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## THE DILEMMA OF FEMALE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SRI LANKA

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### ABSTRACT

*The main objective of this study is to identify the nature of girl child sexual abuse (GCSA) in the Northwestern Province (NWP) of Sri Lanka. The specific objectives include examining the reasons for the increase in child sex abuse in NWP and proposing actions against child sex abuse. The research specifically focused on the Kurunegala District, analysing secondary data from 246 reported cases collected by the Women's and Children's Affairs Division (WCAD) of the Department of Labour, Sri Lanka. Using quantitative methods, data were processed and visualized using Microsoft Excel and ArcGIS, and the findings were summarized using descriptive statistical analysis. Results reveal that while the overall number of reported cases declined slightly between 2021 (132 cases) and 2022 (114 cases), specific police jurisdictions, such as Kurunegala, Wariyapola, and Welagedara, recorded notable increases. The major factors contributing to these incidents include increased exposure to modern technology, lack of digital literacy among parents, limited child awareness, parental negligence, and weakened student-teacher relationships. The study recommends implementing targeted awareness programs for children, parents, and teachers, enhancing community-based child protection measures, and strengthening local policing in high-risk areas. The findings underscore the urgent need for integrated preventive strategies to mitigate GCSA in rural Sri Lankan contexts.*

**Keywords:** Child Abuse, Girl child sexual abuse, Northwestern Province, Sri Lanka.

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## 1. Introduction

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework to address a range of global issues, including the problem of girl/female child sexual abuse (GCSA). SDG 16.2 particularly intends to eradicate all types of child abuse, including sexual abuse, by 2030. There are no more years to achieve this goal, but still, GCSA has become a social stigma.

In the context of age and gender, a girl typically refers to a female child in the childhood or adolescence stage. The age range can vary depending on cultural, legal, and social contexts. The Collins dictionary (2023) defines a girl as “*a female child from birth to young womanhood*”. Therefore, a girl is generally considered in the age range from infancy to adolescence, usually up to 18.

However, it's important to note that the definition of a girl can differ across different legal systems and cultural norms. On the other hand, girl-child sexual abuse is a severe violation of human rights and a global issue that requires immediate action. Any sexual act or exploitation perpetrated on girls under 18, including molestation, rape, trafficking, and other forms of sexual violence, is considered child sex. This exercise intends to increase awareness, lobby for policy changes, and promote interventions to protect and assist victims of GCSA by throwing light on the subject discipline, sociology and its sub-field/s on gender studies and gender-based violence.

Due to underreporting, cultural stigmas, and a dearth of studies in this sensitive area, obtaining reliable figures on child sex abuse in Sri Lanka is difficult. Nevertheless, studies and data that are now accessible shed light on the problem's scope. The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) of Sri Lanka reports that a total of 14,513 incidences of child abuse, the majority of which involved sexual abuse, were reported between 2016 and 2019. Additionally, just a small percentage of incidents are formally reported, underscoring the fact that child sex abuse in the whole country is largely unreported (National Child Protection Authority, 2020).

In the broader context of child sex abuse, girl children in Sri Lanka suffer particular difficulties and risks. Gender inequality, socioeconomic inequities, and patriarchal attitudes all increase their dangers. A 2020 study by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) revealed that females were engaged in 50% of reported child abuse cases, highlighting their increased susceptibility to sexual exploitation (Erken et al., 2020).

There are a number of reasons that contribute to the high frequency of GCSA in Sri Lanka. Families are frequently compelled by poverty and socioeconomic inequality to

put their kids in risky situations, like child labour, where they can be easily taken advantage of. Many girls are also ignorant of their rights due to the dearth of comprehensive sex education and awareness programmes, leaving them vulnerable to abuse. Victims are deterred from reporting incidents due to cultural taboos, stigma, and fear of consequences, which feeds the cycle of silence and impunity (Hettiarachchi, 2020).

Sri Lanka has implemented legislative measures to address child sex abuse. Sections 360–363 of the Penal Code make child sex abuse a crime, while the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act shields young victims. In order to stop and address child sex abuse, the NCPA and other governmental and non-governmental organisations are actively involved. The capacity-building of law enforcement organisations, guaranteeing effective implementation, and facilitating secure reporting systems continue to present issues.

