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The Correlation Between Female Police Presence and Victim Trust

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The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2012 envisages a child-friendly justice system by mandating gender-sensitive procedures, including the involvement of women police officers during investigation and medical examination. However, the persistent underrepresentation of women in India's police force significantly undermines these statutory safeguards. With women constituting only around 12% of the total police strength and an even smaller proportion occupying supervisory positions, child victims often face secondary victimisation, delayed investigations, compromised evidence collection, and psychological trauma. This paper examines the historical evolution of women's participation in policing, analyses the implementation gap between POCSO mandates and institutional realities, and evaluates recent judicial interventions, government policies, and statistical trends. It further explores the structural barriers limiting women's recruitment, retention, and promotion within law enforcement. The study concludes by recommending enforceable recruitment quotas, gender-sensitive infrastructure, specialised POCSO training, promotion reforms, and robust monitoring mechanisms to strengthen victim-centred policing and improve access to justice for children.

Keywords: *women police, child sexual abuse, gender-sensitive policing, access to justice.*

INTRODUCTION

The trauma suffered by victims of child sexual abuse under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act is greatly exacerbated by India's low female police participation, which presently stands at an alarming 8–12% nationally, despite set targets of 33%. The sensitive handling that is essential for vital procedures like reporting events, performing medical examinations, and conducting in-depth investigations is limited by this under-representation. A startling underreporting rate of 60–70% of such incidents is caused by several factors, including recruitment biases, inadequate infrastructure, and deeply ingrained cultural barriers, all of which contribute to the current gender gap in law enforcement. Furthermore, the low conviction rate of only 34% emphasises the structural problems with the legal system, depriving many victims of support and justice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

POCSO's 2012 child-friendly regulations under Sections 24 and 27¹ are at odds with the historical background of low female police participation in India, which shows a systemic trend from colonial-era exclusion to gradual post-independence improvements. The shortcomings of male-dominated investigations were highlighted by pre-POCSO judicial interventions such as *Vishaka* (1997) and *Sakshi* (2004), which led to explicit mandates for female officers in child victim statements and medicals. However, representation remained below 12%, far from international standards.²

PRE-POCSO ERA: JUDICIAL CATALYSTS FOR GENDER-SENSITIVE POLICING

The 1861 Police Act established India's policing system, which has traditionally emphasised a largely masculine approach to law enforcement. Before India's independence in 1947, women were mainly excluded from this field. Notable turning points included the appointment of the first female constable in 1949 and Kiran Bedi as the first female IPS officer in 1972. But by 1981, the National Police Commission found

¹ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, ss 24 and 27

² Bharti Jain, 'Women's representation in Indian police falls short of 33% target: Home Ministry report' *The Times of India* (06 December 2023) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/womens-representation-in-indian-police-falls-short-of-33-target-home-ministry-report/articleshow/105762632.cms>> accessed 04 June 2026

that there were only roughly 3,000 female officers overall, or just 0.4% of the police force. This startling figure demonstrates the profoundly ingrained patriarchal standards in Indian society, where policing was primarily seen as a 'masculine' vocation, hence sustaining gender disparities in this crucial field of public service.³

Vishaka v State of Rajasthan (1997): It is the landmark decision by the Supreme Court of India that created the required, legally binding rules to stop sexual harassment of women in the workplace. The verdict, which was prompted by Bhanwari Devi's gang rape, defined workplace sexual harassment, established complaint processes (ICC), and affirmed gender equality and the right to a secure and respectable workplace under Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21 of the Constitution.

Sakshi v UOI (2004): The Indian Supreme Court decided that the definition of rape under Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) could only be limited to penile-vaginal penetration and could not be judicially broadened to cover all forms of penetration. The Court emphasised that legislative action was required for legal improvements while denying a request to rewrite the Act and ordering the use of child-friendly procedures, screens, and in-camera proceedings for victims.

