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Revisiting the Impact of the POCSO Act on Adolescent Relationship Psychology: A Socio-Legal and Psychological Analysis of Consensual Cases in Haryana

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Abstract: The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, was promulgated to protect children against sexual exploitation and abuse, with stringent legal provisions and child-friendly judicial mechanisms. The Act is progressive in its intention, but the number of cases registered under the Act is increasing in consensual romantic relationships of adolescents. These cases have raised serious concerns about the criminalization of adolescent emotional development, gendered legal interpretations, psychological trauma, and long-term relational consequences among juveniles. The present study is an attempt to explore the psychological, emotional, and socio-legal impact of the POCSO Act on adolescents involved in consensual relationships in Haryana. The study takes a mixed-method research design, including a case study of 50 POCSO cases registered during 2024–2025, and semi-structured interviews with juveniles, families, mental health professionals, and legal authorities. The findings indicate that a substantial number of cases are due to parental objection, social stigma, caste-based restrictions, and family honor issues rather than coercive abuse. The research shows that adolescents face substantial emotional consequences, such as anxiety, depression, social isolation, disrupted attachment patterns, lack of trust in intimate relationships, and conflicts of identity. This back-and-forth did not prevent the disproportionate criminalization of male juveniles. The paper calls for contextual legal interpretation, holistic sex education, judicial sensitization, rehabilitative interventions, and policy reform to balance between the protection of the child and the psychological realities of adolescents.
Keywords: POCSO Act, adolescents, juvenile justice, relationship psychology, consensual relationships, mental health, socio-legal conflict, Haryana.

Introduction - The Government of India has enacted the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO Act, 2012) to provide stringent legal protection of children from sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and sexual harassment. The Act envisaged child-sensitive legal processes and stringent penalties to deal with offences against children. The legislation has evolved over the years as a vital legal instrument in strengthening the child protection mechanisms in the Indian criminal justice system.

But good intentions notwithstanding, there is growing concern regarding how the POCSO Act is being interpreted and implemented in cases of consensual adolescent relationships. In many cases, the romantic relationships of adolescents between 16 and 18 years of age are developmentally and emotionally mutual. But the stringent legal framework on age and consent criminalises these relationships under the POCSO provisions.

The number of cases under the Act involving consensual relationships that are opposed by parents or the community is much higher in the case of India as a whole and more so in states like Haryana. Such objections are often based on caste, religion, family honour, social reputation or traditional expectations. This brings consensual teenage relationships into the legal system with potential long-term psychological and social consequences.

The present study is an attempt to study the psychology of juveniles affected by POCSO proceedings in relation to their relationship. Further, it aims to examine the consequences of criminalization on emotional attachment, trust, mental health, identity formation and future interpersonal relationships for adolescents.

Theoretical Framework: The present study is underpinned by developmental psychology, attachment theory and socio-legal perspectives. Developmental psychology indicates that adolescence is an important time for identity exploration, emotional dependence, romantic interest, and the alteration of interpersonal attachment patterns. Adolescent romantic experiences are important for emotional development and

psychosocial adjustment.

In attachment theory, emotional betrayal, abandonment, social rejection and institutional punishment in adolescence may have long-term adverse effects on future relationship functioning and attachment security. The process of criminalization and social humiliation can generate mistrust, anxiety and emotional withdrawal and relational instability in adolescents.

From a socio legal perspective, laws are influenced not only by legal principles, but also by cultural morality, patriarchal norms and social control mechanisms. The use of the POCSO Act in consensual cases is often a manifestation of the social anxieties around sexuality during the adolescent years rather than an objective assessment of exploitation or abuse.

Review of Literature

Studies have been done nationally and internationally about the relationship between adolescent development, consent, sexuality, and legal intervention. Literature suggests that a large number of cases registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act in India are not cases of exploitative sexual abuse but consensual romantic relations between adolescents.

Research done by the Enfold Proactive Health Trust, in collaboration with UNICEF India, found that many of the prosecutions under POCSO across several Indian states were consensual relationships between adolescents. In their report, they noted that blanket criminalization of consensual adolescent intimacy within the POCSO framework could have unintended psychosocial and legal consequences for young people (Enfold & UNICEF India, 2021).

