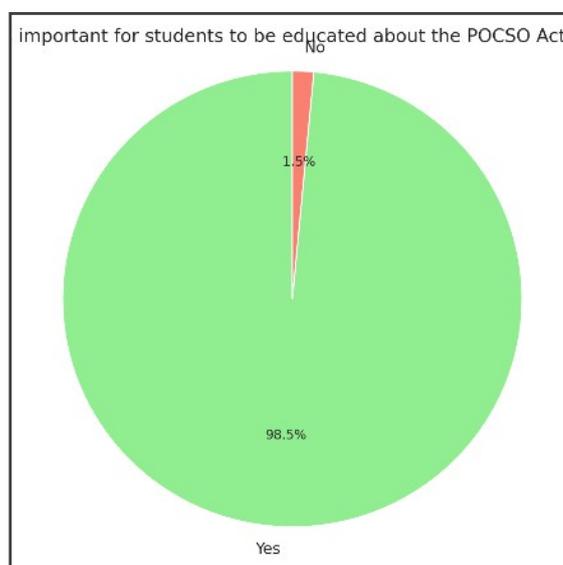
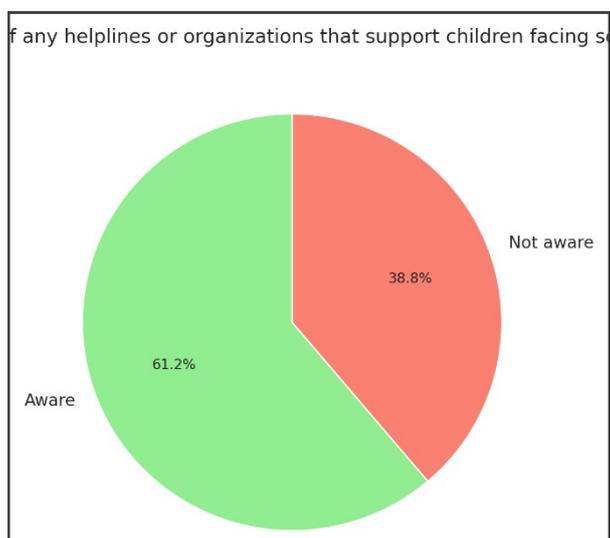
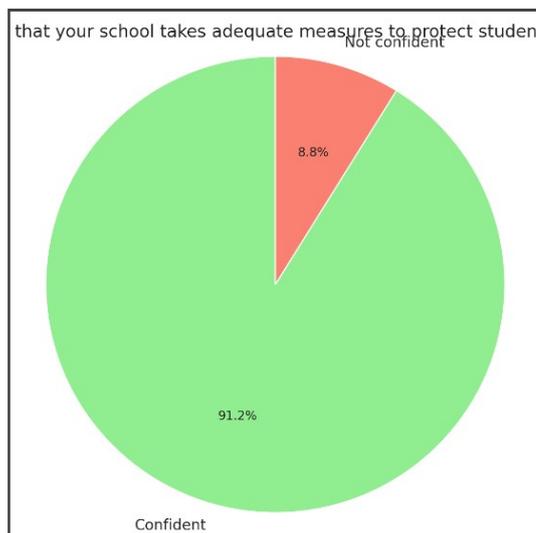
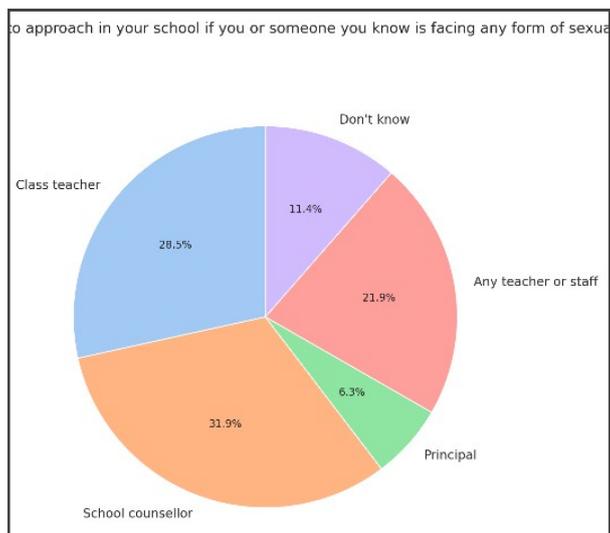
**Whom to approach in school if facing sexual abuse?**

- 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 whom to approach in your school if you or someone you know is facing any form of sexual abuse?)