The Women's and Children's Affairs Division (WCAD) is one of the main governing bodies to protect women and children from inequalities and gender-based violence. Thus, WCAD is significant for a number of reasons. It promotes gender parity and female empowerment in the workforce. The division makes sure that labour rules and regulations are followed, protecting the rights of female workers. It promotes children's rights to education and a safe upbringing while working to end child labour. In order to combat gender-based violence, the division actively raises awareness and offers support services. The well-being of children and vulnerable mothers is improved through the facilitation of social protection measures. The division also conducts research and develops policies to address the unique requirements and difficulties women and children face. Overall, in building a more just and inclusive society in Sri Lanka, the WCAD is an essential institution.

## **2. Study Area**

The Northwestern Province (NWP) of Sri Lanka holds significant importance due to its geographical location, cultural diversity, economic activities, and historical heritage. This region, encompassing districts such as Kurunegala and Puttalam, faces various social dilemmas that have implications for its development and social fabric.

### ***Agricultural Importance***

The Northwestern Province is known as the country's "rice bowl" due to its significant contribution to Sri Lanka's agricultural sector. The region is renowned for its paddy cultivation, livestock farming, and dairy production. However, land fragmentation,

climate change impacts, and limited access to modern agricultural practices pose dilemmas for sustaining agricultural productivity and livelihoods.

### ***Ethnic and Religious Diversity***

The NWP is home to diverse ethnic and religious communities, including Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers. This cultural diversity contributes to the richness of the region's heritage. However, social tensions, communal clashes, and the need for interethnic and interreligious harmony pose ongoing dilemmas in maintaining peaceful coexistence and fostering social cohesion.

### ***Development Disparities***

While NWP has witnessed considerable development in recent years, disparities persist within the region. Urban areas, such as Kurunegala, have seen more infrastructural improvements, access to services, and economic opportunities compared to remote rural areas. Addressing these development disparities and ensuring inclusive growth poses significant social dilemmas for policymakers and stakeholders.

### ***Poverty and Income Inequality***

Poverty and income inequality are prevalent dilemmas in NWP. Despite its agricultural productivity, a significant proportion of the population remains trapped in poverty, particularly in rural areas. Ensuring equitable access to resources, income-generating opportunities, and social welfare programs poses a challenge in addressing poverty and reducing income disparities in the region.

### ***Environmental Challenges***

NWP faces various environmental dilemmas, including deforestation, habitat degradation, and water resource management. Unsustainable agricultural practices, industrial activities, and rapid urbanization contribute to these challenges. Balancing economic development with environmental sustainability poses a dilemma in ensuring long-term ecological resilience and minimizing negative environmental impacts.

### ***Educational Disparities***

Access to quality education is another social dilemma in NWP. While the region hosts educational institutions, disparities exist in terms of infrastructure, resources, and quality of education between urban and rural areas. Bridging the educational gap and providing

equal opportunities for all children and youth in the region are critical challenges for improving human capital development.

### ***Health and Social Welfare***

Access to quality healthcare services and social welfare facilities presents a social dilemma in NWP. Limited healthcare infrastructure, disparities in healthcare service provision, and inadequate social support systems contribute to challenges in ensuring the well-being and social welfare of the population, particularly in remote areas.

According to the above, it can be seen that the NWP of Sri Lanka has paid crucial attention not only to the social stigmas but also the other aspects of stigmas. Thus, for the investigation of the GCSA and CSA, the NWP has become an important study area.

### **3. Literature Review**

According to the RAINN (n.d.) statistics, “[1] in 9 girls and 1 in 20 boys under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault. And 82% of all victims under 18 are female. Females ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault”. Therefore, it is clear that the GCSA is a social dilemma in every context in the world.

Akmatov’s (2010) investigation gives an evident idea about the development status of a country, child abuse and its behaviour. Thus, the study shows that most children in the African region experienced psychological, moderate, and severe physical abuse. In contrast, a considerably lower percentage of children in transitional countries experienced these forms of abuse. It depicts that, despite the “development status of a country”, there may have GCSA, more or less.

