

Research Paper

A Socio-Psychological Analysis of Crimes Against Adolescent Girls in India: Causes and Consequences

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent girls in India remain a particularly vulnerable group, shaped by the intersecting influences of age, gender, and socio-cultural context. Many of them face a wide range of violence in their everyday lives, from child-specific abuses such as corporal punishment and sexual exploitation to more adult forms of violence, including harassment, assault, and even intimate partner abuse. These risks often become more severe in situations marked by social instability or during times of economic and societal stress. Although legal protections are in place, the deeper socio-psychological realities of these experiences have not received adequate scholarly attention. This study seeks to understand both the causes and consequences of such violence through a socio-psychological lens. Using a descriptive and analytical approach, it draws on secondary sources, including government reports, crime statistics, legal documents, and existing academic literature. The findings point toward the powerful role of socio-economic inequalities and entrenched patriarchal norms in shaping girls' vulnerability to violence, often leaving lasting psychological effects. These psychological experiences do not remain confined to the individual; they extend into broader social outcomes. Many girls face exclusions, interruptions in their education, and reduced opportunities to participate fully in public life. Considering these findings, the study calls for more holistic and coordinated interventions, ones that go beyond legal measures to include psychological support, stronger family involvement, and community-based efforts. Addressing both the root causes and the long-term impact of violence is essential to creating safer and more supportive environments for adolescent girls in India.

Keywords: *Adolescent Girls, Gender-Based Violence, Psychological Trauma, Social Consequences, Child Protection Laws*

Violence against adolescent girls constitutes a serious social and human rights concern in India, rooted in persistent inequalities related to gender, age, and power relations within society. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and protection, adolescent girls continue to face disproportionate exposure to various forms of violence. According to the Crime in India 2023 report published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a substantial proportion of crimes against children are committed against girls below the age of eighteen, underscoring their heightened vulnerability.

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Adolescent girls experience multiple and overlapping forms of violence across domestic, institutional, and public spaces. These include child-specific abuses such as corporal punishment, sexual abuse within families, neglect, and mistreatment in educational institutions, as well as adult-type violence such as sexual harassment, assault, and intimate partner violence. The coexistence of these forms of violence intensifies psychological distress and exacerbates social challenges.

The Indian state has enacted several legal frameworks aimed at safeguarding children and adolescents. Prominent among these are the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023. While these legal provisions seek to prevent violence, ensure accountability, and facilitate rehabilitation, most official reports and studies primarily focus on the incidence and classification of crimes. Consequently, limited scholarly attention has been given to the socio-psychological consequences of such violence, highlighting the need for a more integrated analytical approach beyond legal and statistical perspectives.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a socio-psychological perspective to examine crimes against adolescent girls in India. By analyzing both the social determinants and psychological outcomes of violence, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue and to inform effective preventive, protective, and rehabilitative strategies for ensuring the safety, dignity, and overall well-being of adolescent girls.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Violence Against Adolescent Girls: Nature and Patterns

Scholarly literature consistently recognizes violence against adolescent girls as a pervasive and multidimensional social problem rooted in unequal power relations based on age, gender, and social status. Studies indicate that adolescent girls are exposed to a continuum of violence that includes both child-specific and adult-type forms across domestic, institutional, and public spaces. Child-specific violence comprises corporal punishment, sexual abuse within families, neglect, and mistreatment in educational institutions, while adult-type violence includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence. Importantly, research highlights that these forms of violence frequently overlap rather than occur independently, intensifying vulnerability during adolescence (Chakraborty & Roy, 2019; UNICEF, 2021).

However, existing studies largely focus on identifying and classifying forms of violence, with limited attention to how overlapping experiences of abuse shape the combined social and psychological realities of adolescent girls.

Socio-Cultural and Economic Determinants of Violence

A substantial body of literature emphasizes the role of socio-cultural and economic structures in increasing adolescent girls' vulnerability to violence. Patriarchal norms, gender discrimination, and the social normalization of silence around abuse are identified as key structural factors that legitimize violence and discourage disclosure. These dynamics are particularly evident in rural and marginalized communities, where strict regulation of female behavior persists. Additionally, poverty, migration, economic insecurity, and social instability weaken familial and institutional support mechanisms, further exposing adolescent girls to violence (Sharma, 2020; UNICEF, 2021).

