

BEST PRACTICES

BEYOND THE SILENCE

*A Guidance Document for Case Workers
Supporting Male and Transgender Child
Victims of Sexual Violence*



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This document has been prepared for **social workers, case workers, support persons, and other frontline professionals** who work with, or are likely to work with, male and transgender children (below 18 years of age) who have experienced sexual violence.

It draws upon the experiences, insights, and learnings shared by Prerana case workers, as well as other practitioners who have directly supported male children who are victims/survivors of sexual violence. The document aims to strengthen understanding, sensitivity, and response mechanisms while working with boys in situations of sexual abuse and exploitation.



WORKING WITH MALE CHILDREN

In India, the sexual abuse and exploitation of male children remain a deeply **under-recognised and underreported** issue, often hidden behind silence, stigma, and harmful gender stereotypes. While public discourse and child protection systems have historically focused more on girls, evidence shows that boys are also significantly vulnerable to sexual violence in homes, institutions, schools, communities, and online spaces. The Government of India's Study on Child Abuse (2007), conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, revealed that a substantial proportion of boys reported experiencing sexual abuse, with many facing severe forms of abuse. Despite the enactment of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, which recognises all children **irrespective of gender**, male victims continue to face barriers in disclosure and access to support services.

Social expectations around masculinity, fear of shame, disbelief, ridicule, or being labelled weak often prevent boys from speaking about their experiences. Many case workers may also feel less prepared to identify signs of sexual abuse among boys, or may unintentionally minimise their trauma.



It is therefore essential that child protection practitioners adopt a gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and non-judgmental approach while working with male children who have experienced sexual violence, recognising that their emotional pain, fears, and protection needs are as real and significant as those of any other child.

Key Considerations for A Case Worker

Working with a boy child who has experienced sexual violence requires a gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and patient approach. Because male victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) are often underreported and face unique societal stigmas, a case worker must focus on building trust, overcoming shame, and ensuring safety.

Challenge “Macho” Norms

Recognise that boys are often socialised to be "tough," which can cause them to feel weak for not fighting back, leading to guilt, shame, and self-blame. There is a strong, false societal belief that boys cannot be victims of sexual abuse. This stigma creates intense shame and fear of being perceived as "weak" or gay, which inhibits disclosure. They may take time to open up to the support person or the case worker (the "silence factor"); this is seen more among adolescent boys.

Externalizing vs. Internalizing

Children who experience sexual violence, physical and emotional violence, neglect, or exploitation do not all react in the same way. However, boys and girls often show their distress differently.

Boys are more likely to express their emotional pain outwardly (externalizing behaviours). Instead of talking about their fear, sadness, or shame, they may show their distress through: aggressive or violent behaviour, frequent fights with peers, defiance of adults and authority figures, bullying younger children, running away from home or institutions, substance use (tobacco, alcohol, drugs), association with gangs or anti-social groups, and risk-taking behaviours.

Many boys learn from an early age that **"boys do not cry" or "boys must be strong."**



As a result, feelings of hurt, fear, and vulnerability may be hidden behind anger, toughness, or aggression.

“A boy who had experienced sexual violence was becoming aggressive towards peers, skipping school, and spending time with local anti-social groups when he was referred to a social worker.”

“An adolescent boy living in a red-light area was reacting to chronic exposure to violence by intimidating younger children and engaging in petty criminal activity.”

Girls are more likely to turn their distress inward (internalizing behaviours). They may:

- Become withdrawn and isolated
- Show signs of sadness or depression
- Experience anxiety and excessive worry
- Have low self-esteem
- Engage in self-harm
- Develop psychosomatic complaints such as headaches or stomach aches

These patterns are often seen more clearly during adolescence (10–19 years), when children are coping not only with trauma but also with rapid physical, emotional, and social changes.

Social workers need to remember that these are general patterns, not rules. Some boys may become withdrawn and depressed, while some girls may become aggressive. Understanding the trauma behind the behaviour is more important than focusing on the behaviour alone.



Address Sexual Confusion

Be prepared for the boy to feel confused or guilty about physiological responses (such as arousal) that may have occurred during the abuse. Case workers should clarify that such responses are natural but do not imply consent.

Address Stigma

Some boys may fear that others will see them as "weak" or wrongly judge them because of the abuse. Gently discuss these worries in a way that is appropriate for the child's age, and reassure them that they are not to blame for what happened.

Acknowledge Female Perpetrators

While many perpetrators are male, acknowledge that male children can be abused by females, a scenario that often brings added disbelief, fear of minimisation of experiences, and barriers to reporting.

Exercise Patience with Disclosure

Understand that boys often take longer to disclose abuse—sometimes decades—due to fear of not being believed. Avoid pressuring for complete narratives and allow the child to share at their own pace.

