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## REVISITING ADOLESCENT CONSENT UNDER POCSO: EVALUATING THE NEED OF ROMEO-JULIET CLAUSE

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### ABSTRACT

Child protection is a fundamental priority within modern criminal jurisprudence. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO) was enacted as a robust child protection statute to combat exploitation and sexual abuse of minors. It defines child as person below 18 years, promoting debate on age of consent. The rigid framework of the law creates constitutional paradox by criminalizing consensual intimacy among adolescence; a stage associated with increasing biological maturation and cognitive awareness of sexuality. The POCSO Act made no distinction between consensual relationships, like those in Romeo-Juliet cases, and instances where the victim experienced actual abuse or violence. In India, absence of "Romeo-Juliet" Clause create space for familial epicuricity, where the law is weaponized to settle personal vendetta. A narrowly crafted exception would safeguard adolescent intimacy without diluting penalties for coercion or abuse. This paper explores significance of introducing close-in-age exemption within the POCSO framework, which include slashing vexatious F.I.R., protecting constitutional rights under Articles 14 and 21 for peers age of 16-18 years with 2-3 years gap, align Indian law with International Standards and Practices, curbs "score settling". scale down mechanical imprisonment, truncate burden on courts, compliment other laws (example Juvenile Justice Act 2015). The study examines POCSO provision, key judicial development including State of UP vs Anurudh (2026), the age of consent, the Mature Minor Doctrine, comparative cross jurisdictional perspective. Ultimately, the article underscores the imperative to reconcile legal intent with social realities, ensuring that the protecting mandate of the Act is not subverted into injustice.

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## INTRODUCTION

Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO), as a strong and child-centric Act, is designed to shield minors from child predator and their nefarious and illegal acts but ironically suffers consensual teen romantic relationships, they are caught up in criminal nets because of POCSO which bans providing them under 18 years of age from engaging in sexual activity. It establishes a complete mechanism of punishment of a great variety of sex offences, adopting a definition of a child as any person under the age of eighteen, and criminalising all types of sexual activity with such a child. By legally disqualifying everyone under 18 from making such a decision, the statute reduces the subtlety between abusive sexual exploitation and voluntary intimate relations between adults and adolescents. The adolescent period is a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood which is accompanied by marked biological and psychological changes. As individuals explore their questions of who they are and where they belong, the episodes of exploratory love relationships occur. The relationship that is marked by mutual consent, particularly those that are separated by a narrow age gap are

subject to prosecution under the same provision as designed to address coercive and predatory offences.<sup>1</sup> Judicial pronouncements have increasingly criticised the growing trend of POCSO complaints being instituted as a tool of familial retaliation to settle familial scores. 55% of POCSO trials are pending.<sup>2</sup> This dissonance between youthful agency and legal absolutism is sharply felt in economically vulnerable and rural environments. When young couples involve deliberately into intimate relationships are often re-characterized into criminal offences when there is a reporting by disapproving relatives alleging the boy abduction, aggressive penetrative sexual assault under POCSO. In a number of cases, these prosecutions are often not based on the actual claims of force and coercion, but more on social conservatism and fears of reputational damage. As a result, the boy is criminalised, he is branded rapist, he can land up in jail during the pendency of trial and he is stigmatised which casts a long shadow on

<sup>1</sup> National Law School of India University, "Romantic Cases" under POCSO: A Study of Special Courts in India (2022), <https://ccl.nls.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/POCSO-Romantic-Cases-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Child and the Law, Implementation of the POCSO Act, 2012: Goals, Gaps and Challenges (2018), <https://ccl.nls.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/POCSO-Report.pdf>