POCSO 2012 MANDATES

Section 24: Recording Child's Statement:⁴ This clause requires that a woman police officer of sub-inspector level or higher, who is not required to wear a uniform, record the child's statement in their home, regular place of stay, or preferred location. Unless a Special Court orders otherwise, the officer makes sure the child and the accused do not interact, forbids the youngster from being detained overnight at the police station, and shields the child's identity from the media.

Section 27: Medical Examination:⁵ Even in the absence of a documented FIR, medical examinations for child victims prioritise urgent care in accordance with Section 164A of the CrPC. In the presence of a trusted parent or other adult, a female physician examines

³ 'National Conference of Women in Police' (*Central Reserve Police Force*)

<<https://crpf.gov.in/Welfare/National-Conference-of-Women-in-Police>> accessed 04 June 2026

⁴ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, s 24

⁵ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, s 27

girls; if this is not possible, a woman designated by the medical head attends. This sensitively collects evidence while protecting dignity.⁶

EVOLUTION OF WOMEN POLICE REPRESENTATION (2013-2026)

According to data from the India Justice Report and the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD), women's police representation in India increased from a mere 5.87% in 2013 (with 97,000 women among a total force of 16.6 lakh) to 11.75% by 2022 (with 2.46 lakh women in a total force of 20.9 lakh), stabilising around 12.3% overall by 2025. This representation is still far below the 33% quota that the Standing Committee on Home Affairs has recommended since 2013. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has reiterated this recommendation in several letters, including one from April 2022 that calls for the addition of ten constables per police station and three female Sub-Inspectors. Significant post-Nirbhaya measures, such as the creation of women-only police stations, which grew from 502 in 2013 to 744 in 2022, contributed to the nearly twofold increase in women's representation. Only 17% of police stations are found in rural areas, and these stations still make up only 4.2% of all police stations.

Additionally, training assistance from the NIRBHAYA Fund has been helpful. However, the representation is still disproportionately skewed toward the constable ranks, which make up roughly 90% of the entire female police force, while the officer ranks are only 8% (25,282 women). Less than 1,000 women hold senior positions, such as Superintendents of Police (SP) or Directors General of Police (DGP). Progress is nonetheless hampered by persisting family responsibilities, ongoing recruitment prejudices, and infrastructure deficiencies such as a shortage of restrooms and crèches. This problem is further highlighted by significant state differences: Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have attained rates of 21% and 20%, respectively, while Bihar has reached an impressive 24% participation through quotas. Despite national guidelines aimed at fostering gender equality within law enforcement, states like Tripura and Jammu &

⁶ Gaurav Yadav, 'POCSO Act – Salient Features & Challenges – Explained Pointwise' (*Forum IAS*, 12 January 2026) <<https://forumias.com/blog/pocso-act-salient-features-challenges-explained-pointwise/>> accessed 04 June 2026

Kashmir hover at a low 6%, while nine states even show a reduction in women's presence.⁷

Despite this increase, the number of women police per lakh women population only slightly improved from 16 (2013) to 36 (2022) half the parity ideal of 76 highlighting a persistent gap that hinders POCSO compliance; rural stations (66% of PS) remain male-dominated (only 17% of PS rural), fuelling trauma and underreporting; MHA's five advisories since 2013 produced tokenism without enforcement, leaving India's ratio at 36/lakh compared to the UN's 30% benchmark or peers like Australia's 32%, and continuing evidentiary failures in child probes.