Indian judicial observations, too, have been sensitized towards the complex nature of adolescent relationships under POCSO. In Sabari v. Inspector of Police (2019), the Madras High Court noted that consensual love affairs between adolescents are frequently wrongly criminalized under the Act with adverse psychological and social consequences on both parties. Courts have often expressed concern about the abuse of statutory rape laws in cases where there is no coercion or exploitation.

The developmental psychology literature often emphasizes adolescence as a sensitive period for emotional, social, sexual, and identity exploration. The psychosocial developmental theory of Erik Erikson states that adolescence is the stage of "Identity vs Role Confusion". People at this stage explore emotional intimacy, interpersonal relationships, and self-identity. Furthermore, neuroscientific and psychological research has found that romantic experiences during adolescence are important for emotional regulation, social competence, and identity development (Steinberg, 2014; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Criminalization of consensual relationships at this developmental stage may therefore be detrimental to healthy psychosocial development and may contribute to emotional distress.

Several socio-legal studies reported the gendered application of POCSO. The study found that male adolescents are often labeled as offenders, whether the relationship is consensual or not, and female adolescents are always labeled as victims, regardless of the relationship context. Such binary legal readings have been criticized by scholars for overlooking the emotional reciprocity, agency, and developmental realities of adolescent relationships (Agnes, 2013; Kumar, 2020). This tends to reinforce patriarchal assumptions about female sexuality and male culpability.

Studies in trauma psychology and juvenile justice also show that the mental health effects of the legal prosecution, detention, social stigma, and long judicial processes can be dire for adolescents. Juvenile justice involvement has also been linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety disorders, shame, emotional dysregulation, social withdrawal, and long-term problems with trust in interpersonal relationships (Abram et al., 2003; Ford et al., 2012). Adolescents involved with the criminal justice system may experience disruptions in their education, family functioning, and peer relationships with negative consequences for long-term psychosocial adjustment.

Need and Significance of the Study: The present study is important because it addresses a new but understudied domain in the nexus of psychology, law, and adolescent development. There is a lot of legal discussion about the POCSO Act, but little research on how the criminalization affects the psychology and relationships of adolescents in consensual relationships.

The present study adds to the knowledge about the effects of legal interventions on emotional development, attachment security, self-esteem, and interpersonal trust of juveniles. The study is particularly relevant in the context of Haryana, where traditional social structures, patriarchal norms, and concern about family honour have a strong influence on adolescent autonomy and romantic choices. The findings can help inform policymakers, psychologists, the courts, teachers and those working in the juvenile justice system to develop more balanced and rehabilitative strategies.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the psychological impact of POCSO Act on consensual relationship among adolescents.
2. To understand how criminalization affects minors' feelings and relationships.
3. To study the effect of social stigma, cultural norms and parental pressure in the institution of legal proceedings.
4. To study gender differentials in implementation of POCSO Act.
5. To suggest reforms that seek to balance child protection and developmental rights of adolescents.

Research Methodology: The present study adopted a mixed-methods research design with qualitative and descriptive approaches. We selected 50 cases registered

under the POCSO Act in Haryana in 2024-2025 where there was a consensual relation between the adolescents.

Data collection was:

1. Examination of case files and procedural documents.
2. Semi-structured interviews with detained youth.
3. Interviews with parents, attorneys, counselors, psychologists.
4. Observational perspectives from juvenile justice proceedings.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. A thematic analysis was performed to identify recurrent emotional, psychological, relational, and social themes.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent were maintained during the study. Participants' personal identities were kept confidential to ensure privacy and ethical compliance.

Findings and Discussion: The findings showed that about 30-35% of recent POCSO cases in Haryana were consensual romantic relationships between adolescents between the age group of 16-18 years. Most of the complaints were about parental disapproval of relationships, inter-caste associations, elopement or fear of social dishonour.

One of the most important findings was the breaking down of emotional trust in adolescents. The male juveniles often reported feelings of betrayal when their partners recanted previous statements under family pressure. Often these experiences resulted in emotional withdrawal, resentment and distrust of intimate relationships.

Another key finding was the severe psychological distress of detained juveniles. A high number of adolescents reported anxiety, hopelessness, insomnia, panic reactions, social withdrawal, and tendencies towards depression. The emotional trauma was compounded by prolonged detention and legal uncertainty.