his educational journey, career choices and social status.<sup>3</sup> Studies conducted by the Centre for Child and the Law (CCL- NLS)<sup>4</sup> analyzed the operation of POCSO Act special courts in five states, which contributes a great amount of information regarding the way the cases of minor victims and the consent problem are resolved. According to the research, the so-called romantic cases refer to the issues when the victim confessed the presence of romantic relations with the accused in the investigation or the trial, or the trial judge inferred the presence of the same based on the facts and evidence in the case. "National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) (2023) finds that total crime against children is 177,335 cases, POCSO-related offences 67,694 cases (38.17 percent of total cases). The empirical studies show that the nine percent 88-90 acquisition in cases related to the 16-18-year-olds are mostly due to the consensual teenage relationships or elopements. This tendency demonstrates clearly that the statute is being abused so as to enforcing social stigmas instead of prosecuting any actual predator. During consensual sex the role of both the boy and girl is equal, however, once the genealogical fact is uncovered and some disapproval is confirmed to follow, one boy is labeled as a criminal and the other as a victim.

Professor Ved Kumari, vice chancellor of the National Law University Odisha, stated that: "*In consensual sex, both are offenders, or both are victims. It has been my long-held position that either both need to be tried under the JJ Act, or both should go to the CWC (Child Welfare Committee). Normally, the boy is tried under JJ, and the girl is sent to CWC. They are equal partners. How can the two be treated differently?*"<sup>56</sup>

#### **Judicial Approach Towards Consensual Adolescent Relationships:**

In the state of Uttar Pradesh v Anirudh (2026)<sup>7</sup>, the Supreme Court warned against considering teenage romance a crime of predation, protested a close-in-age exception when it proposed introducing a Romeo-Juliet clause. The man was accused of aggravated penetrative assault against a minor in POCSO in Uttar Pradesh. The victim even mentioned that it was consensual intimacy and she was approximately between 17-18 years as opposed to her school records that indicate that she is under 18. The Supreme Court reversed the decision of the Allahabad High Court, which allowed bail on POCSO case; the Court was violating its jurisdiction by ordering mandatory medical age verification of the victim, the time of introduction of investigation and by allowing reviews of age-related documents during the bail procedure. The case has also highlighted the abuse of POCSO Act through the frequent utilisation in instances of consensual relationships between adolescents of similar age. The Court noted that a law that was meant to keep children off the exploitation list was being used in a way that would criminalize all normal teenage relationships. As such, the Supreme Court advised the Union Government to look into legislative change, such as the addition of Romeo-Juliet clause in the POCSO Act, to spare the actual consensual unions between age-near peers of adolescents out of litigation and avoid misappropriation of the statute. Earlier, the Madras High Court exposed the dangers of mechanical conviction of statutory presumptions u/s 29 of the POCSO Act in Sabari @ Sabarinathan @ Sabarivasan v The Inspector of Police & Ors. (2019)<sup>8</sup>. The case was a teenage elopement with the grandfather (POCSO complaint) filed of kidnap and penetrative sexual assault by

her adult classmate of the same year. The court stated that infatuated or innocent consensual relationships between teenagers aged between 16 to 18 years should not fall under the ambit of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, which provides not less than seven to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment for the same. It further said that a child should be redefined as one below 16 years of age than the current 18.<sup>9</sup> The Bombay High Court, in Vijay Chand Dubey vs State of Maharashtra and Anr<sup>10</sup>, recently reflected this reality when it ruled that a 14-year-old minor girl had 'sufficient knowledge' and 'capacity' to know the 'full import of her actions'. The bench made it clear that although the offences committed under the POCSO Act under Sections 4, 6 and 8 are very stringent the same would not deter the Court from passing or refusing bail for the ends of justice. *Vijayalakshmi v State*, in which the Supreme Court held that consensual relationship between adolescents cannot be equated with heinous sexual assaults and the court suggested reconsideration through legislation. The Madras High Court stated that, "An adolescent boy and girl who are in the grips of their hormones and biological changes and whose decision-making ability is yet to fully develop should essentially receive the support and guidance of their parents and the society at large. These incidents should never be seen from the perspective of an adult and I think such understanding will lead to the lack of empathy. An adolescent boy sent to prison in such case will be persecuted all his life."<sup>11</sup>