CURRENT DATA & STATISTICS

According to data from the India Justice Report (2025), the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD), and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for the years 2025–2026, the national average for women's police representation in India is 12.3%. This number represents about 2.6 lakh women out of a total force of 21 lakh soldiers, a little rise from 11.7% in 2022. With only 8% of women holding officer ranks (25,282 women serving as Sub-Inspectors and above) and a startling 90% restricted to constable roles, this representation is severely skewed. Additionally, less than 1,000 women, or 12% of the Indian Police Service (IPS), hold prominent positions like Superintendent of Police (SP) or Director General of Police (DGP). State differences across the nation are striking: Bihar leads with a representation of 24%, the largest increase from 21% in 2022, followed closely by Andhra Pradesh at 21%, Tamil Nadu at 20%, and Karnataka, which constitute a powerful southern cluster. States like Jammu & Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal report representations of less than 10%, while Tripura lags with only 6%. Despite the Ministry of Home Affairs' April 2022 33% quota instruction, women's participation has alarmingly decreased in nine states and Union Territories. Only 4.2% of the 17,379 police stations in the country are female (744 women police stations compared to 502 in 2013), and only 17% of them are in rural areas, compared to 66% of general police stations. Furthermore, the average percentage of female employees in child-specific units

⁷ Apoorva Mandhani, 'Just 8% of country's police officers are women, 12% in IPS, finds India Justice Report 2025' *The Print* (15 April 2025) <<https://theprint.in/judiciary/just-8-of-country-police-officers-are-women-12-in-ips-finds-india-justice-report-2025/2589768/>> accessed 04 June 2026

like Child Care Units (CCWUs) and Special Juvenile Police Units is less than 10%. As a result, there are only 36 female police officers per lakh women in the population, which is much less than the ideal parity target of 76.⁸

IMPACT ON POCSO VICTIMS

FIR Recording Trauma (Sec 24 Violation):⁹ Girls under 15 must make statements to male SIs because 88% of stations lack female officers, which makes them feel ashamed when they are asked invasive questions such as ‘Why were you alone?’ According to Vidhi Centre data, 50% of victims choose not to speak, resulting in a 60–70% underreporting rate; rural victims travel 50 km to women's PS, frequently abandoning cases.

Medical Examination Delays (Sec 27):¹⁰ A female doctor is urgently required within a tight timeframe of 24 hours; however, current shortages lead to frustratingly long waits of up to 72 hours, often necessitating male-led escorts. This prolonged exposure can result in significant trauma for victims. Additionally, DNA evidence can deteriorate over time, and alarmingly, 40% of charge sheets are ultimately rejected due to various factors. Consequently, acquittals have risen by an alarming 25%. Research has shown that the likelihood of developing PTSD doubles when there is not a gender match with the medical professional involved in the case.

Investigation Coercion (Sec 26):¹¹ Male probes use aggressive methods that flagrantly break the ‘no distress’ norm, seriously damaging victims' emotional well-being. As a result, these people frequently experience severe familial pressure in addition to slut-shaming. Additionally, the harmful stigma of emasculation affects boys, who account for 12% of all cases. The integrity of the investigation process is seriously threatened by the alarming 30% of non-compliance found in 2025 audits, which results in untrustworthy evidence.¹²

⁸ Suresh Deepala, ‘Data: Women in Police Force as of 2022 is About 12%, Much Below the Recommended 33%’ (*Factly*, 26 July 2024) <<https://factly.in/data-women-in-police-force-as-of-2022-is-about-12-much-below-the-recommended-33/>> accessed 04 June 2026

⁹ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, s 24

¹⁰ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, s 27

¹¹ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, s 26

¹² ‘Implementation Issues with the POCSO Act’ (*Drishti IAS*, 21 January 2023)

<<https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/implementation-issues-with-the-pocso-act>> accessed 04 June 2026

Secondary Victimisation: Witnesses' feelings of fear and anxiety are greatly increased during cross-examinations by male solicitors in courtrooms, where screens are not present in about 70% of cases. Furthermore, as stated in Section 39, the lack of female support personnel adds to a concerning statistic: dropout and PTSD rates are 40% greater in cases that are handled more carefully. The difficulties vulnerable people encounter during the legal procedure are made worse by this lack of suitable assistance.