When considering the Asian context, Solehati et al., (2021) review that child sex abuse (CSA) ranged from 2.2% - 94% for girls and 1.7% - 49.5% for boys. The review concludes that early adolescence is the earliest victim age for child sex abuse, which is still prevalent in Asia. The majority of victims are women who already know the offender, and it is believed that cultural taboos contribute to the rise in CSA in Asia. From this point of view, it is clear that not only in the other context in the world Asian countries are also having a significant contribution to the aforesaid dilemma.

In order to have an insight into Sri Lanka and its background of the GCSA, the United Nations Dispatch gives a crucial idea about the safety of the environment for children. According to their investigations, Sri Lanka only has nearly 51% of a safe environment for children. Figure 01 depicts the above in a summarised way.

**Figure 01: Identified best environments for children (out of 100%)**

|      |                |      |              |
|------|----------------|------|--------------|
| 82.7 | United Kingdom | 62.4 | Brazil       |
| 81.5 | Sweden         | 58.2 | Serbia       |
| 75.3 | Canada         | 57.6 | India        |
| 74.9 | Australia      | 57.0 | Turkey       |
| 73.7 | United States  | 56.1 | South Africa |
| 73.1 | Germany        | 55.3 | Philippines  |
| 71.6 | South Korea    | 54.2 | Tanzania     |
| 69.7 | Italy          | 53.8 | Kenya        |
| 65.2 | France         | 53.7 | Uganda       |
| 63.8 | Japan          | 53.4 | Malaysia     |

|      |             |      |            |
|------|-------------|------|------------|
| 52.8 | Romania     | 47.3 | Kazakhstan |
| 52.7 | Mexico      | 47.0 | Indonesia  |
| 52.5 | Cambodia    | 46.4 | Nigeria    |
| 52.4 | El Salvador | 45.9 | Russia     |
| 50.8 | Sri Lanka   | 45.4 | Argentina  |
| 50.6 | Albania     | 43.7 | China      |
| 49.7 | UAE         | 42.9 | Vietnam    |
| 49.4 | Jamaica     | 37.8 | Mozambique |
| 49.3 | Mongolia    | 31.2 | Egypt      |
| 48.8 | Rwanda      | 28.3 | Pakistan   |

The above figure 01 gives statistical proof that the environment for children is not favourable even in the so-called wealthy/developed countries. It proves the investigations of the authors mentioned earlier, where the development nor the region of a country is higher in CSA.

When considering the Northern part of Sri Lanka, Sathiadas et al. (2016) show that the majority of female children are victimised by sexual abuse. Therefore, the GCSA can be identified as a social dilemma in Sri Lanka. However, the pathetic situation of the Sri Lankan law against the CSA can be cited as follows.

*"...police data on child prostitution, child pornography, and encouraging the seduction of a girl were considered "minor offenses." Thus, Sri Lanka's laws have customarily*

*ignored the severely detrimental psychological and developmental effects of sexual abuse on children” (de Zoysa, 2002, para 1).*

By considering the above facts, the main problem of this research is "What is the nature of GCSA are happening in NWP?" In order to answer the above, executed two research questions as follows.

1. What are the reasons for the increment of GCSA in NWP?
2. What kinds of actions that can be taken to mitigate the effects of GCSA?

