

'Teach children to report sexual abuse'

PREVENTION Stringent security policies also need to be put in place, say activists

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MUMBAI: The arrest of a Walkeshwar schoolteacher on Monday for allegedly sodomising a six-year-old student underscores the need of preventive programmes and stringent security policies as most cases of child sexual abuse are not reported, say child rights activists.

"Nearly 180 million children in India are marginalised and are extremely vulnerable," said Nishit Kumar, spokesperson for Childline, a non-profit which runs a help line for children. "It is critical to organise preventive programmes so that children can recognise and avoid abuse." In March, Childline started an awareness programme in 600 schools in the city, using storytelling to make children aware of sexual abuse.

Arpan, an NGO that works to protect children from sexual abuse, recently completed a six-day personal safety workshop at Bombay Cambridge School, Andheri, and will start a similar initiative in the city's low-income group schools after Diwali.

"This programme is essential because it helps children speak out," said Savita, principal, Bombay Cambridge School. "They need to know that if something goes wrong it is not their fault and they can share it."

According to a 2007 report by the ministry of women and child development (see box), 53.22% of the 12,447 children surveyed across 13 states said that they had faced one or more form of sexual abuse, but most did not report it. Although abuse is prevalent in all strata of society, those most vulnerable include children on the streets, along with those made to work, and the ones in institutional care.

"Much work needs to be done in the area of prevention," said Pooja Taparia, founder and CEO of Arpan. "Moreover, parents need awareness and knowledge on how to intervene appropriately when abuse is reported. Often, children feel uncomfortable about opening up because parents do not believe them."

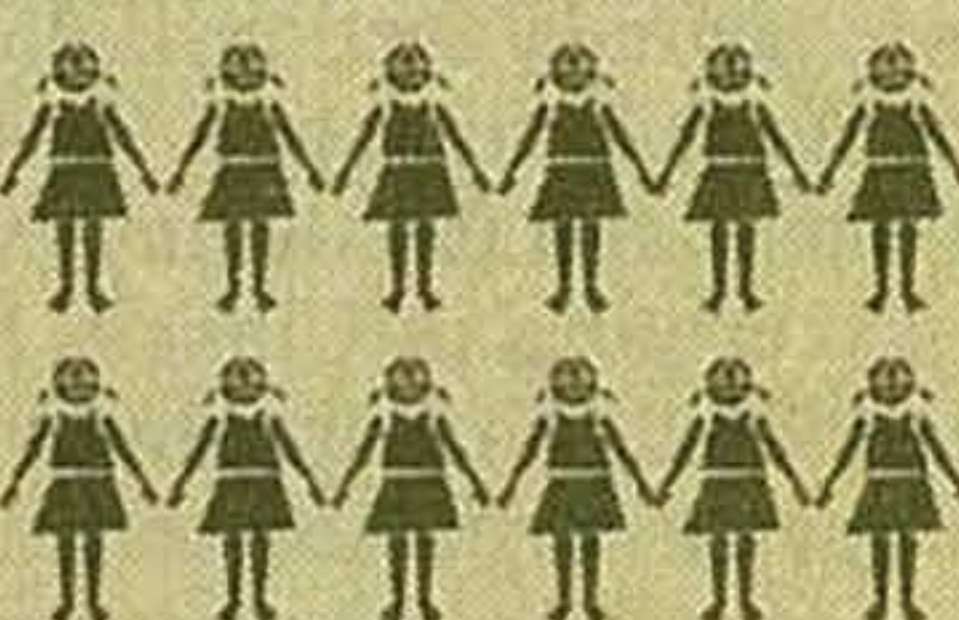
Priti Patkar, director of Prerna, an NGO which provides shelter to children of commercial sex workers, said schools should screen their staff. "Children may or may not retain safety training but schools must have a child protection policy and a dedicated mechanism to receive complaints."