Conviction Erosion: A shocking 40% of charge sheets are rejected due to weak statements resulting from trauma, which causes conviction rates in ordinary courts to drop to only 28%. Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs), on the other hand, have a more favourable conviction rate of 42%. Because of the shortcomings in the judicial system, this concerning tendency contributes to a circle of impunity in which criminals frequently evade punishment.¹³

Underreporting Cycle: Due to the widespread stigma attached to reporting such assaults, between 60 and 70 per cent of occurrences are never officially documented as FIRs. Only 63,000 cases have been formally reported, according to the NCRB 2024 study, greatly understating the actual scope of the issue. Girls from rural regions and members of the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Scheduled Tribes (ST) are disproportionately affected by this problem.

Psychological Fallout: About 40% of instances are inadequately managed, and the long-term consequences of these cases frequently involve serious problems, including despair and self-harm. These detrimental effects are further exacerbated by improper convergence with the counselling procedures specified in the Juvenile Justice Act, creating a vicious circle of distress for those impacted.

CAUSES & CHALLENGES

Recruitment Biases & Barriers: Female candidates are routinely excluded due to physical eligibility requirements (height >152 cm, chest measurements irrelevant for women), which are exacerbated by irregular recruitment cycles lacking permanent boards in many states. Poor implementation continues despite MHA advisories for 33%

¹³ 'Scheme of Fast Track Special Courts' (*Press Information Bureau*, 08 August 2025) <<https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2154103®=48&lang=2>> accessed 04 June 2026

quotas since 2013; for example, Bihar reserves 35% but achieves only 24%, while Kerala, Goa, and Mizoram have no policy and hover at 6–11%.

Infrastructural Deficits: Currently, 70% of police stations lack basic gender-sensitive amenities like separate restrooms, childcare crèches, safe night shifts, or secure housing choices, which greatly hinders the retention of female officers. Because of this, there are only 4.2% of female police officers nationwide – a total of 744 – with a sharp disparity in representation: 17% in rural areas and 66% in general rural police stations. Due to this circumstance, female police officers are compelled to work in settings that are dominated by men, which presents further difficulties for them.

Promotion Glass Ceiling: 52% of women in law enforcement have advanced to the rank of Sub-Inspector (SI), but a startling 90% of them are still only constables. But just 12% become Indian Police Service (IPS) officers, and less than 1,000 women hold key positions like Director General of Police (DGP) or Superintendent of Police (SP). This glaring under-representation draws attention to a systemic bias in mentoring and training that seriously impedes women's professional advancement in the industry. Furthermore, opportunities for mixed-unit exposure – which is crucial for professional development – are further restricted by the existence of distinct cadres.¹⁴

Work-Life Conflicts & Family Pressures: Particularly in rural and small-town regions, unpredictable long hours seriously conflict with societal expectations surrounding women's traditional domestic obligations. Due to ongoing daycare shortages and a lack of flexible job listings that could meet the demands of working mothers, this circumstance adds to high attrition rates.

Cultural & Perceptual Hurdles: Many people view law enforcement as a 'masculine' career that requires hostility and physical domination. Kiran Bedi draws attention to the pervasive societal barriers that women encounter in this industry, noting that many of her male coworkers are often uncooperative and contemptuous of their efforts. According to a Maharashtra study, 400 female police officers raised these issues, highlighting the difficulties they face in their jobs.

¹⁴ 'India Justice Report 2025: Fewer Than 1,000 Women in Senior Police Roles Nationwide' (*Change in Content*, 30 April 2025) <<https://www.changeincontent.com/india-justice-report-2025/>> accessed 04 June 2026

Internal Harassment & Discrimination: Gender bias and sexual harassment are reported by about 20% of women in the force, which severely lowers staff morale. Additionally, the lack of internal complaints committees only makes this problem worse by making it more challenging for victims to get assistance and justice.