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While these studies effectively document structural determinants, they rarely explore how such social conditions interact with psychological vulnerability during adolescence, resulting in a fragmented understanding of violence as a socio-psychological process.

Psychological Impact of Violence During Adolescence

Research on psychological consequences underscores adolescence as a critical developmental stage marked by emotional sensitivity, identity formation, and cognitive growth. Exposure to violence during this period has been strongly associated with fear, anxiety, depression, trauma-related stress, and social withdrawal. Studies suggest that repeated victimization or exposure to violence across multiple settings, such as the home, school, and community significantly, amplifies psychological harm and undermines coping capacities (Sharma, 2020).

Nevertheless, much of the literature examines psychological outcomes in isolation, with insufficient attention to the social environments that shape trauma, resilience, and long-term adjustment among adolescent girls.

Social Consequences and Processes of Exclusion

Beyond psychological harm, violence against adolescent girls has far-reaching social consequences that influence life trajectories. Research indicates that victimization often leads to educational discontinuity, strained family relationships, peer isolation, and reduced participation in community and public life. These outcomes reinforce cycles of marginalization by limiting access to education, skill development, and social mobility (Chakraborty & Roy, 2019).

However, existing studies seldom integrate social exclusion with psychological trauma, thereby overlooking how mental distress and social marginalization mutually reinforce each other during adolescence.

Legal and Institutional Responses

Several studies examine legal and institutional frameworks designed to protect adolescent girls from violence in India. Laws such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act (2015), and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023) reflect significant state efforts toward prevention, accountability, and rehabilitation of victims. Despite these provisions, research highlights persistent gaps in implementation, awareness, and accessibility (Kumar, 2021).

Most legal analyses, however, focus on procedural outcomes such as reporting rates and convictions, paying limited attention to the psychological recovery and social reintegration of adolescent victims.

Research Gap:

Existing literature shows that violence against adolescent girls in India is influenced by socio-cultural, economic, psychological, and institutional factors, but these are often studied separately. There is a clear gap in integrating these dimensions within a unified socio-psychological framework. This study addresses this gap by adopting an integrated socio-psychological approach to better inform preventive, protective, and rehabilitative interventions.

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Objective of Study

- To identify the major types of crimes and violence against adolescent girls in India.
- To examine the socio-economic and cultural causes of such crimes.
- To analyze the psychological consequences of violence.
- To assess the social consequences of violence.
- To evaluate legal and institutional responses for the protection of adolescent girls.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the nature, causes, and socio-psychological consequences of crimes against adolescent girls in India. It is based entirely on secondary data, including government reports, NCRB statistics, research articles, books, and legal documents such as the POCSO Act (2012), Juvenile Justice Act (2015), and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023). Data are systematically reviewed and thematically analyzed to identify patterns and link social factors like gender inequality and poverty with psychological and social outcomes. Findings are further synthesized to develop a holistic understanding and suggest preventive and rehabilitative measures.

Scope of the Study: The study focuses on crimes against adolescent girls (below 18 years) in India, emphasizing socio-psychological causes and consequences. It is limited to secondary data and excludes primary fieldwork.

Limitations of the Study: The study relies on secondary data, which may not capture unreported cases of violence. Its findings depend on the availability and reliability of existing sources.

FINDINGS / ANALYSIS

Major Types of Crimes and Violence against Adolescent Girls in India:

- **Sexual Violence and Abuse:** Sexual violence is the most prevalent crime against adolescent girls in India. NCRB (2023) reported 67,694 cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, indicating the scale of the problem. In a majority of cases, perpetrators were known to the victims, including relatives and acquaintances. Such abuse during adolescence leads to severe psychological consequences, including trauma, anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and educational disruption.
- **Trafficking, Kidnapping, and Forced Marriage:** Kidnapping and abduction accounted for 79,884 cases in 2023, with adolescent girls frequently trafficked for forced marriage and sexual exploitation (NCRB, 2023). These crimes result in long-term psychological trauma, interrupted education, and enduring social marginalization, especially among economically vulnerable groups.
- **Severe Physical and Violent Attacks:** Adolescent girls are also exposed to extreme forms of physical violence, including acid attacks and honour-based violence. In 2023, 113 acid attack cases were reported against women, including adolescents. Such violence causes permanent physical disfigurement, psychological trauma, social stigma, and long-term exclusion from social life.
- **Domestic and Family Violence:** Domestic violence represents a significant but often overlooked form of victimization for adolescent girls, particularly child brides and those living in abusive households. NCRB (2023) recorded 1,33,676 cases of cruelty by husband or relatives. Although these cases largely involve adult women,

