

# Navigating Support

## *The Role of A Support Person in Cases of Sexual Violence Against Children*



*In this case study, Smriti Mishra, a Social Worker at Prerana, documents the process of supporting a child victim of sexual violence in her role as a Support Person appointed under Rule 4 of the POCSO Rules, 2020.*

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# Background

Priya's (name changed to protect the identity of the child) case was referred by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), Thane, to Prerana for a **Social Investigation Report (SIR)** in 2024.

Through this Order, Prerana's social workers undertook visits to assess the child's socio-cultural and economic background and draft a report. Their report ([SIR](#)) would enable the CWC to take **informed decisions** on Priya's rehabilitation.

During this visit, the social workers also informed the child and the family about their entitlements including a Support Person that could be appointed to assist them in **navigating the criminal justice system**.

Priya's mother expressed that they saw the value in having someone who could help them make sense of what lay ahead. She felt that Prerana, now a **familiar presence**, could step into that role and support them through the legal process.

The social investigation team responded that they would take the request forward to the CWC when they visited to submit the **Social Investigation Report**, and that the family too has the right to request the CWC for the same.



*Following the submission of the SIR, Prerana formally requested the appointment of a Support Person, which was granted and with it, the journey of ongoing follow-up and submission of regular reports to CWC as per POCSO Rule 4 (9) and (12) respectively began.*

# The FIR

## & Additional Disclosures

As per the FIR registered in January 2024, it was reported that Priya, a 10-year-old child was sexually assaulted by her **biological father**.

During the subsequent interactions with Priya and her mother, further details came to light. It was disclosed that Priya's father had **previously sexually assaulted** her in 2018, and during an attempt to **resist** his actions, she sustained a nerve injury in her neck that required surgery. At the time, everyone was told that she got injured while playing.

It was only after her father eventually moved out, to separate from her mother due to their differences, that Priya finally found **the courage to disclose** to her mother not just about the recent incident of sexual assault, but also about the earlier ones.

After this disclosure, Priya's mother filed a **police complaint** against her husband.

As time passed and Priya slowly began to feel a little safer, she disclosed even more. She shared that the sexual assault inflicted on her involved **more people** besides her father. She named a few others; friends of her father, the owner of their current residence, certain neighbours, and **even some school staff**. She clearly expressed that she didn't want to resume going to the school.



These additional disclosures of other individuals accused were also communicated by Priya's mother to the Investigating Officer (IO), who asked to **provide supporting evidence** to add their names in the FIR.

The consequences rippled swiftly through their lives, the isolation was all-encompassing, relatives from both natal and marital families **severed ties**, and neighbours began to subject them to **constant verbal harassment**.

Since Priya's father was the only earning member of the family, his separation from her mother placed a growing **financial burden** on her mother.

In the beginning, Priya's mother, despite repeated efforts, was **unable to secure stable employment** locally. To manage basic household needs, she had to **mortgage** both her and Priya's gold earrings.



# Stepping In, Standing By



*"It was through Prerana that I became involved with the case, stepping in as the **Support Person** for Priya.*

*Each visit to their home began with her mother greeting me at the door, **a gentle smile** slowly forming on her face, never quite reaching its full curve before tears quietly spilled down her cheeks.*

*I would instinctively ask how she was doing, but she would softly motion to lower my voice, worried that the neighbours, some of whom Priya had named as **additional accused** might overhear us.*

*During home visits, I was always met by Priya and her little sister, Srishti. Priya, ever cautious, would quickly shut the door behind me, while Srishti, warm and curious, would **slip her hand into mine** and eagerly show me what she was watching on her mother's phone. These interactions would start with simple conversations about how they were doing.*

*But often, I would catch Priya staring at me, her eyes unblinking, her face unreadable. Her thin frame and stoic expression conveyed more than her words did. In those moments, I realized just how **immense** the impact of the ordeal has been on her and her mother."*



# First Steps

One of the first steps we took in supporting Priya and her mother was to gently open a conversation about **mental health**, about what it essentially meant and how it could help them process their emotions and navigate the overwhelming state they were in.

At first, they were uncertain of what the process of **counseling** might involve. But as we talked, they began to see the potential value in speaking with a trained mental health **professional** who could offer guidance and support.