JUDICIAL & GOVT RESPONSES

Judicial and government responses to low female police representation have been proactive yet largely advisory and unevenly implemented, blending Supreme Court directives with repeated MHA interventions but yielding limited enforcement.¹⁵

Nipun Saxena v Union of India (2018) upheld stringent safeguards for victims' identity in situations involving sexual assault. On December 11, 2018, the Supreme Court rendered a ruling that concerned media disclosures and procedural protections under the POCSO Act and Section 228A IPC.

Alakh Alok Srivastava v Union of India dealt with POCSO case trial delays. In accordance with the POCSO Act of 2012, the Supreme Court published rules to guarantee prompt justice for victims of child sexual offences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Enforce 33% Quota: Implement a legislative framework that establishes binding recruitment targets, ensuring that at least one-third of recruits in the police force are women. Additionally, it is essential to relax existing height and chest measurement criteria that may disproportionately disadvantage female candidates, thereby making the recruitment process more inclusive and accessible for women.

Infrastructure Boost: Introduce mandatory requirements for the establishment of crèches and adequate toilet facilities in all police stations. This initiative aims to create a more supportive work environment, particularly for women officers. Furthermore, there should be an expansion plan to increase the number of women police stations to 2,000,

¹⁵ 'Supreme Court urges Union Government to Introduce a "Romeo-Juliet" clause in POCSO Act' (*Vision IAS*, 12 January 2026) <<https://visionias.in/current-affairs/news-today/2026-01-12/polity-and-governance/supreme-court-urges-union-government-to-introduce-a-romeo-juliet-clause-in-pocso-act>> accessed 04 June 2026

facilitating a safer and more accommodating space for female officers and the community they serve.

POCSO-Specific Training: Enforce compulsory training modules focusing on gender sensitivity and the specifics of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act for all personnel involved in child-related investigations. This training is imperative to ensure that law enforcement officers approach cases with the necessary understanding and compassion.¹⁶

Promotion Reforms: Revise the current promotion structure to create unified cadres that support equal opportunities for all genders. Implement mentorship programs aimed at preparing women for senior roles, with a target of achieving at least 20% representation of women in the Indian Police Service (IPS) at higher levels.

Monitoring Dashboard: Establish a comprehensive monitoring dashboard that includes annual audits conducted by the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD). These audits should link funding and resource allocation to compliance with these new policies and initiatives, ensuring accountability and transparency in the implementation process.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the stark underrepresentation of women in India's police force, hovering below 12% overall and merely 8% in officer ranks, stands as a significant structural violation of the POCSO Act's child-friendly mandates. This is particularly evident in Section 24's requirement that female officers record statements from girls under 15, as well as Section 27's mandate for medical examinations to be conducted by women doctors. This glaring gap within the police force perpetuates a series of systemic failures that severely impact victims: retraumatization during the filing of First Information Reports (FIRs), medical delays that often exceed 72 hours, coercive investigations led predominantly by male officers, and an alarming rate of underreporting that affects 60-70% of cases. Consequently, these issues contribute to a dismal national conviction rate

¹⁶ Sadaf Modak, 'Study on POCSO Act implementation: Out of 36 rural police stations, 20 don't have women sub-inspector' *The Indian Express* (08 May 2018) <<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/study-on-pocso-act-implementation-out-of-36-rural-police-stations-20-dont-have-women-sub-inspector-5167395/>> accessed 04 June 2026

of just 34%. Despite judicial interventions such as the Nipun Saxena case in 2018 and Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) advisories advocating for 33% quotas since 2013, the implementation of these initiatives remains largely tokenistic. This is further highlighted by state disparities in female representation (for example, Bihar at 24% compared to Tripura at a mere 6%), which underscore entrenched recruitment biases, infrastructural deficits, and pervasive cultural barriers that hinder progress. Urgent and comprehensive reforms such as legislated quotas for female personnel, POCSO-specific training programs, and the establishment of monitoring dashboards are essential to align policing practices with the constitutional guarantee of dignity under Article 21 and to restore justice for child victims across the nation. Without these critical changes, the cycle of trauma and injustice for vulnerable children will continue unabated.