

International Journal of Social Science and Education Research



ISSN Print: 2664-9845
ISSN Online: 2664-9853
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.42
IJSSER 2025; 7(2): 796-799
www.socialsciencejournals.net
Received: 15-10-2025
Accepted: 12-11-2025

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Women's safety in Odisha: A critical analysis of institutional violence

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26649845.2025.v7.i2j.438>

Abstract

In the recent period Odisha has witnessed a disturbing rise in cases of sexual exploitation and underage pregnancies among girls residing in government-run and residential school hostels. Between 2020 to 2025, multiple cases emerged from tribal districts such as Kandhamal, Kalahandi, Sundargarh, and Mayurbhanj, where minor girls many under the age of 16 were found to be pregnant while staying in state-run hostels (The Hindu, 2024; OTV, 2023). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2022), Odisha recorded over 2,300 cases of crimes against women, with rural and tribal belts being disproportionately affected. These incidents have ignited public outrage and raised serious concerns about the illusion of women's safety, particularly for girls from marginalized and tribal communities. This research critically examines the systemic failure of institutions entrusted with ensuring the safety and dignity of women in Odisha. Using both qualitative as well as quantitative approaches, The study draws on recent POCSO Act violation data, NCRB crime statistics, field-based case studies, and media reports to investigate how administrative apathy, lack of monitoring, and absence of female staff in residential schools contribute to unchecked abuse. This paper critically analyses that the rhetoric of safety remains far removed from the lived realities of adolescent girls in Odisha, necessitating urgent reforms in policy, institutional accountability, and gender-sensitive governance. The study calls for a rights-based, intersectional approach to restore trust and ensure justice.

Keywords: Women's safety, POCSO act, intersectional vulnerability, policy gaps

1. Introduction

The idea of women's safety in India is enshrined in constitutional guarantees and legal frameworks. Its implementation remains deeply fractured particularly in socio-economically marginalized regions such as Odisha. The state has seen a surge in institutional sexual violence, particularly in government-run residential schools and hostels meant to protect and educate girls, especially from tribal and rural communities. Despite state and national initiatives aimed at safeguarding women and children, recent developments in Odisha paint a troubling picture. In recent years several cases of underage pregnancies were reported from school hostels in Kalahandi, Kandhamal, Sundargarh, and Mayurbhanj, involving minor girls, some as young as 14 (The Hindu, 2024; OdishaTV, 2023). According to the National Crime Records Bureau of Odisha recorded 2,348 cases of crimes against women in 2022-23 many of which occurred in educational or custodial environments (NCRB, 2022-23). Odisha is home to over 22% tribal population (Census, 2011) and a large number of rural and semi-urban children depend on state-supported residential education. The girls residing in these institutions, particularly from ST/SC and BPL families, face heightened vulnerability due to power asymmetry, administrative neglect, and poor legal literacy. This research adopts a qualitative analytical framework and some highlighted case studies areas in the State of Odisha. By studying recent cases, government policies, legal loopholes, and administrative apathy, this paper argues that the promise of safety for women particularly for tribal and rural girls is more myth than reality in contemporary Odisha.

2. Review of Literature

The issue of women's safety, particularly in institutional settings such as hostels and residential schools, has attracted growing academic and policy attention in recent days. According to Kumar and Kumari (2020) ^[5], institutional spaces such as schools, hostels, and custodial homes often fail to safeguard women due to inadequate supervision, patriarchal