#### **4. The objective and the specific objectives of the study**

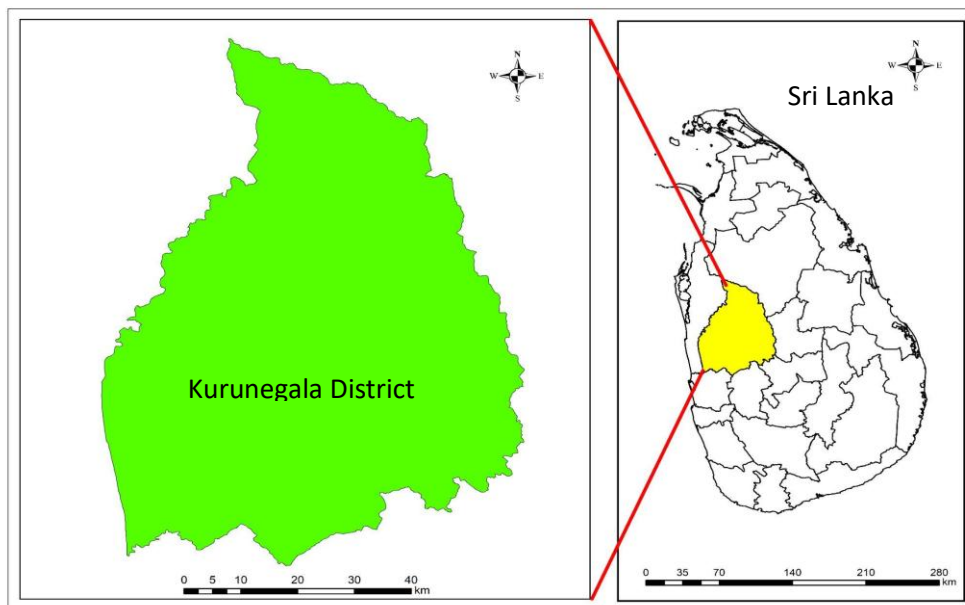
The main objective of this study is to identify the nature of GCSA in NWP in Sri Lanka. Thus, to achieve this objective, the following specific objectives were executed.

- To examine the reasons for the increment of GCSA in NWP
- To propose/suggest actions against GCSA

#### **5. The methodology**

This research was based on secondary data from a survey conducted by the Women's and Children's Affairs Division of the Department of Labour, Sri Lanka. The research was limited only to the reported cases of child sexual abuse in the Kurunegala District for the years 2021 and 2022 (*Please refer Map 01*). Therefore, the research design of this exercise adopted a quantitative research design using descriptive statistical analysis to identify the patterns and variations in reported incidents across police jurisdictions. Other than this authority-based secondary data, data from the books, journals and online publications were taken to fulfil the main and specific objectives. Data were tabulated and analysed using Microsoft Excel to generate frequency distributions and year-to-year comparisons, while the essential maps were generated using the ArcGIS package.

**Map 01: Survey Area**



Source: *Compiled by the author using data from the survey department, 2023*

## 6. Findings and Results

Here, the nature of sexual abuse of children in the entire Kurunegala district is analysed. Accordingly, the results and discussion have been done according to the objectives of the study. When studying the nature of delinquency, crimes reported in the Kurunegala district were 132 and 114 cases in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Table 01 depicts the number of reported cases of child sex abuse in 2021 and 2022.

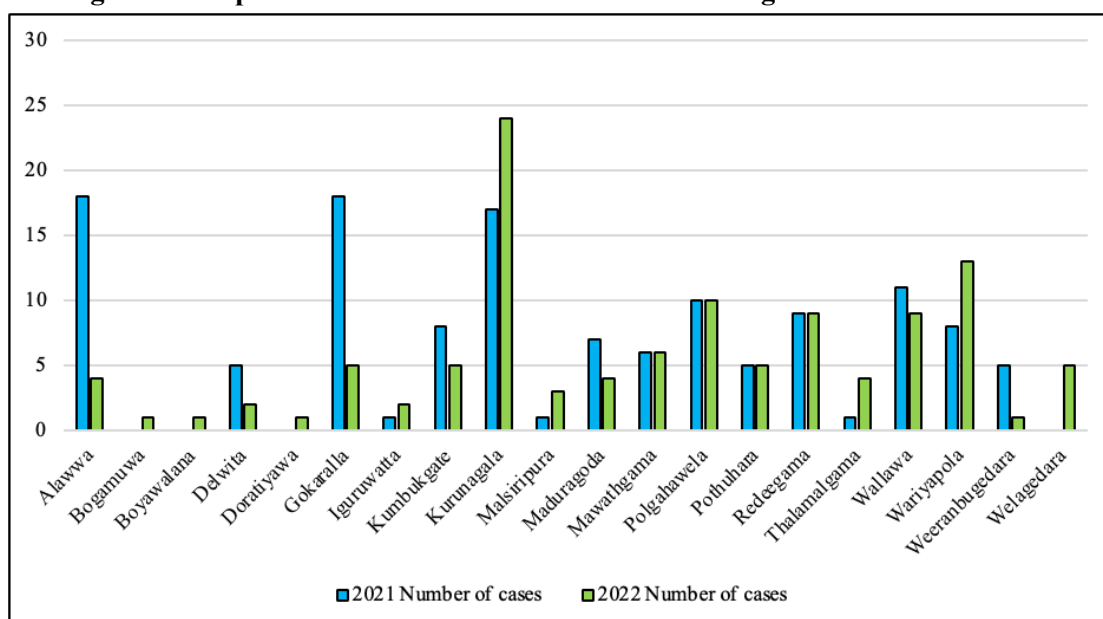
**Table 01: Reported abuse of child sex abuse in Kurunegala district 2021-2022**