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the normalization of violence within households directly affects adolescent girls' emotional security and psychological development.

- **Institutional Violence and Harmful Social Practices:** Bullying, sexual harassment, and discrimination within schools and institutions constitute widespread yet underreported violence against adolescent girls. These experiences frequently lead to fear, psychological distress, reduced educational participation, and school dropout. Harmful social practices such as child marriage and dowry-related harassment further reinforce gender-based discrimination and undermine girls' safety and empowerment.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Causes of Crimes Against Adolescent Girls in India:

- **Gender Inequality and Patriarchal Norms:** Deep-rooted patriarchal values and gender inequality place adolescent girls in subordinate social positions, restricting autonomy and increasing vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and abuse. These norms also contribute to under-reporting of crimes and weak social support mechanisms for victims.
- **Harmful Socio-Cultural Practices:** Practices such as child marriage, dowry-related expectations, and honour-based restrictions continue to endanger adolescent girls, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. These traditions normalize control over girls' lives and are closely linked to forced marriage, abduction, and sexual exploitation.
- **Socio-Economic Disadvantage and Poverty:** Poverty and marginalization significantly increase girls' exposure to crime by limiting educational access, increasing economic dependency, and placing them in unsafe environments. NCRB (2023) data indicate higher incidence of crimes in economically vulnerable regions, where trafficking and exploitation are more prevalent.
- **Educational Inequality and Lack of Awareness:** Limited access to quality education and low awareness of legal rights weaken adolescent girls' capacity to recognize, resist, and report abuse. Educational deprivation reduces empowerment and restricts access to institutional support systems.
- **Domestic and Community Violence:** Violence within families and communities, including abuse, neglect, and cruelty by relatives, creates a high-risk environment for adolescent girls. The normalization of violence as a private or disciplinary matter further perpetuates silence and non-intervention.

Psychological Consequences of Crimes and Violence Against Adolescent Girls:

- **Anxiety, Fear, and Hyper-Vigilance:** Adolescent girls exposed to violence commonly experience chronic anxiety, persistent fear, and hyper-vigilant behaviour. Fear of repeated victimization restricts mobility, reduces participation in social life, and negatively affects regular school attendance, reflecting enduring perceptions of insecurity within domestic, institutional, and public spaces.
- **Depression and Emotional Distress:** Sustained exposure to abuse significantly increases the risk of depression, emotional numbness, and feelings of hopelessness. Studies highlight that affected girls often exhibit social withdrawal, reduced motivation, and declining interest in education and personal development (UNICEF, 2021).
- **Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms:** Victims frequently display trauma-related symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance behaviour, and emotional dysregulation. Such trauma impairs concentration, memory, and learning

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ability, thereby adversely affecting academic performance and everyday functioning (Chakraborty & Roy, 2019).

- **Low Self-Esteem and Identity Challenges:** Experiences of violence often lead adolescent girls to internalize blame and social stigma, resulting in low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and difficulties in asserting autonomy. As adolescence is a crucial stage for identity formation, sustained victimization disrupts self-confidence, peer relationships, and psychosocial development.
- **Behavioral and Coping Difficulties:** In the absence of adequate psychosocial support, many adolescent girls adopt maladaptive coping strategies such as withdrawal, aggression, self-harm, or substance use. These behaviours reflect psychological attempts to manage trauma within restrictive social and familial environments.
- **Risk of Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviour:** Adolescent girls exposed to severe or chronic violence face an elevated risk of suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviour. Although age-specific data remain limited, NCRB (2023) reports indicate a rising incidence of suicide among young women, reflecting the cumulative psychological burden of abuse, stigma, emotional isolation, and inadequate mental-health support.