**• 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.)

**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 is generally high. A good grasp of the child-friendly aspects of the POSSCO Act is expressed through this report. 76% of the students are aware of special courts for speedy trials. A quarter of the students are not aware of it. It suggests a need to reinforce knowledge about the judicial mechanism under POCSO.



**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 whom to approach in schools, it is surprising to be told that a majority would turn to school counsellors or class teachers, indicating trust in these figures. Even then, 11% of them are not aware whom to approach and that 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**

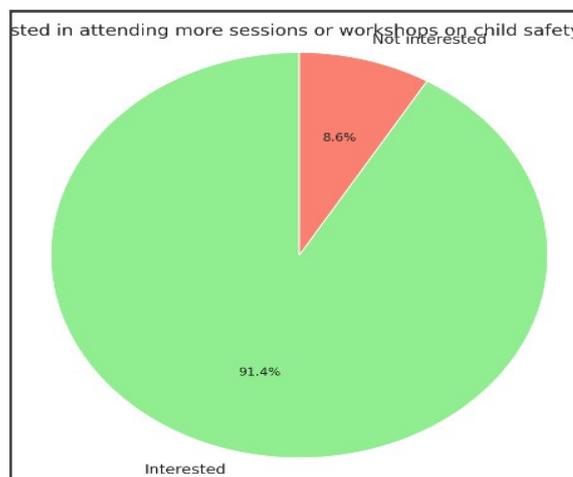
Do you feel confident that your school brings forward adequate measures to save the students from sexual abuse?

- I am confident: 433 students (91.2%)
- I am not confident: 42 students (8.8%)
- (look at the chart below)

Is it important for students to be learned about the child safety and the POCSO Act?

- Yes, it is important for 462 students (97.3%)
- No, it is not important for 7 students (1.5%)
- (look at Chart given below.)

- Are you Interested to get more sessions or workshops concerning the POCSO Act and child safety?
  - 426 students are interested (89.7%)
  - 40 students are not interested (8.4%)
- o (look at the Chart given below:



**Analysis:** with over 91% expressing confidence, the students' perception of their school's protective measure is overwhelmingly positive and it shows the safe environment within schools. Crucially, almost all students (97.3%) affirm

that education about the POCSO Act and child safety is important. With high percentage (89.7 %) they are interested in attending more such sessions. This shows a strong willingness among students to more and be 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 on the POCSO Act.
- Suggestions included interactive sessions and parental awareness.

**Analysis:** The general desire for more education on 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 have suggested for a parental awareness programme in all the educational initiatives. This will definitely achieve a holistic and supportive system for the safety of the children in and around the school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND GENERAL FINDINGS

A high level of awareness is expressed in the survey. We find a positive attitude and understanding in Ernakulam district about the POCSO Act.

### The attractive and strong impressions include

- The common awareness is high: Among the students, a significant majority is aware of the Act.
- Good Foundational Understanding: The core purpose and beneficiaries of the Act are correctly identified by the most of the students.
- Strong awareness about 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.
- iv. Knowledge of child rights: Awareness about child-friendly legal procedures like statement recording at comfortable locations and identifying confidentiality is found high in the students.
- High perception of schools: Students are feeling confident in their schools' protective measures.
- High demand for further sessions and education: Students express a strong interest in attending more sessions and workshops on child safety, both for them and for the parents too.

### The survey also identifies certain important critical areas for improvement

- 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 the media entry to the lives of children has to be properly guided
- Gaps in specific knowledge: The mandatory reporting obligations for schools and the role of special courts are not at the notice of considerable number of students.

- Unaware factor in help-seeking in the schools: A significant portion of students remain unsure whom to approach in schools in cases of abuse and unaware of helpline mechanisms
- Necessity of interactive learning: Students' suggestions highlight a preference for more engaging and interactive education approaches for the safety of the children.
- Importance of parental involvement: The most explicit feedback given by the students about the need for parents' awareness of the safety of the children and child sexual abuse is highly remarkable and the requirement in the digital era. hour in the digital age.

## CONCLUSIONS

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

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would be obliged and thankful to all the students and the authorities for the collaboration with the research study. I declare that there is no conflict of interest, and the consent is obtained from the participants of the survey. Ethical Approval: the study was carried out with essential ethical standards;

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