| SN<br>. | Name of<br>the Police<br>Station | 2021                   | 2022                   | SN<br>. | Name of the<br>Police Station | 2021                   | 2022                   |
|---------|----------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------|-------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|         |                                  | Numbe<br>r of<br>cases | Numbe<br>r of<br>cases |         |                               | Numbe<br>r of<br>cases | Numbe<br>r of<br>cases |
| 1       | Alawwa                           | 18                     | 4                      | 11      | Maduragoda                    | 7                      | 4                      |
| 2       | Bogamuwa                         | 0                      | 1                      | 12      | Mawathgama                    | 6                      | 6                      |
| 3       | Boyawalana                       | 0                      | 1                      | 13      | Polgahawela                   | 10                     | 10                     |
| 4       | Delwita                          | 5                      | 2                      | 14      | Pothuhara                     | 5                      | 5                      |
| 5       | Doratiyawa                       | 0                      | 1                      | 15      | Redeegama                     | 9                      | 9                      |

|                  |             |           |           |                  |                |            |            |
|------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------------|----------------|------------|------------|
| 6                | Gokaralla   | 18        | 5         | 16               | Thalamalgama   | 1          | 4          |
| 7                | Iguruwatta  | 1         | 2         | 17               | Wallawa        | 11         | 9          |
| 8                | Kumbukgate  | 8         | 5         | 18               | Wariyapola     | 8          | 13         |
| 9                | Kurunagala  | 17        | 24        | 19               | Weeranbugedara | 5          | 1          |
| 10               | Malsiripura | 1         | 3         | 20               | Welagedara     | 0          | 5          |
| <b>Sub Total</b> |             | <b>68</b> | <b>48</b> | <b>Sub Total</b> |                | <b>62</b>  | <b>66</b>  |
| <b>Total</b>     |             |           |           |                  |                | <b>130</b> | <b>114</b> |

Source: Compiled by the author using data from the WCAD, 2023

**Figure 01: Reported abuse of child sex abuse in Kurunegala district 2021-2022**



After analysing the data, it was possible to identify several factors that are mainly responsible for the increase in reported cases of child sex abuse in the area.

***With the development of modern technology, children and parents are increasingly turning to it***

Nowadays, with the increase in the use of modern technology, it is possible to identify a tendency for children to focus more on it: Ex. – *social media, internet, smart phones, television channels*. Especially with children using social media or their parent’s social media, there is a tendency to watch mind-twisting videos. Also, engaging in phone conversations through video technology, sharing indecent photos, and ultimately using them to lead children to sexual abuse.

### ***Nowadays, many people have distorted mental states***

Children, adults, mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters suffer from various mental disorders, which has led to an increase in crime in the society. This has been caused by turning to watch blue films, imitating their contents, and comparing their stories to their own lives.

### ***Lack of technology literacy among parents in rural areas***

Parents in rural areas often lack knowledge about social media and digital tools, making it difficult for them to monitor their children's activities. Consequently, children may form unsafe online relationships that increase the risk of abuse.

