

An Overview of Child Abuse in India: The Role of Social Work

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Abstract

Child abuse is a serious social problem affecting children across India and includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, child labour, trafficking, child marriage, and exploitation. It occurs in homes, schools, workplaces, and communities, often remaining hidden due to fear, stigma, and weak reporting systems. The importance of this study lies in understanding child abuse as a major violation of child rights and recognizing the role of social work in child protection. The main objective is to examine the forms, causes, consequences, and legal aspects of child abuse and to analyze the role of social workers in prevention, protection, and rehabilitation. The study is based on secondary data collected from books, journals, government reports, UNICEF, WHO, and Ministry of Women and Child Development publications. The findings show that poverty, illiteracy, domestic violence, alcoholism, and gender discrimination are major causes of child abuse. Social workers play an important role through counselling, legal support, family intervention, rehabilitation, and awareness programmes. The study concludes that stronger child protection systems and professional social work interventions are essential. It suggests better awareness, improved reporting systems, trained social workers, and stronger institutional coordination for effective child protection.

Keywords

Child abuse, child protection, child welfare, social work, India, rehabilitation, child rights

Introduction

Children are considered the future of society, and their safety, protection, and development are essential for national progress. However, child abuse remains a hidden and widespread social problem in India, affecting children across different socio-economic, cultural, and regional backgrounds. Child abuse refers to any act of commission or omission by parents, caregivers, institutions, or society that causes physical harm, emotional suffering, sexual exploitation, neglect, or any threat to the psychological and social well-being of a child (Seth, 2015; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). It is a serious violation of child rights and human dignity, affecting not only the present well-being of children but also their future development, education, health, and social adjustment (UNICEF, 2021; Government of India, 1950). Abuse often occurs in places where children are expected to feel safe, such as homes, schools, childcare institutions, workplaces, and communities, making it a deeply concerning social welfare issue (Bala & Garg, 2021; Carson, Foster, & Tripathi, 2013).

India has one of the largest child populations in the world, and evidence indicates a high prevalence of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse among children across both rural and urban settings (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007; Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). Studies reveal that child abuse is frequently normalized and underreported, especially in developing societies where corporal punishment, harsh discipline, and emotional neglect are often accepted as normal parenting practices (Bala & Garg, 2021; Seth, 2015). Emotional abuse and neglect frequently remain invisible because they are misunderstood as discipline or family matters, resulting in long-term psychological harm such as anxiety, depression, fear, and low self-esteem (Waseem, 2025; WHO, 2020). Child sexual abuse has received greater public attention after the enactment of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, yet many cases continue to remain hidden due to fear, shame, family honour, and social stigma (Choudhry et al., 2018; Government of India, 2012). Trafficking, child labour, and exploitation further worsen the vulnerability of children, especially those from poor and marginalized families (Deb, Mukherjee, & Mathews, 2011; UNICEF, 2021). These realities highlight the urgent need for strong child protection systems and effective social work intervention in India.

Social work, as a professional discipline, is fundamentally concerned with the welfare and protection of vulnerable populations, particularly children. Social workers play a critical role in identifying cases of abuse, providing counselling and psychosocial support, restoring family functioning, ensuring legal protection, and advocating for child-friendly policies and services (UNICEF, 2021). Their role is not limited to intervention after abuse but extends to

prevention, awareness generation, and strengthening child protection systems. Thus, social work plays a vital role in addressing child abuse and promoting the overall well-being and rights of children in India.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the concept and different forms of child abuse in India.
2. To examine the major causes and consequences of child abuse.
3. To study the legal framework available for child protection in India.
4. To analyze the role of social workers in prevention, protection, and rehabilitation of abused children.
5. To identify the challenges faced by social workers in child protection services.

Methodology

This study is based on review article methodology using secondary sources of data. Information was collected from books, research journals, government reports, policy documents, WHO reports, UNICEF publications, Ministry of Women and Child Development reports, and previous research studies related to child abuse and child protection in India. Relevant laws such as the POCSO Act, Juvenile Justice Act, Child Labour Act, and constitutional provisions were also reviewed. The collected information was analysed systematically to understand the nature of child abuse and the professional role of social workers in addressing it.

Types of Child Abuse

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse includes hitting, beating, burning, shaking, poisoning, kicking, or any act that causes bodily injury to a child. It may result in visible injuries such as bruises, fractures, burns, or even permanent disability. In many Indian households and schools, corporal punishment is often normalized as a form of discipline, which increases children's vulnerability to physical abuse (Seth, 2015). Such practices violate children's rights and negatively affect their physical and emotional well-being (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020).

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse includes rape, molestation, inappropriate touching, exposure to pornography, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and forced sexual activity involving a child. It may occur within families, schools, institutions, workplaces, or by strangers. Child sexual abuse is one of the most underreported forms of abuse due to fear, shame, family pressure, and social stigma (Choudhry et al., 2018). The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 was introduced to provide legal protection and child-friendly judicial procedures (Government of India, 2012).