Once they felt ready, we connected them with a mental health counsellor associated with a **partner organization** in a Govt. Hospital close to their residence. We ensured that the counseling center was conveniently reachable via a local train ride, just four stops away from the Priya's residence.

To ease their linkage with counseling, the **Support Person** accompanied them on their first visit, introducing them to the counselor.

What followed was heartening: both Priya and her mother attended five to six counseling sessions, and some shifts became noticeable.



During the follow-up visits, the Support Person sensed a growing ease in interactions with Priya and her mother.

Gradually, Priya's mother too began showing interest in **moving forward**: "I went to that factory and asked about job vacancies," she shared. "What steps should we take next?" "There's a vocational course offered by a nearby NGO—should I check if I'm eligible?" These weren't just questions — they were signs of possibility, of beginning to imagine a future shaped by **self-determination**.

# Before The Law



*“The Investigating Officer (IO) had asked the family to provide **supporting evidence** in order to add the names of other individuals as accused, which left Priya's mother feeling **discouraged** and uncertain about the next steps. She turned to me, expressing her strong desire to have the names of other individuals as accused included in the FIR.*

*I reassured her that a follow-up with the IO would be conducted before the next home visit. Soon after, I visited the concerned police station to follow up on three key points:*

- *the status of the Manodhairya compensation application,*
- *updates on the arrest of the accused,*
- *and the possibility of adding the names of other individuals as accused.*

*While the IO confirmed that the Manodhairya application was in process, she was hesitant to act on the **additional disclosures**. She suggested that Priya's statements might be influenced by her mother and cautioned against naming multiple individuals without supporting evidence.*

*I gently but firmly responded, emphasizing that disclosures by child victims of sexual violence often emerge over time. I reminded her of **Section 29 of the POCSO Act**, which shifts the **burden of proof** away from the child—it is the duty of the police to investigate and verify such disclosures. I then shared the list of names Priya had mentioned and requested to be informed when her supplementary statement would be recorded.”*



# Partners In Protection

During one of our regular case work discussions, we paused to reflect on the progress of Priya's case. It became increasingly clear that the **legal complexities** required stronger support; someone who could help navigate the process with more persistence.

We discussed the idea of bringing in a **legal partner**, and decided to explore this option with Priya's mother.

Subsequently, legal linkage was established with one of our legal partner organizations. A ***vakalatnama*** was signed, enabling a panel lawyer from our partner organization to formally assist the Public Prosecutor and ensure the legal case received the thorough attention.



Three months passed and despite the previous efforts, no updates were provided either to Priya's mother or to the Support Person on recording of the **additional statement**.

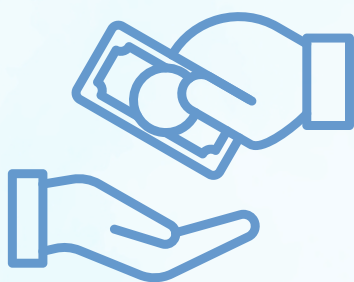
To follow up, the Support Person visited the police station. Unfortunately, the **Investigating Officer** was not there. When we reached out to her, she suggested discussing the matter another day. Her continued **reluctance** was again evident.

After discussing the situation with our **lawyer**, it was suggested that a **formal letter** be addressed to the Station In-Charge, laying out the facts of the case and the IO's ongoing inaction regarding the addition of the names of other individuals disclosed as accused in the FIR. The letter was dispatched, with the hope that it would prompt the necessary steps to **move the investigation forward**.



# Public Schemes, Private Struggles

Left to support the family on her own, and having **pawned her gold** already, Priya's mother made persistent efforts to find employment and was able to secure work as a **domestic worker** in a household, earning INR 2,000 per month. With such a meagre income, meeting **basic needs** like food and transportation became an immediate concern.



Priya's mother requested **ration support** from us. While we were anticipating for longer-term support through government schemes like the [Bal Sangopan Yojana](#) or compensation from the [Manodhairya Yojana](#) (a state scheme to offer support to victims of sexual assault and acid attack), it was recognized that **immediate, short-term support** was necessary to sustain the family in the meantime.

The Support Person reached out to Prerana's **Sponsorship Committee**, presenting their situation, and was able to secure short-term ration, nutritional, and travel support for her counseling sessions.