Social Consequences of Crimes and Violence Against Adolescent Girls:

Violence during adolescence, a critical stage for socialization, education, and identity formation, often disrupts schooling, weakens family and peer relationships, and restricts participation in public life. According to the *Crime in India 2023* report (NCRB), 1,77,335 cases of crimes against children were registered in 2023, with adolescent girls forming a substantial proportion of victims across sexual offences, domestic violence, harassment, and cybercrimes, reflecting persistent social insecurity.

- **Educational Disruption and School Dropout:** Violence significantly affects school attendance, academic performance, and educational continuity. Fear of harassment, social stigma, and unsafe school environments often lead to irregular attendance and early dropout. In many cases, families withdraw girls from school to protect perceived safety or family reputation. Parliamentary data indicate that approximately 65.7 lakh children dropped out of school in the last five years, of whom nearly 29.8 lakh were adolescent girls. Educational disruption reduces future employment opportunities and reinforces long-term social and economic disadvantage.
- **Impact on Family Relationships:** Crimes and violence alter family dynamics, often resulting in emotional distance, increased control, or blame directed at the girl. Families may restrict movement and social interactions to ensure safety, but these measures can inadvertently limit emotional support and personal freedom. Out of 40,434 cases of penetrative sexual assault under the POCSO Act in 2023, offenders were known to the victims in 39,076 cases, including family members, friends, neighbours, or acquaintances (NCRB, 2023). This demonstrates how violence often occurs within familiar environments, directly affecting family relationships.
- **Social Stigma and Exclusion:** Victims commonly face stigma, social judgment, and community silence, which discourage reporting and increase isolation. Fear of shame often results in withdrawal from school activities, friendships, and community life. Peer relationships suffer as adolescent girls distance themselves due to emotional distress or fear of social labeling. This social exclusion limits healthy interaction, reduces confidence, and disrupts normal social development during adolescence.

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- **Pressure for Early or Forced Marriage:** In some regions, families respond to violence by arranging early or forced marriages, believing it will protect the girl or restore family honor. Such marriages often end education, restrict personal freedom, and limit future opportunities. According to NFHS-5 (2019–21), 23.3% of women aged 20–24 years were married before age 18, indicating that child marriage remains a critical social concern. Fear of stigma, violence, and concern for social status frequently drive these decisions, reinforcing gender inequality.
- **Restriction of Mobility and Public Participation:** Fear of violence leads families to restrict girls' movement, limiting visits to school, markets, or public spaces. According to NFHS-5, only 41% of women in India can move freely to common public places. These restrictions reduce confidence, independence, and social development, further limiting public participation and reinforcing societal gender norms.

The social consequences of crimes and violence against adolescent girls are extensive and enduring. Without sustained family counseling, community sensitization, educational support, and effective institutional protection, these social impacts persist into adulthood, limiting adolescent girls' full participation in society.

Preventive and Rehabilitative Measures:

In India, crimes and violence against adolescent girls require a comprehensive response that combines prevention with rehabilitation. Effective measures must not only ensure immediate safety but also support long-term psychological recovery, social reintegration, and educational continuity. These measures are critical for addressing fear, trauma, social withdrawal, and loss of institutional trust among adolescent girls.

- **Preventive Measures:**
 - **Strong Legal Framework and Enforcement:** Laws such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 provide a strong legal framework against sexual abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and child marriage. Child-friendly procedures and effective enforcement are crucial to improving reporting and reducing repeat victimization.
 - **Safe and Supportive Educational Environment:** Schools serve as important preventive spaces by offering safety, stability, and awareness. Initiatives like *Samagra Shiksha* promote school safety, retention of girls, and awareness of rights, which help reduce vulnerability to violence and dropout after victimization.
 - **Community Awareness and Social Sensitization:** Social stigma, victim-blaming, and silence often worsen the impact of violence. Programs such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* aim to challenge harmful gender norms, encourage community responsibility, and promote early reporting of crimes against adolescent girls.
- **Rehabilitative Measures:**
 - **Psychological Counseling and Health Support:** Violence has serious emotional and mental health consequences for adolescent girls. One Stop Centres under the Mission Shakti umbrella scheme provide counseling, medical care, legal assistance, and temporary shelter, supporting recovery and reducing long-term trauma.