While legally declared victims, the adolescent girls also experienced mental conflict and social alienation. Several participants reported feeling guilty about their partners' incarceration. Many were restricted in movement, stopped from attending school, and monitored by their families following legal procedures.

The study also found a major gender imbalance in legal interpretation. Mutual emotional involvement was not taken into account and male adolescents were predominantly seen as offenders. This reflects broader patriarchal assumptions about male sexuality and responsibility.

Another major issue that was raised was lack of awareness of consent, sexuality, emotional boundaries and legal consequences. Comprehensive sex education was rare in schools , leaving adolescents largely ignorant of the legal and emotional aspects of relationships .

Participants also demonstrated long-term relational consequences. Young people in legal processes reported difficulty trusting others, fear of intimacy, feeling emotionally numb and insecure in future relationships.

Psychological Interpretation: Overwhelming is the psychological effect of criminalization at adolescence. Adolescence is a sensitive developmental period in which emotional experiences matter for personality development, self-esteem and attachment.

Institutional penalties for consensual emotional behavior by adolescents may foster the internalization of guilt, shame, and rejection. The legal system may also inadvertently reinforce fear-based ideas of intimacy and emotional expression.

Disruptions in attachment as identified in participants suggest that traumatic relational experience in adolescence may lead to the adoption of avoidant attachment styles, emotional distancing, or relationship anxiety in adulthood. The findings also suggest that social stigma and public labeling greatly contribute to emotional trauma. Young people often suffered humiliation and isolation through community scrutiny.

Policy Implications and Recommendations: The study findings warrant policy changes and sensitization of institutions.

1. **Sex Education for Everyone:** Schools should be teaching proper lessons on consent, emotional boundaries, legal rights, sexuality and responsibility in relationships.
2. **How to Find Law Readings:** Laws must differentiate between abusive exploitation and consensual relationships among adolescents with narrow age gaps.
3. **Awareness creation in the Judiciary:** The judges, the police personnel, the child welfare committees, and the legal authorities need to be trained in adolescent psychology and the realities of development.
4. **Rehabilitation-Based Juvenile Justice:** There should be inclusion of counselling, emotional rehabilitation, and psychological support services in juvenile justice processes.
5. **Accelerate:** Cases of consensual sex among adolescents need to be fast-tracked to avoid long-term emotional and social harm.
6. **Family Counseling:** Psycho-educational counselling should be provided to parents to reduce stigma, improve communication, and challenge rigid social attitudes.

Limitations of the Study: The study was restricted to some areas within the state of Haryana, and the sample size was quite small. Owing to the qualitative character of the study, a more comprehensive generalization is not possible. The social sensitivity surrounding interactions between adolescents may have contributed to the disclosures made by participants in interviews.

Future Scope: The results of the study show that there is a need for policy change and activation of institutions to be more concerned.

1. **Sex Education That Tells You Everything:** Consent, emotional limits, legal rights, sexuality and responsibility in relationships should all be taught in schools in the correct manner.
2. **Finding Readings According to the Law:** Rules for

partnerships between adolescents with small age differences must differentiate between abusive exploitation and consensual relationships.

3. **Sensitization of the Judiciary** : The judges, the police personnel, the child welfare committees and the legal authorities are to be trained in teenage psychology and the realities of growth.

4. **A Juvenile Justice System That Prioritizes Rehabilitation:** Counselling, emotional rehabilitation and psychological support services should be part of the juvenile justice system.

5. **The Fast-Track:** Cases of consensual sexual activity among adolescents must be expedited to limit the potential for long-term psychological and societal damage.

6. **Offering Counseling Services to Families:** Providing psycho-educational counseling to one's parents can help to reduce stigma, improve communication and address strict social attitudes.

Conclusion: The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act is still a vital legal barrier against child abuse and exploitation. However, the current study demonstrates that strict enforcement of the law in the cases of consensual relationships of adolescents may cause psychological damage, emotional trauma, and future relationship problems.

Criminalizing intimacy between adolescents is emblematic of the broader conflict between legal rigidity and developmental realities. Adolescents need protection from exploitation, but they also need emotional understanding, guidance, and rehabilitative support.

A balanced, psychologically informed, rights-based approach is needed to prevent the emergence of child protection laws that may harm adolescents' emotional development and mental health. A more humane and developmentally appropriate juvenile justice framework necessitates legal reform, institutional sensitization, family awareness, and comprehensive psychosocial support.

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