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administrative systems, and weak implementation of the POCSO Act, 2012. Das (2023) ^[3] in her study on tribal hostel management in Odisha reveals that over 60% of residential institutions lack routine inspections and have no deployed female wardens. The situation becomes dire when these girls, many from SC/ST and poor backgrounds, lack awareness of legal rights or access to psychological counselling. The NCRB (2022) reported that Odisha ranked among the top 10 states in crimes against women, with over 2,348 reported cases, including 173 rapes involving minors in institutional care. In 2023, the National Commission for Women conducted a fact-finding mission across several districts in Odisha, revealing shocking lapses. Patnaik and Mishra (2021) ^[17] emphasize that tribal girls in Odisha are uniquely vulnerable. Their socio-economic background, lack of parental supervision (due to migration or poverty), and limited literacy expose them to systemic exploitation in educational institutions that are meant to uplift them. The NCW found that many school hostels failed to adhere to POCSO guidelines, and several girls had become pregnant due to long-term abuse by hostel staff or outsiders with access (NCW, 2023) ^[9]. Recent media reports from outlets like The Hindu (2024) and OdishaTV (2023) brought to light cases from Kalahandi, Kandhamal, and Sundargarh, where minor girls became pregnant while staying in state-run hostels. These revelations prompted public outrage, but also highlighted the state's sluggish response and the absence of internal mechanisms for redressal. Despite the existence of the Nirbhaya Fund, Odisha has not fully utilized these resources to improve hostel safety, install CCTV surveillance, or hire trained female staff. Thus above, the literature review displays overall negligence pictures of women safety in India as well as in Odisha State.

3. Historical overview of women safety in India

Women's safety is broadly defined as the condition where women and girls are free from physical, psychological, sexual, and emotional violence or threat thereof, in both public and private spheres. The Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) defines safety not just as protection from crime but also from "situations that limit women's freedom and dignity" (MWCD, 2023). The Odisha State Policy for Girls and Women (2014) further contextualizes women's safety within the framework of social inclusion, economic empowerment, and institutional accountability. At the national level, this includes legal protections, access to justice, physical infrastructure and a safe environment in institutions such as schools, colleges, workplaces, and hostels. It stresses the importance of preventing violence in educational institutions, hostels, workplaces, and public spaces, particularly for marginalized groups like tribal women and girls. These are some of the important women safety initiatives taken by Govt. of India discussed here. The Nirbhaya Fund (2013), Launched after the 2012 Delhi gang rape case, this centrally-sponsored scheme provides financial support to projects focused on enhancing the safety and security of women in public spaces and institutions. Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015): Though primarily aimed at improving the sex ratio and promoting girl child education, this scheme has indirectly contributed to safety efforts by fostering safe school environments and community awareness in districts like Bargarh, Dhenkanal, and Nayagarh where it is actively implemented (Press Information Bureau, 2024). Odisha has utilized the fund for

projects such as Women's Help Desks in police stations and One Stop Centres in districts like Balasore, Koraput, and Sundargarh (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023). Initiatives for addressing sexual harassment and providing institutional support to survivors of violence. As of 2023, Odisha has operationalized 30 One Stop Centres, serving as crisis response hubs (MWCD Annual Report, 2023-24).

4. Sexual violence in institution: a critical analysis

According to the NCRB's Crime in India 2023, Odisha recorded a crime rate of 103.3 per 100,000 women, significantly above the national average of 66.4. While rape overall declined in India from 31,677 cases in 2021 to 30,948 in 2022, Odisha reported a concerning number of 1,382 rape cases in 2022, including 231 involving minors. The Odisha State Commission for Women's 2024 report highlights nearly 40 verified cases of sexual violence within state-run hostels in tribal districts over 2022-2023, pointing to alarming institutional lapses (OSCW Report, 2024).

4.1 Major Case Studies of Institutional Sexual Violence in Odisha (2020-2025): Institutional sexual violence in Odisha has increasingly come under scrutiny due to recurring incidents involving young girls, particularly from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) backgrounds. These cases have exposed systemic gaps in hostel management, law enforcement delays, and a pervasive culture of silence. Below are three illustrative case studies that reflect broader structural issues.

Kalahandi: In a shocking incident from Bhawanipatna block of Kalahandi district, two SC minor girls residing in a government-run residential school hostel were found to be pregnant (The New Indian Express, 2023). Investigations suggested prolonged sexual exploitation by a local contractor who had free access to the premises. Despite prior complaints of male outsiders entering the hostel, school authorities failed to act. The District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) intervened only after a medical check-up confirmed pregnancies. The delay in FIR registration and lack of female staff in supervisory positions raised serious questions about institutional accountability.