### ***Lack of awareness among the rural people about the current information of the country***

There is less awareness among the people about the crimes/abuses that are happening in the country when the people who are engaged in agriculture and farming activities in the rural areas focus on doing their daily livelihood. Due to this, children are more victims of crime.

### ***Parental busyness***

Due to busyness and many parents working/making decisions based on money, children become victims of crime due to their lack of attention towards their children. For this, it can be pointed out that both parents are employed.

### ***Parents' lack of understanding about the child's mental level***

Dealing with the children's needs/unwanted goods and services based on the competition between the parents. This is due to a lack of parental attention, carelessness, arrogance, ignorance, and poverty. Parents act without understanding who the child is, the child's age, where the child is and the child's mentality. A tendency of children to become victims of crimes can be identified due to reasons such as inconsistencies in parents, misdeeds, extramarital affairs and second marriage. And by making the children competitive with the parents, the child will also agree to make tough decisions.

### ***The child's lack of understanding about society***

Directing children only to education without understanding the outside society has led to criminals/swindlers falling into the hands of gifted children who are unable to live in the society and clash with the society even though they only have the knowledge of the book.

### ***Decreased student-teacher relationships***

At present, in the school, especially in the urban schools, due to teachers chasing after money, the existing attitudes about the responsibilities and duties of the profession are weakening. Also, the bond between the teacher and the child is reduced, the respect for the teacher is reduced, etc. also led to this.

Accordingly, after analysing the data of the study, it was possible to identify that the above-mentioned factors have caused the increase in female child abuse in the area.

When situating the findings within broader contexts, the trends observed in the Kurunegala District are consistent with national patterns reported by the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), which recorded over 14,000 cases of child abuse between 2016 and 2019, with sexual abuse accounting for the majority (National Child Protection Authority, 2020). Internationally, UNICEF (2021) and RAINN (2013) statistics indicate that 1 in 9 girls globally experience sexual abuse before the age of 18, demonstrating that Sri Lanka's rates align with global concerns (RAINN, 2013; UNICEF, 2021). The persistence of underreporting, stigma, and digital exposure as key factors reflects not only local socio-cultural issues but also the global trend of technology-facilitated exploitation. Hence, while the Northwestern Province's specific socio-economic environment intensifies vulnerabilities, the underlying risk factors mirror global patterns of gender-based violence against children.

## **6.2 Suggestions against child sex abuse**

Thus, the increase in the abuse of women and children in a country or region can have negative effects on the society. Because of this, measures should be taken to reduce and prevent the abuse of child sex.

### ***Implementation of children's awareness programs***

Police, doctors, psychiatrists, and counsellors can be used for this purpose. The nature of crime and the obstacles it may cause to the child's future should be taught through such programs. Children can be educated through schools, Sunday schools, and tuition classes.

Awareness programs should use practical case examples to explain the nature of crimes. Since children respond better to interactive formats, audio and video materials can make sessions more engaging. In the cases of crimes that are reported today, awareness should be given through the information that is revealed in connection with the problems of the children about the factors that cause the children to end up in such a situation. Giving sex education to the child and the negative consequences should be made known to the child. For example, children should be informed about the problems and inconveniences they have to face in practice due to the criminal incidents they have faced.

### ***Implementation of awareness programs for parents/guardians and teachers***

By educating children and teachers, each person should understand the bond with the child. Especially since children spend most of the day with their parents, parents have more responsibility towards their children. In educating the parents/adults of children in the age group of 12-16, it is very important to understand the age and mental state of the child, so parents/adults should warn and inform the children with understanding. Also, when there are children in boarding houses, their guardians should also be informed.

### ***Increasing police security in areas and days where children hang out more***

Children come to suburban areas for schools and extra classes where they are exposed to various cases of abuse. In order to avoid this situation, security forces should be deployed in areas where children hang out more and in public places and hotels on days when children visit more (example: weekends, Poya days).