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- **Family Counseling and Social Reintegration:** Family-based interventions help counter victim-blaming and social isolation. Counseling supports reintegration into family, school, and community life, which is essential for restoring confidence and social functioning.
- **Educational Rehabilitation and Skill Development:** Rehabilitation includes re-enrollment in schools, bridge courses, and skill training. Schemes such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) support continued education, especially for girls from vulnerable and marginalized backgrounds.
- **Legal Aid and Access to Justice:** Free legal aid and child-sensitive judicial processes reduce secondary victimization and strengthen trust in institutions. The child protection laws ensure care, protection, and rehabilitation for adolescent girls affected by violence.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the complex and interconnected nature of crimes against adolescent girls in India, emphasizing the interplay between socio-cultural factors, psychological trauma, and social consequences. Consistent with prior research (Chakraborty & Roy, 2019; Sharma, 2020; UNICEF, 2021), the findings demonstrate that gender inequality, patriarchal norms, poverty, harmful cultural practices, and limited access to education significantly increase girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse, domestic violence, trafficking, harassment, and emerging forms of exploitation.

Importantly, this study addresses a key gap in existing literature by integrating structural determinants of violence with their psychological and social outcomes within a unified socio-psychological framework. The findings reveal that adolescence, as a critical stage of identity formation and emotional development, is particularly sensitive to experiences of violence, which often result in anxiety, depression, trauma, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal. These psychological effects further translate into broader social consequences, including disrupted education, strained family relationships, restricted mobility, and early or forced marriage, thereby reinforcing cycles of marginalization.

The study also underscores that a significant proportion of violence occurs within familiar environments—homes, schools, and communities—where perpetrators are often known to victims. This reflects not only a breakdown of trust but also the normalization of violence within social structures. Despite the existence of legal frameworks such as the POCSO Act (2012), the Juvenile Justice Act (2015), and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023), their effectiveness remains constrained by socio-cultural barriers, underreporting, and gaps in implementation. These findings highlight the structural nature of violence, where institutional responses alone are insufficient without addressing underlying social norms.

From a socio-psychological perspective, the study demonstrates that psychological trauma and social exclusion are mutually reinforcing processes. Fear, stigma, and low self-esteem restrict social participation, while limited mobility, disrupted education, and social isolation further intensify psychological distress. This cyclical relationship reflects broader theoretical insights into structural inequality and trauma, suggesting that violence must be understood as both a social and psychological phenomenon rather than solely a legal issue.

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However, it is important to note that the study is based on secondary data, and therefore, the findings are dependent on the availability and reliability of existing sources. This limitation highlights the need for future research based on primary data and field-based studies to capture underreported experiences and provide deeper contextual insights.

Overall, the findings suggest that addressing crimes against adolescent girls requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that goes beyond legal enforcement to include mental health support, family and community engagement, and educational interventions. Coordinated efforts across social, psychological, and institutional domains are essential for breaking the cycle of violence and ensuring the long-term safety, dignity, and well-being of adolescent girls in India.

CONCLUSION

Violence against adolescent girls in India stems from gender inequality, patriarchal norms, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. Crimes including sexual abuse, domestic violence, bullying, trafficking, and harmful practices cause severe psychological effects such as fear, anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, which often lead to school dropout, family strain, peer isolation, restricted mobility, stigma, and early or forced marriage.

These challenges are interconnected: social and economic factors increase vulnerability, affect mental health, and limit social participation. Addressing them requires integrated measures, including legal enforcement, counseling, family and community support, safe schooling, digital awareness, and educational rehabilitation. Programs like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao and One Stop Centres show the importance of combining prevention, and rehabilitation. Future research should explore underreported cases and evaluate interventions to enhance the safety, well-being, and empowerment of adolescent girls.

Thus, ensuring the protection of adolescent girls is not only a legal necessity but also a social and moral imperative for inclusive development.

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Conflict of Interest

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