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse includes humiliation, verbal insults, rejection, threats, neglect of affection, constant criticism, intimidation, and psychological manipulation. It damages the child's self-esteem, emotional security, and mental health. Emotional abuse is often hidden and culturally normalized because it is commonly mistaken for strict parenting or discipline (Waseem, 2025). Studies show that emotional abuse remains one of the most under-recognized forms of child maltreatment in India (Bala & Garg, 2021).

Neglect

Neglect refers to the failure of parents or caregivers to provide basic necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, education, healthcare, emotional support, supervision, and protection. It is common among children living in poverty, unstable family conditions, or socially marginalized communities (UNICEF, 2021). Neglect can severely affect a child's physical growth, emotional stability, and social development (WHO, 2020).

Child Labour and Exploitation

Children forced into labour, domestic work, begging, bonded labour, trafficking, and other exploitative conditions are also victims of abuse. Child labour deprives children of education, health, dignity, and safe childhood experiences. Poverty, migration, family debt, and weak law enforcement often contribute to child exploitation (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007). Such exploitation is a major violation of child rights and requires urgent intervention through legal and social welfare systems.

Causes of Child Abuse in India

Child abuse in India is influenced by several socio-economic, cultural, and family-related factors that create unsafe environments for children. Poverty and unemployment are among the major causes, as financial stress often leads to neglect, child labour, trafficking, and domestic violence within families (Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007). Illiteracy and lack of parenting knowledge also contribute significantly, as many parents and caregivers are unaware of healthy child-rearing practices and may consider harsh punishment as a normal disciplinary method (Seth, 2015). Alcoholism and substance abuse further increase the risk of violence against children, especially in households where addiction leads to aggression, neglect, and family instability (Bala & Garg, 2021).

Social and cultural factors such as gender discrimination, patriarchal family structures, child marriage, and the social acceptance of corporal punishment also play an important role in child abuse. Girls are often more vulnerable to neglect, sexual abuse, trafficking, and early marriage due to gender bias and unequal treatment (UNICEF, 2021). Weak child protection systems, poor reporting mechanisms, and lack of awareness about child rights make it difficult for victims to seek help or justice. In addition, fear of social stigma, family honour, and community pressure often prevent children and families from reporting abuse, allowing violence to continue silently (Choudhry et al., 2018). These combined factors create conditions where child abuse remains hidden, normalized, and underreported in Indian society.

Consequences of Child Abuse

Child abuse affects every dimension of a child's life and has both immediate and long-term consequences on physical health and psychological well-being. Physically abused children may suffer injuries such as bruises, burns, fractures, disability, and in severe cases, permanent physical damage or death (Seth, 2015). Neglected children often experience malnutrition, poor hygiene, delayed growth, chronic illness, and lack of access to proper healthcare (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Sexual abuse may also result in reproductive health problems, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies, particularly among adolescent girls (Choudhry et al., 2018). Developmental delays in speech, learning, and physical growth are also common among abused and neglected children.

Psychologically, child abuse causes deep emotional trauma that may continue throughout life. Children often experience depression, anxiety, fear, insecurity, low self-esteem, trust issues, and feelings of shame or guilt (Bala & Garg, 2021). In severe cases, abuse may lead to suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Waseem, 2025). Socially, abused children may show poor academic performance, school dropout, social isolation, delinquent behaviour, substance abuse, and difficulty in forming healthy relationships later in life (UNICEF, 2021). Trauma-informed studies also highlight that childhood abuse significantly affects adulthood adjustment and may contribute to an intergenerational cycle of violence, where victims may later become perpetrators or continue patterns of abuse within families (Sage Journals, 2023).

Legal Framework for Child Protection in India

India has established several constitutional provisions, laws, and welfare schemes to protect children from abuse, exploitation, neglect, and violence. The Constitution of India provides a strong foundation for child rights through Articles 15, 21, 24, 39, and 45. Article 15 prohibits discrimination, Article 21 ensures the right to life and dignity, Article 24 prohibits child labour in hazardous occupations, and Article 39 directs the State to protect children from abuse and exploitation (Government of India, 1950). Article 45 emphasizes early childhood care and education, highlighting the importance of child welfare as a national responsibility.

Specific laws such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 provide legal mechanisms for child protection and rehabilitation. The POCSO Act offers child-friendly procedures for reporting, investigation, and trial of sexual offences against children (Government of India, 2012). The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 prohibits employment of children in hazardous occupations, while the Right to Education Act, 2009 ensures free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 years. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 protects children, especially girls, from early marriage and its harmful consequences. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 also supports children exposed to domestic abuse. In addition, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) strengthens institutional support through Child Welfare Committees, shelter homes, and rehabilitation services (UNICEF, 2021). These laws aim to ensure safety, justice, protection, and holistic development for children in India.