*According to the latest Government Resolution (G.R.) of the Manodhairya Yojana issued in 2024, INR 30,000 of the 25% of the compensation is supposed to be given in cash within 7 days to cover immediate medical expenses.*



Meanwhile, to move the **Manodhairya** compensation process forward – the Support Person, along with Priya and her mother, visited the **District Legal Services Authority (DLSA)** Office in Thane.

Together, they carefully gathered and submitted all the **required documents**; Aadhar cards, Priya's birth certificate, and details of her bank account.

Then, a glimmer of hope arrived, we received positive news: Priya's compensation had been approved, and an amount of **INR 3 lakhs** was sanctioned in her name.



*But Priya's journey didn't follow the rulebook. Instead of receiving timely aid, she waited. Weeks turned to months. And it was only after an entire year had passed that she finally received INR 62,000. The relief was real, but so was the delay.*

## Restoring Health, Rebuilding Safety

During one of the follow-up visits, Priya's mother shared concern about Priya's stunted growth and the way she **struggled to walk**.

To understand the cause and explore next steps, the Support Person scheduled a **medical appointment** at a Govt. Hospital and accompanied Priya and her mother to the hospital visit.

After examining Priya, the doctor recommended an MRI to rule out any underlying neurological issue.

Priya underwent the MRI scan, and the..





...results indicated no visible abnormalities, but the doctor also noted that Priya appeared **malnourished** and suggested that her physical challenges might be tied more to prolonged nutritional deficiencies than to any medical condition.

To address this, the doctor referred Priya to a **dietician** at the hospital.

During the consultation, the dietician patiently walked the family through what a **balanced diet** should look like for Priya – explaining her nutritional needs in simple terms and helping them build a plan suited to her age and condition.

## Living with Fear

In many of our conversations, Priya's mother spoke of constant worry about the **continued threats and harassment** they faced from their **neighbors**. She shared how the hostility had escalated: their water supply had been cut off, forcing her to fetch water each day from a nearby community tap.

The situation had become even more alarming when a group of men from the neighborhood forcefully **entered their home** and tried to harm them. On another occasion, she recalled how a man attempted to give Priya a pill, which Priya refused.

Priya, too, opened, saying that the neighbors often hurled **abusive language** at her and her mother. The constant verbal attacks left her feeling scared and unsettled in what should have been the safety of her own **home and neighborhood**.

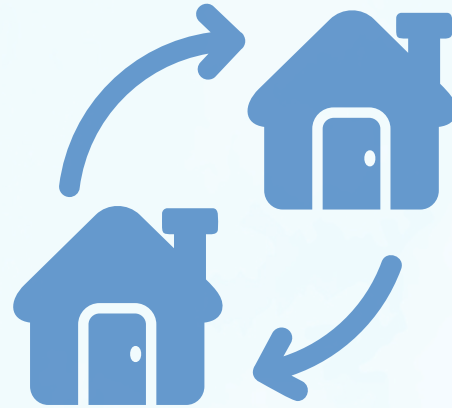
The same was also brought to the police's notice. They summoned and warned the individuals involved, who were then let off shortly after. However, the fear lingered, as some of these individuals had also been named by Priya as additional **accused**.

# A Move Toward Safety

Recognizing how unsafe their neighborhood continued to be, we discussed the possibility of **relocating to another neighbourhood** and what all would that entail. Priya's mother agreed in principle, acknowledging that moving could be a better option, but she also admitted that their financial situation made it nearly impossible at the moment.

Understanding the constraints, we discussed this case within our team and the possibility of supporting the family further.

After thoughtful deliberation, the Support Person presented the idea to our sponsorship committee and a **one-time grant support for relocation** was approved. With the support of INR 11,000, Priya's mother was able to cover the rental deposit and manage the shifting expenses.



Soon after, the family moved to a **new neighborhood** in a different locality.

When the Support Person later checked in with them, mother shared that she liked the new area. It reminded her of a village – quieter, more spacious, and far away from the daily harassment they had faced before.

Through her resilience and persistent efforts to improve her family's circumstances, she eventually also **secured a job as a peon** in a university in that area, earning INR 12,000 per month.

# A Future In Focus

Throughout this journey, one of the crucial aspects that slipped quietly into the background was the **resumption of formal education** for both Priya and her sister, Srishti.