Mayurbhanj: In early 2024, a 15-year-old tribal girl in an ST-residential school in Rairangpur, Mayurbhanj, accused a hostel staff member of repeated sexual assault (OdishaTV, 2024). Hostel officials attempted to suppress the matter, refusing to involve law enforcement. It was only after media reports exposed the case that a formal complaint was lodged and action was taken under the POCSO Act. The case exposed severe gaps in the hostel's grievance redressal system. A fact-finding report by the Odisha State Commission for Women (OSCW) highlighted the absence of regular inspections and failure to sensitize students on reporting mechanisms.

Koraput: In a remote village near Boipariguda in Koraput district, an 11th-grade SC/ST girl residing in a government higher secondary school hostel was found to be five months pregnant. Despite visible physical changes, no action was taken by the hostel authorities. According to Down to Earth magazine's field report, the hostel lacked a female warden and had no internal complaint committee (ICC) in place.

The girl later disclosed that a male school clerk had been exploiting her for months. The police only acted after villagers staged a protest. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) took suo motu cognizance and recommended stringent departmental action against the district education officer.

5. Intersectional vulnerabilities and silenced voices

In the context of Odisha, institutional sexual violence against women and girls particularly in school and hostel environments is not just a gendered issue, but deeply embedded in the intersection of caste, class, and tribal marginalization. These overlapping identities contribute to a compounded vulnerability, where victims face multiple layers of discrimination and systemic neglect. These regions report higher cases of institutional abuse due to the isolated nature of hostels, lack of regular inspections, and the socio-economic disempowerment of the victims' families (Down To Earth, 2024; Odisha State Commission for Women, 2024). A report by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR, 2023) found that 68% of institutional abuse victims in Odisha were from Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes. The stigma surrounding caste hierarchies often silences SC/ST survivors. Many victims come from extremely poor families. Parents, either due to lack of awareness or fear of institutional backlash, often choose not to file complaints. They are discouraged from speaking out, fearing social ostracization and disbelief from authorities an issue highlighted in a 2023 Odisha Bytes investigation into sexual harassment in tribal hostels. Economic dependency on state-run welfare institutions disincentivizes confrontation with authorities, leaving children vulnerable to systemic neglect. In the Koraput hostel pregnancy case (2024), the survivor's mother admitted in a local interview (OTV, 2024) that she was afraid to demand justice because her daughter's education depended on state support.

6. Safety policies and regulations acts: Odisha, a state with a significant tribal and rural population, faces unique challenges in ensuring institutional safety for women and girls. The state has adopted specific policies and regulatory frameworks like The POCSO Act is a cornerstone of legal protection for minors particularly those in institutional settings like residential schools, hostels, and shelter homes. Odisha particularly in tribal hostels have highlighted delays in reporting and conviction due to poor institutional awareness and fear among victims (NHRC, 2023). The Act Criminalizes all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation of children under 18. Mandates mandatory reporting of offenses by institutional staff. Includes Section 21, which penalizes failure to report abuse by responsible persons. The Juvenile Justice law governs the care and protection of children, including those living in child care institutions (CCIs). The Key provisions are like Institutional managers are held personally accountable for safety and well-being. The Act mandates registration and inspection of every CCI under the District Child Protection Unit. Section 27 establishes Child Welfare Committees as quasi-judicial bodies empowered to act in the best interest of institutionalized children. Women and Child Helpline Actively promoted in Odisha, yet data shows low awareness among tribal girls in institutions (NHRC Report, 2023). UGC Guidelines on Hostel Safety For college and university

hostels, the University Grants Commission has issued: Mandatory sexual harassment committees in all institutions. Proper CCTV surveillance, night-time security, biometric access systems. Complaint mechanisms that respect student anonymity. Though largely applicable to higher education institutions, several state-aided tribal girls' hostels in Odisha violate these norms, according to RTI and media reports (The Hindu, 2024).