**Age of Consent Under Pocso & Allied Laws:** The definition of a child' in context of different laws varies. For example, under the Majority Act 1875, the age of majority is 18 years which is also the minimum age for voting. Right to Education Act, 2009, defines a child from the age of 6 to 14 years. Similarly, the Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, defines a child to be anyone younger than 14 while adolescence includes children between the age group of 14 to 18 years. Meanwhile, both POCSO Act and Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 define a child as an individual below the age of 18. Historically the age of consent in India was gradually raised through legislative reforms. The statutory age was shifted from 10 to 16 between 1891 and 1940. In the wake of the Nirbhaya incident parliament changed the law in 2013 and it fixed 18 as the new cutoff. Despite being an objective that would prevent exploitation and protect minors, the amendment did not consider consensual relationships among teenagers. The POCSO Act in Section 2(d) has defined a 'child' as any person below the age of 18 years. Section 3 and Section 5 criminalise penetrative sexual assault while Section 7 defines sexual assault whilst they all apply regardless of consent when the girl is under the age of 18. The Act makes sexual acts with minors, regardless of consent, a criminal offence. This structure eliminates judicial discretion regarding presumption of maturity or voluntariness as to adolescent cases. As a result, the statutory approach blurs the boundary between mutual relationships among teenagers, as opposed to coercion.<sup>12</sup>

**Concept of Romeo-Juliet Clause:** The Romeo-Juliet clause is one of the laws that has the effect of protecting adolescents from being criminalized for having consensual sexual relationships under the condition that they are close in age. Its main purpose is to ensure that child protection laws are concerned with the prevention of abuse and exploitation, rather than the punishing of teenagers who come into mutual relationships. The Romeo-Juliet clause is named after Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. It was instituted in the United States to end the overzealous application of statutory rape laws that put teenagers in consensual relationships in prison instead of protecting them from real predatory behaviour. The law creates a stark distinction between sexual acts where a person uses coercion or

<sup>3</sup> Shreya Atrey, Revisiting the Age of Consent under the POCSO Act: A Constitutional Perspective, 12 NUJS L. Rev. 45 (2019), <https://nujlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/12-2-Shreya-Atrey.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Child and the Law (CCL), National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Implementation of the POCSO Act, 2012 by Special Courts: Challenges and Issues, National Law School of India University (February 2018), <https://ccl.nls.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Implementation-of-the-POCSO-Act-2012-by-speical-courts-challenges-and-issues-1.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Indian Express* (Apr. 30, 2019), <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/what-madras-high-court-suggested-on-age-of-consent-age-gap-and-the-implications-pocso-act-5701591/>.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> State of Uttar Pradesh v. Anurudh, 2026 INSC 47 (India)

<sup>8</sup> Sabari @ Sabarinathan @ Sabarivasan v. Inspector of Police, CrI. A. No. 490 of 2018 (Madras High Court Apr. 26, 2019) (India).

<sup>9</sup> Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, The Age of Consent and the POCSO Act: Balancing Protection and Autonomy (2020), <https://vidhilegalpolicy.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Age-of-Consent-POCSO.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> *Vijay Chand Dubey v. State of Maharashtra*, 2025 SCC Online Bom 329 (Bom. H.C.)

<sup>11</sup> *Vijaylakshmi & Anr. v. State*, O.P (MD) No. 3775 of 2012 (Mad. H.C.) (India)

<sup>12</sup> Mukesh v. State (NCT of Delhi), AIR 2017 SC 2161 (India).