### ***Pay more attention to children and give them love and affection well***

Parents should be made aware of the importance of maintaining a good relationship between parents and children. Children become misguided and stubborn due to careless actions by parents, and they tend to make quick decisions. Because of this, there is a temptation for children to harm their lives, so parents should be informed first. We can point out the wrong methods used in warning the child for various reasons like love relationships, drug use, etc. Accordingly, whenever possible, parents should be informed to socialize the child in such a way as to improve the bond between parents and children by providing the love and affection the child needs.

### ***Giving only essential items to children***

Only essential items should be given to the child. Parents should also have some awareness about the technical equipment provided. Parents should not only provide the

necessary things for the child's needs but also check the child's use of the equipment. During those investigations, the parents should carry out the activities in such a way that the child is not physically or mentally distressed.

### ***Identifying potential abuse sites and informing the right holders***

As such places, temporary accommodation (boarding), hotels, schools, other deserted places etc., can be identified. People who have the right to these should be informed. In particular, measures such as restricting the arrival of people for boarding to parents only, prohibiting the arrival of minors in hotels, installing CCTV in deserted places, or deploying police or other security personnel on days when children are more active should be taken.

### ***Educating society***

Here, short, and attractive awareness programs can be advertised to all people through mass media and social media. And everyone should be convinced that all children are the future of the country, and taking care of them is a significant responsibility of all of us. As a whole, the human qualities in the people have been severely destroyed nowadays, so programs should be implemented with the support of government and non-government organizations to increase those human qualities.

### ***Strict decision-making by the law itself***

People who abuse children should be strictly enforced. This will reduce the occurrence of such incidents in the future. Likewise, people who commit such acts should be publicized through the media and convinced that they cannot hide from the law. Electronic and print media should be used to inform people about the legal background of child abuse. Looking at the above issues, it appears that GCSA incidents can be prevented/minimized by taking such measures.

## **7. Conclusion**

The issue of GCSA is a significant concern in Sri Lanka, with a high prevalence of underreported cases. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16.2, aim to eradicate all forms of child abuse, including sexual abuse, by 2030. However, GCSA remains a social stigma and a severe violation of human rights. Various factors contribute to the high frequency of GCSA in Sri Lanka. Poverty, socioeconomic inequality, and patriarchal attitudes increase the vulnerability of girls to sexual

exploitation. Limited access to comprehensive sex education and awareness programs leaves girls uninformed about their rights and more susceptible to abuse. Cultural taboos, stigma, and fear of consequences discourage victims from reporting incidents, perpetuating a cycle of silence and impunity. Efforts have been made to address child sex abuse in Sri Lanka through legislative measures and the involvement of governmental and non-governmental organizations. The WCAD plays a crucial role in promoting gender parity, empowering women, protecting children's rights, and combating gender-based violence. The NWP of Sri Lanka faces various social dilemmas, including agricultural challenges, ethnic and religious diversity, development disparities, poverty, environmental issues, educational disparities, and healthcare and social welfare access. Addressing these dilemmas requires a multi-dimensional approach involving government authorities, civil society organizations, community participation, and inclusive policies to create a prosperous, inclusive, and harmonious society. As per the study conducted in the Kurunegala district of NWP revealed an increase in reported cases of child sex abuse. Factors such as the influence of modern technology, mental health issues, lack of technology literacy among parents, lack of awareness, parental busyness, and lack of understanding between parents and children contribute to this increase. To address child sex abuse, suggestions include implementing children and parent/guardian awareness programs, increasing police security in areas frequented by children, and emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships between parents and children.

Although the study provides valuable insights into the prevalence and nature of girl child sexual abuse in the Northwestern Province, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied solely on secondary data, which may underrepresent actual cases due to underreporting and data collection inconsistencies. Second, the analysis was confined to the Kurunegala District, limiting the generalizability of the findings to the entire province or country. Third, the absence of qualitative data restricts a deeper understanding of the victims' lived experiences and community perceptions. Future research incorporating mixed-method approaches and longitudinal data is recommended to provide a more comprehensive picture and to strengthen policy interventions. In conclusion, the issue of GCSA in Sri Lanka, particularly in the NWP, requires urgent attention and comprehensive efforts from various stakeholders to protect the rights and well-being of children, empower women, and create a safe and inclusive society.

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