.Role of Social Worker in Child Abuse

Social workers play a central role in child protection through direct service, counselling, advocacy, rehabilitation, and policy implementation. One of their primary responsibilities is the identification and early detection of abuse through observation, interviews, school visits, hospital referrals, home visits, and community contact. Early identification helps prevent further harm and ensures timely intervention (UNICEF, 2021). Abused children often suffer from fear, guilt, anxiety, and emotional trauma; therefore, social workers provide counselling, crisis intervention, and trauma-informed care to restore emotional stability and self-confidence (Waseem, 2025). They also work closely with parents and caregivers to improve parenting practices, reduce domestic violence, manage family conflict, and strengthen family support systems (Seth, 2015).

Social workers also play an important role in case management by coordinating with hospitals, schools, police, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), Juvenile Justice Boards, shelter homes, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for comprehensive care and follow-up. They assist children in accessing justice by reporting abuse, supporting legal procedures, preparing social investigation reports, and ensuring child-friendly legal processes under laws such as the POCSO Act (Government of India, 2012). Rehabilitation and reintegration are equally important, as rescued children need education, shelter, healthcare, vocational training, and social support for long-term recovery. In addition, social workers conduct awareness programmes in schools, villages, slums, and communities regarding child rights, safe touch, good parenting, and abuse prevention. They also advocate for stronger child protection policies, better implementation of laws, and improved institutional accountability to ensure a safer environment for children (Bala & Garg, 2021).

.Challenges Faced by Social Workers

Despite their important role in child protection, social workers face several challenges that reduce the effectiveness of intervention and rehabilitation services. One major problem is the lack of trained child protection professionals and specialized knowledge in handling cases of child abuse, trauma counselling, and legal procedures (UNICEF, 2021). Poor coordination among institutions such as schools, hospitals, police, Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), Juvenile Justice Boards, and NGOs often delays timely intervention and weakens support systems. Inadequate funding, shortage of shelter homes, limited rehabilitation services, and poor infrastructure further restrict the ability of social workers to provide comprehensive care to abused children (Seth, 2015).

Social stigma and family resistance also create serious barriers in reporting and addressing abuse. Many families avoid disclosing abuse due to fear of shame, social judgment, and damage to family honour, especially in cases of sexual abuse (Choudhry et al., 2018). Underreporting remains one of the biggest challenges because children are often afraid to speak, and caregivers may ignore or hide the problem. Delays in legal procedures and lack of child-friendly justice systems can discourage victims from seeking help. In addition, social workers often experience emotional stress and psychological burden while handling traumatic cases involving violence, neglect, and exploitation. These challenges highlight the need for stronger institutional support, better professional training, and improved child protection systems in India (Bala & Garg, 2021).

Conclusion

Child abuse in India remains one of the most serious social welfare and human rights issues affecting the healthy growth and development of children. It exists in various forms such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, child labour, trafficking, and exploitation, often hidden within families, schools, workplaces, and communities. Factors like poverty, illiteracy, domestic violence, alcoholism, gender discrimination, weak child protection systems, and social stigma contribute significantly to the continuation of abuse (Seth, 2015; UNICEF, 2021). The consequences are severe and long-lasting, affecting children physically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially, and often extending into adulthood (WHO, 2020).

Social work plays a vital role in addressing child abuse through prevention, identification, counselling, legal support, rehabilitation, family intervention, and policy advocacy. Social workers act as protectors, counsellors, coordinators, and advocates for child rights, ensuring safety and justice for vulnerable children (Bala & Garg, 2021). However, challenges such as underreporting, lack of trained professionals, poor institutional coordination, and inadequate rehabilitation services limit effective intervention. Therefore, stronger child protection systems, better implementation of laws, professional social work services, and collective responsibility from families, communities, and institutions are essential to create a safe and child-friendly society in India.

Policy Suggestions

To prevent child abuse and strengthen child protection in India, effective policy measures are essential at both institutional and community levels. The government should strengthen child protection systems by improving the functioning of Child Welfare Committees (CWCs), Juvenile Justice Boards, shelter homes, rehabilitation centres, and child helpline services such as CHILDLINE 1098. Strict implementation of laws such as the POCSO Act, Juvenile Justice Act, Child Labour Act, and Prohibition of Child Marriage Act is necessary to ensure timely justice and child-friendly legal procedures. Specialized training should be provided to social workers, teachers, police, and healthcare professionals for early identification, counselling, trauma care, and rehabilitation of abused children. Schools should promote child protection education through awareness programmes on child rights, safe and unsafe touch, and reporting mechanisms. Family strengthening programmes and parenting education should be encouraged to reduce domestic violence, corporal punishment, and neglect. Community awareness campaigns are also important to reduce stigma and improve reporting of abuse. Strong coordination among schools, hospitals, police, NGOs, and legal institutions is necessary for effective intervention. Social workers should be actively involved in policy planning and implementation to ensure a child-centered and rights-based approach to child protection.

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