Many boys do not disclose sexual abuse in a clear, chronological manner. Traumatic experiences may be remembered in fragments, and the child may reveal different parts of the experience over time. Inconsistencies in disclosure should not automatically be interpreted as fabrication. Case workers should focus on creating a safe environment and documenting disclosures carefully, without repeatedly questioning the child.

"A boy initially reported physical assault by an employer. Several weeks later, after trust was developed, he disclosed repeated sexual violence."



Prioritise Rebuilding Self-Esteem

Because sexually violated boys often experience very low self-esteem (despite acting "tough"), rebuilding self-worth is a crucial intervention point.

Encourage Positive Masculinity

Support boys in developing healthy and non-violent understandings of masculinity. Emphasise that seeking help, expressing emotions, showing empathy, and protecting oneself and others are signs of strength, not weakness.

Be Attentive to Identity-Related Concerns

Male victims, particularly heterosexual ones, may experience confusion regarding their sexuality if assaulted by other males. Case workers should respond with sensitivity, avoiding assumptions and providing reassurance.

A 14-year-old boy who was sexually abused by an older male neighbour told the case worker, "Does this mean I am gay?" He appeared distressed and avoided discussing the incident. The case worker listened calmly and reassured him that sexual abuse is an act of violence and exploitation, not a reflection of his sexual orientation. The case worker allowed the child to express his feelings and concerns without judgment and subsequently also arranged counselling support to help him process the trauma.



WORKING WITH TRANSGENDER CHILDREN



Working with a transgender child who has experienced sexual abuse requires a case worker to navigate **intersectional vulnerabilities**, specifically addressing the high prevalence of trauma and the need for gender-affirming care. Case workers must validate the child's identity to foster trust, manage complex family dynamics, and address heightened risks for homelessness, discrimination, and mental health crises.

Key Considerations for Case Workers

Provide Gender-Affirming Support

Using the child's correct name and pronouns and, where possible, ensuring access to gender-affirming care is critical for building trust and reducing trauma, especially if the abuse was linked to their gender identity.

Adopt a Holistic, Trauma-Informed Lens

Recognize that transgender adolescent often experience multiple forms of victimisation (e.g., bullying, peer victimisation, and family rejection) in addition to sexual abuse, necessitating a holistic safety plan.

Navigate Family Dynamics

Address potential lack of familial support or rejection, which can increase vulnerability to abuse and homelessness. Where appropriate, engage caregivers through sensitisation to improve support, while also preparing alternatives when family environments are unsafe.



Specialized Advocacy

Advocate against discrimination in healthcare and social services, as fear of discrimination may prevent the child from accessing necessary legal or medical resources.

Focus on Resilience

Implement interventions that go beyond trauma-focused care to incorporate building resilience, which is essential given the high prevalence of mental health struggles such as depression and suicidal ideation.

Avoid Assumptions

Do not assume that the child's distress is solely related to their gender identity, but acknowledge the impact of "minority stress."

Plan for Safety Risks

Due to higher risks, safety plans may need to include resources for housing and legal protection. They tend to leave the house due to family dynamics, indifference, and neglect, and find themselves living on the streets—this is more common among those who are 15 and above.

Provide Validation

Ensuring the child feels heard and supported in their identity is crucial, as this directly impacts their willingness to engage and their recovery.

Case Examples with Role of Case Workers



i Conflict Between the Child and Caregivers

"A 14-year-old transgender boy (assigned female at birth) disclosed sexual violence by a relative. Following the disclosure, the parents focused primarily on preventing him from identifying as male, believing that his transgender identity is a "phase" caused by the sexual violence. Frequent arguments at home escalated, and the child expressed a desire to run away."

The case worker must address both the trauma resulting from the abuse and the family conflict surrounding the child's gender identity. This may involve family counselling, facilitating respectful communication, helping caregivers understand the child's needs, assessing risks of homelessness or self-harm, and ensuring that the child's safety and best interests remain central to all interventions.

i Focusing on Resilience, Not Just Trauma

"A 15-year-old transgender boy from Pune disclosed a history of sexual violence by a family acquaintance. Following the abuse, he experienced anxiety, low mood, and declining school attendance. He reported feeling isolated because classmates mocked his gender expression, and he had occasional thoughts that life is "not worth living."

The case worker helps the child recognise their strengths and interests, supports their return to school or vocational training, and connects them with safe peer groups and trusted adults. They encourage participation in confidence-building activities, work with the family to strengthen supportive relationships, develop a safety plan for times of emotional distress, and celebrate the child's achievements to help them build a positive identity beyond their experience of abuse.



Working With Male Children Who Have Experienced Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE)



Key Considerations for Case Workers

Do Not Mistake Victims for Offenders

Boys who have been sexually exploited may appear aggressive, angry, defiant, or involved in criminal activities. These behaviours are often survival responses to trauma and exploitation.

Example: A 16-year-old boy rescued during a police raid is found carrying drugs for a trafficker. He should be assessed as a possible victim of trafficking and exploitation, and not automatically treated as a child in conflict with the law.