7. Systemic challenges and institutional gaps

Despite various state and national interventions aimed at safeguarding women and children, particularly those from vulnerable communities, systemic failures continue to plague residential hostels in Odisha especially those catering to Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) populations. These failures are not isolated but represent deep-rooted institutional apathy, infrastructural deficits, and socio-cultural neglect. According to the National Crime Records Bureau 2022 data. Odisha reported 789 cases of rape against SC/ST girls. In 67% of these, the charge sheet was filed after 60 days, violating fast-track mandates under POCSO. Odisha has over 5,500 government-run hostels for SC/ST children, accommodating more than 5 lakh students (Odisha ST & SC Development Department, 2023). A survey by ActionAid India (2022) found that only 12% of SC/ST girl students in Odisha hostels would feel safe reporting abuse to authorities, citing shame, fear of expulsion, and disbelief. Lack of Trained Female Staff, CCTV, and Grievance Redressal Mechanisms Infrastructure and human resource challenges severely hamper hostel safety. Most tribal hostels in Odisha do not meet the UGC and NCPCR minimum safety guidelines. A 2023 joint audit by NCERT and Odisha's Women and Child Development Department found that 73% of girls' hostels had no female wardens. Only 18% had functioning CCTV cameras. Less than 10% had any grievance redressal cell or complaint box. This absence of female staff and basic monitoring facilities leads to unchecked power by male wardens, and increases risk of exploitation. Delayed legal action and police insensitivity further aggravate the trauma of survivors. In several cases, complaints were either not registered promptly or compromised due to political and institutional pressure. A glaring example is the Bhawanipatna tribal hostel rape case (2023) where the FIR was filed 10 days after the survivor's report, and the accused hostel staff was transferred instead of being suspended (Odisha TV, 2023).

8. Recommendations and policy reforms

Addressing institutional sexual violence in Odisha requires a multi-pronged and evidence-based strategy that strengthens existing structures while introducing community-based innovations. Drawing from recent incidents, data, and systemic reviews, the following recommendations are proposed: A state-mandated bi-annual safety audit should be conducted across all SC/ST, tribal, and girls' hostels. These audits must assess Structural vulnerabilities, Staffing patterns or presence of female wardens, Emergency response systems like helpline access, police contacts. All government and aided residential institutions must be legally required to employ. Minimum of two trained female wardens per hostel, especially in remote districts. One certified counsellor or mental health professional per cluster of schools. Odisha SC/ST Development Department

Circular No. 4289/SSD, 2023 emphasizes the lack of female staff in over 60% of hostels. ICCs must be present even in schools and hostels, not only colleges/universities, as a preventive justice mechanism. All POCSO-related institutional abuse cases should be routed to dedicated fast-track courts, as per the Supreme Court's directive in *Alakh Alok Srivastava v. Union of India* (2021). Community Sensitization and Legal Awareness Campaigns such as Initiate massive awareness drives in tribal and backward districts using vernacular media on POCSO rights, Consent and abuse redressal, Protection mechanisms, Engage students, parents, and teachers through monthly gender-safety workshops.

9. Conclusion

The safety of women and girls in institutional settings, particularly in Odisha's residential schools, SC/ST hostels, and tribal welfare homes, is not merely a question of infrastructure or laws but a litmus test of our collective commitment to gender justice, social equality, and constitutional morality. While the state has taken commendable steps through schemes like Mission Shakti and Mo Sishu Mo Parivar, recurring incidents of sexual violence, underreporting, and delayed justice expose deep-rooted structural flaws and cultural silences. This study reveals that caste, class, and tribal identities intersect in ways that magnify vulnerability, and the voices of the most marginalized are often buried under layers of shame, fear, and institutional apathy. Legal mechanisms like the POCSO Act and JJ Act provide a protective framework, but their implementation remains uneven, especially in remote and tribal areas. Move over from illusion to reality in ensuring women's safety, Odisha must move beyond reactive measures to proactive, inclusive, and community-led approaches. Safety audits, gender-sensitized staffing, stronger grievance redressal mechanisms, and participatory monitoring must become non-negotiable components of institutional governance. Only then can Odisha and India claim to have made women's safety a lived reality rather than a distant promise.

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