OVER HALF OF CHILDREN IN INDIA FACE SEXUAL ABUSE

Major findings of a 2007 study carried out by the ministry of women and child development with the help of Unicef and child rights organisations Save the Child and Delhi-based Prayas

12,447

children were surveyed across 13 states



One figure is equivalent to 1,000

53.22%

children in the country reported having faced one or more forms of sexual abuse



Among children facing other forms of sexual abuse

38.24% were in the age group of 5-12



26.94% were aged between 13 and 14 years



34.82% were 15 to 18 years old



Children on the street, along with those made to work and in institutional care, reported the highest incidence of sexual assault

21.90%

child respondents reported facing severe forms of sexual abuse

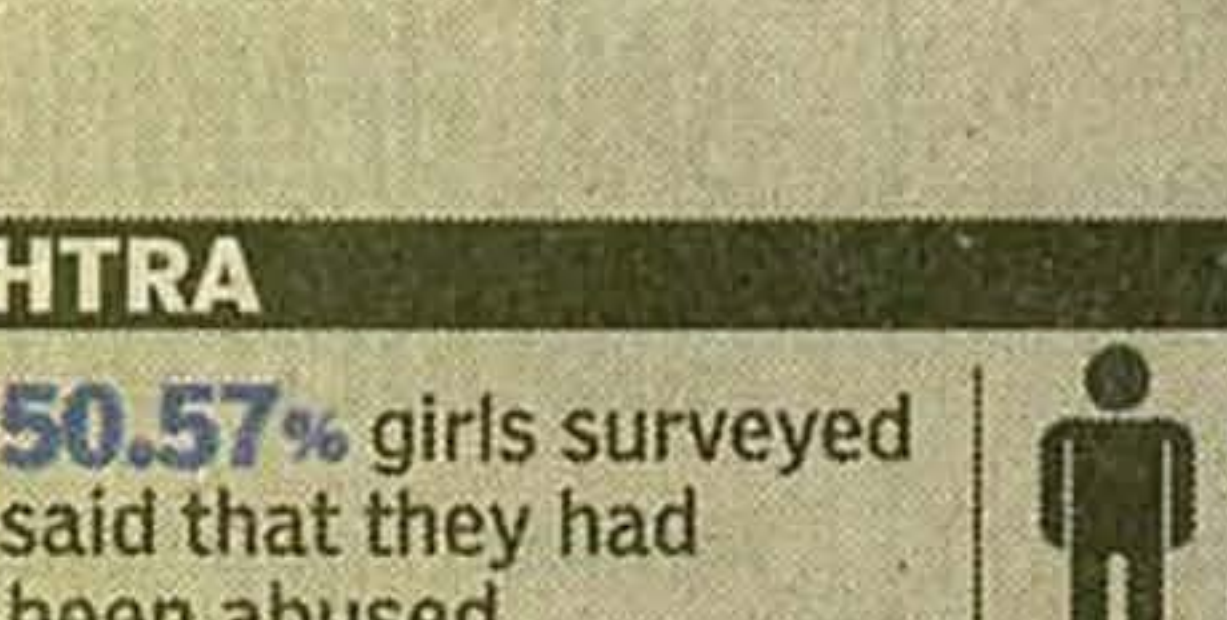


50.76%

said they faced other forms of sexual assault



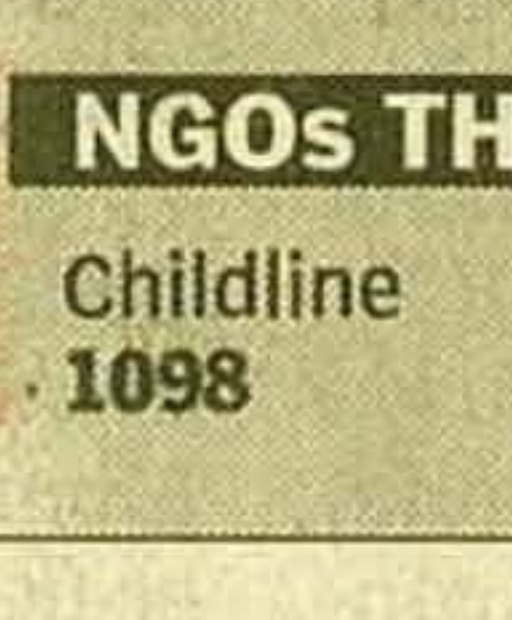
50% of abusers were persons known to the child or in a position of trust and responsibility