Understand That Physical Arousal Does Not Mean Consent

Some boys feel intense shame because they experienced an erection or orgasm during sexual violence. These are involuntary physical responses and do not indicate consent or enjoyment.

Example: A boy refuses counselling because he believes he "allowed" the abuse since his body reacted. The case worker should explain that physical responses can occur even during unwanted sexual acts.



Explore Previous Experiences of Violence and Neglect

Boys who are sexually exploited may have previously experienced sexual violence, physical violence, emotional abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

Example: A boy living at a railway station reports being sexually exploited by adults. Further assessment reveals a history of severe physical abuse at home that led him to run away.

Assess Risks Related to Homelessness and CSE

Street-connected boys may be vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation, where sexual acts are exchanged for food, shelter, money, protection, transport, or other basic necessities.

Example: A 15-year-old boy sleeping at a railway station accepts offers of food, money, and accommodation from adult men in exchange for sexual acts. He may not view himself as a victim because he believes he received something in return.

Be Sensitive to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming children face higher risks of exploitation because of family rejection, bullying, discrimination, and homelessness.

Example: A transgender adolescent leaves home after repeated violence from family members and becomes vulnerable to traffickers who offer accommodation and employment.

Examine Family and Community Factors

Exploitation may be facilitated by family members, relatives, peers, employers, or community practices.

Example: A boy from a marginalised community is introduced to exploitative situations by an older relative who receives money in return.

In some regions, harmful traditions like “Devdasi” and “Jogta/Jogini” have contributed to intergenerational exploitation and vulnerability.



Recognise the Role of Peer Influence

Not all recruitment is done by adults. Peers may recruit, groom, or pressure boys into exploitative situations.

Example: An older adolescent promises easy money and introduces younger boys to adults who pay for sexual acts.

Watch for Forced Criminal Activities

Traffickers often force children to participate in criminal activities to increase control and reduce the likelihood of disclosure.

Example: A trafficker compels a boy to deliver drugs or participate in theft, threatening violence if he refuses.

Watch for Debt Bondage / Dependency

Traffickers may create artificial debts by charging children for food, accommodation, transportation, clothing, or substances, and then force them to engage in commercial sexual exploitation to repay these debts. The child may believe that they owe the exploiter and therefore cannot leave.

Understand Online Grooming and Exploitation

Perpetrators increasingly use social media, gaming platforms, messaging apps, and dating applications to identify and groom boys. Boys may be coerced, deceived, or threatened into creating and sharing sexual images or videos. Once such material is distributed online, perpetrators may use it for blackmail, extortion, or continued exploitation. Case workers should assess digital safety concerns and facilitate reporting and removal mechanisms wherever possible.

Example: A boy shares intimate images with someone he met through social media and is later threatened that the images will be circulated unless he complies with further demands.



Address Shame, Stigma, and Masculinity Norms

Many boys do not disclose abuse because they fear being judged as weak, homosexual, or responsible for what happened.

Example: A 13-year-old repeatedly says, "Boys cannot be victims," and therefore refuses to identify his experiences as abuse.

Be Alert to Mental Health / Self-Harm Risks

Sexual exploitation can result in intense shame, hopelessness, and self-blame. Case workers should routinely assess for suicidal thoughts, self-harm, and other high-risk behaviours, particularly following rescue, disclosure, legal proceedings, or family rejection.

Example: Following rescue, a boy becomes withdrawn, avoids social interaction, and expresses hopelessness about the future.

Consider Educational and Economic Vulnerabilities

School dropout, child labour, poverty, migration, and lack of livelihood opportunities can increase vulnerability to exploitation.

Example: A migrant adolescent working in a hotel is lured by promises of higher earnings and is subsequently sexually exploited.

Ensure Boys Receive Equal Access to Protection and Services

Male victims are often overlooked because services are traditionally designed for girls. Boys require the same access to rescue, counselling, shelter, healthcare, legal aid, and rehabilitation.

Example: A boy rescued from exploitation is initially denied admission to a service because staff do not recognise boys as potential victims of commercial sexual exploitation.



Practice Reminders for Case Workers



When working with boys who have experienced sexual violence or commercial sexual exploitation, ask yourself:

- ☐ Am I seeing the child behind the behaviour?
- ☐ Could this behaviour be a trauma response rather than misconduct?
- ☐ Have I explored possible experiences of sexual victimisation, exploitation, or grooming?
- ☐ Have I unintentionally minimized the child's experience because he is a boy?
- ☐ Have I provided the same level of empathy, protection, and support that I would offer to a girl in a similar situation?
- ☐ Have I identified the child's strengths, support systems, and aspirations for the future?

This reflective practice can help reduce bias and strengthen child-centred, trauma-informed interventions.



We welcome inputs and suggestions from all stakeholders to further strengthen this document in the best interest of all children. Please share your thoughts with us at contact@preranaantitrafficking.org

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