Given the unsafe environment in their neighborhood at the time, the Support Person's primary focus became addressing the immediate concerns — ensuring the **safety and security of the children** and family, including their mental and physical well-being — and pursuing the addition of other accused individuals' names in the FIR.

While the Support Person continued to follow up on their educational status, active steps to **reconnect** Priya with formal schooling couldn't materialize during that period.

When Priya shared her discomfort and **reluctance to return** to her previous school, her mother arranged for an alternative — she began attending a tuition center run by her mother's friend, where she learned basic reading and writing free of cost.



At their new home, while Priya's mother goes to work each day, the children are left at home without any **adult supervision** — a situation that could potentially pose concerns for Priya's & Srishti's safety and well-being.

During the day, they usually engage in **self-learning** activities, often working through exercises in an English workbook.

Moving ahead, the Support Person will facilitate Priya's **re-enrollment into formal education** at a school identified by her mother. This process will be supported by follow-ups with the **DLSA**, which had earlier offered to assist the family with school fees.



# Reflections As A Support Person

## Through the Legal Maze, Hand in Hand with a Child Victim of Sexual Violence

"In my role as a Support Person for this case, I stepped in with the intent to fulfill the responsibilities outlined under **Rule 4(9) of the POCSO Rules**, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining **consistent contact and building trust** with the child and their family or with someone in whom the child places their trust and **confidence**. And yet, despite this consistent contact and developed trust, I found myself unable to fully fulfill the primary purpose of this role – to translate that trust into tangible support during **the trial**. The trial, which should have been well underway by now, has **yet to begin**."

According to **Section 35(2) of the POCSO Act**, the trial of a case should ideally be completed **within one year** from the date the court takes cognizance of the offence. Unfortunately, this timeline has **not been upheld** in Priya's case nor in many others I've supported in my capacity as a Support Person. The proceedings have stretched far beyond the mandated period. One such case, for instance, was registered in 2016 but only saw its trial conclude in 2024—an **eight-year delay**! In Priya's case, 2 years have passed and only the charge sheet has been filed so far, and there's no significant progress beyond that. During this period, I as the Support Person, along with our panel lawyer, were able to support the child and her mother through the process of representation in the **bail hearing**.

These procedural delays also lead me to think and question the very **feasibility** of the Support Person's **envisioned role**. When the legal process stretches far beyond the timelines laid out in the law, can a Support Person **realistically** remain a steady, consistent figure throughout the entire duration of the trial? What happens to the broader vision of **rehabilitation** that is so closely tied to this role? It makes me wonder- is it fair to expect a child to wait endlessly for a trial to come to closure? And in this context, can we still say the process is truly serving the **best interest of the child**, as the law so earnestly intends. The justice system, despite its intent, often leaves those it aims to protect, waiting in limbo. **And in that waiting, much is lost - time, energy, and perhaps, trust."**

# Reflections As A Support Person

*In the Gaps of the System, We Stayed*

"The role of a Support Person, as I've experienced it, grew far **beyond the statutory outlines** as per the POCSO Rules. It didn't limit to only supporting the child and family in the process of investigation and trial and submitting the required monthly reports to the CWC. The Support Person became a consistent point of contact for a range of **support services** for the child and the family. From coordination with counselors, medical practitioners to DLSA representatives to ensure that both immediate and **long-term rehabilitative needs** of the child and consequently the family were met.

At multiple points, I also offered **first-hand psychosocial support** to Priya and her mother during times of emotional distress. We also participated in two Family Support Group meetings, one of which was a Christmas carnival organized for children supported by Prerana. These programs were organized as intentional spaces of joy, where children and their caregivers could relieve- a chance to be playful, relaxed, and free.

Additionally, my role as a Support Person also grew to linking Priya and her mother with short-term sponsorship support, a crucial step in furthering the child's **healing and rehabilitation journey**. It was about reinforcing a support system around Priya that allows her to begin rebuilding trust, confidence, and a sense of stability.

In essence, while the legal machinery moved slower than expected, my role as a Support Person evolved, sometimes even stepping beyond how it is shaped by the law/ rules. It became less about ticking boxes and more about embodying the larger role of a **social worker**. This meant being there not only as a facilitator of rights and services but also as an emotional anchor, extending presence, persistence and care to support both Priya and her mother."

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