Most children did not report the matter to anyone

IN MAHARASHTRA

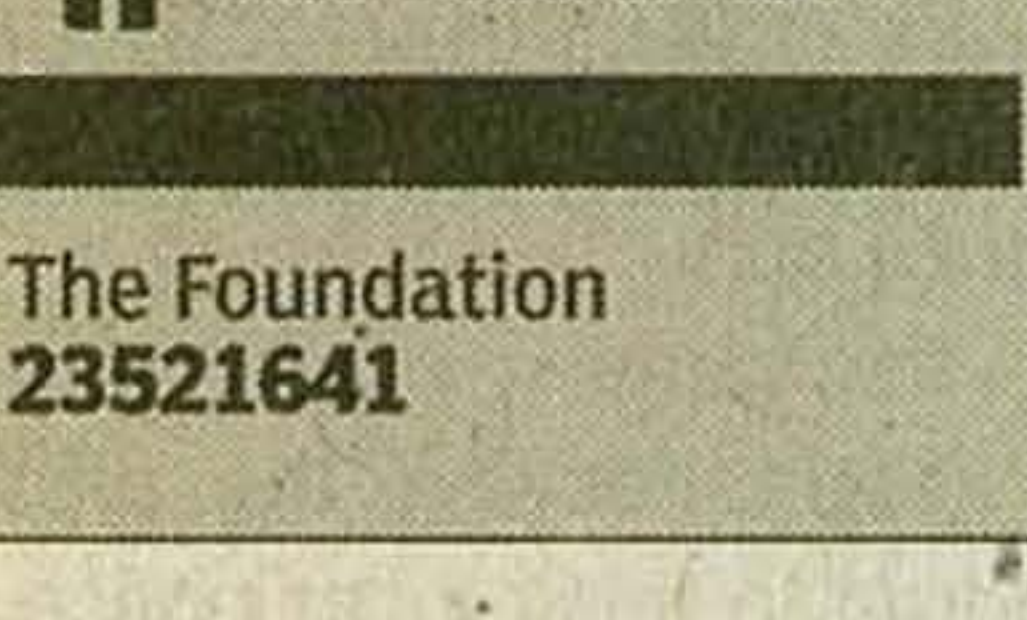
Only **9.79%** reported sexual abuse



50.57% girls surveyed said that they had been abused



49.43% boys surveyed said that they had been abused



NGOs THAT CAN HELP YOU

Childline
1098

Arpan
26862444/26868444

The Foundation
23521641

Schools skirt sex education debate by opting for counselling, slideshows

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MUMBAI: City schools are no longer shy of addressing issues related to child sexual abuse and many have started conducting sessions in which children and parents are made aware about the issue.

"Cases of sexual harassment have been on the rise in schools and younger children are more vulnerable as they may not be able to express themselves," said Deepshikha Srivastav, principal of Rajhans Vidyalaya, Andheri. "We have full-time counsellors who conduct sessions on good touch and bad touch," she added.

Like Rajhans, other schools have also responded to the demand for such awareness. A few months ago, parents of stu-

We have full-time counsellors who conduct sessions on good touch and bad touch.
DEEPSHIKHA SRIVASTAV,
principal, Rajhans Vidyalaya

dents from Eurokids, Versova, had complained about a young teacher who allegedly taught toddlers how to kiss.

Following the incident, another pre-school, Podar JumboKids, Santacruz, prepared a slideshow on the difference between a 'good touch' and a 'bad touch'. The slideshow is shown to toddlers' parents, staff members and even bus attendants. Moreover, all Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) schools have an adolescent development pro-

gramme wherein children are taught about sex education, among other things.

However, whether sex education is required at the school level is still a strongly debated issue. When asked if it should be made mandatory, Srivastav said, "Children are too young to understand what is sexual and what is asexual. But they can be taught a lot of things indirectly which conveys the message better."

Activists, and survivors of child sexual abuse have a different opinion on sex education. "We need to understand the difference between sex education and pornography. Sex education will not provoke children but will enable them to come up with the right words to indicate an act of abuse," said Harish Iyer,

a media professional, who was a victim of sexual abuse for 11 years. "Had I known at the age of five what was happening with me, I wouldn't have been abused for so long. Sex education is the need of the hour."