exploitation and sexual relations between people close in age who are mutually amenable, a distinction it accepts as requiring a recognition of the right of adolescents to form normal emotional and intimate relationships. In practice, the clause usually applies to cases where the difference in age between partners is within a certain range of years, often two or four years and requires that the relationship be consensual and free from any coercion as well as without the involvement of adult authority. Courts apply the provision carefully, looking at such factors as emotional maturity, duration and nature of the relationship, and no evidence of exploitation, to avoid the provision being misused by older people claiming to have romantic intent. Globally, several similar provisions have been adopted to de-check the process of over-criminalization of teenagers, while ensuring that essential statutory laws of rape are focused on genuine cases of exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

**Romeo Juliet Clause in Different Countries:** The scope and operation of Romeo Juliet law is widely different in most jurisdictions. These variations dealt mostly with minimum age threshold, permissible age differentials and the degree of legal protection afforded. These differences represent the wide variety of policy options adopted to address young consensual sexual behavior.

**United States:** The mature minor doctrine in New York enables capable minors to make medical decisions independently of parental consent in consideration of adolescent maturity as opposed to one's age. Similarly, the Romeo-Juliet clause to the U.S. generally provides for close-in-age exemptions, though they are applied differently in each state: In Texas, for example, there was a three-year age gap for people 14 to over, whereas Florida permits partners 16-17 to people up to age 23, Illinois allows partners a five-year difference for people 17 to over, and Georgia allows a three year difference, whereas California has no statutory law in this respect.<sup>14</sup>

**Canada:** In the criminal part of the law, in Canada, the age of consent is 16. Calibrated close-in-age exemptions are recognised in the law. These provisions permit children aged 12 and 13 to have sex with persons who are less than 2 years old, in a consensual sexual relationship. Similarly, 14 to 15 years as allowed to do so with persons whose age does not exceed a difference of 5 years. Such exceptions only operate in those cases where the relationship does not involve exploitation, thus giving protection to genuinely voluntaristic adolescent intercourse.<sup>15</sup>

**United Kingdom:** Unlike jurisdictions that include a statutory close-in age exemption, the United Kingdom has an uncompromising, unique regulatory strategy. The age of consent remains the same at 16 in all its constituent jurisdictions which makes any sexual relations with people who are below that age of consent punishable as per the law and irrespective of the minimal age disparity. Despite this rigidity, there is tampering with enforcement by the judgment of the prosecutor, especially when the relationship is presented as one of consent and non-exploitation.<sup>16</sup>

**Australia:** In Australia, the age of consent is not consistent and varies from one state to another, but generally ranges from 16 to 17 years. Some states also offer a statutory close in age exemption. For instance, a person in Victoria between the ages of 12 and 15 years can engage in consensual sexual activity with someone who is not more

than 2 years of age. In South Wales there is a close-in age safeguard which applies when both people are under 18 years of age.<sup>17</sup>

**Germany:** Germany opts for a hard based-approach; section 182 of the German Penal Code does not criminalise consensual adolescent sexual activity as such; Criminal Liability only exists where the offender exploits the lack of capacity of the mirror for sexual self-determination. The approach puts exploitation and vulnerability to the forefront as the essential mischief shout to be overcome, not so much a strictly numerical age soul threshold.<sup>18</sup>

**India:** India is a signatory to the international conventions, which define a child as any person below the age of 18 as per Juvenile Justice Act, the POCSO Act and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights and other relevant acts. Both boys and girls below 18 years of age are classified as 'child'. The age of 18 affords the individual autonomy and financial, contractual and civics matters. However, discussions based on POCSO reveal tension in the use of an absolute 18-year marker in consensual adolescence relationship. These relationships reflect social dynamics and not deviant behavior. The Supreme Court had made a recommendation for the consideration of the close age exception in POCSO to avoid the criminalisation of adulthood relationship between the teenagers.<sup>19</sup>

Country/State	Age of consent	Close-in-age Exemption	Year Introduced
USA (Florida)	18	16-17 years old can engage with partner up to 23 years	2007
USA(Georgia)	16	Allow a 3-year age gap for minor aged 14 – 16	2006
Australia Tasmania	17	-15 + can consent if partner more than 5 years old	2001
Philippines	16	16-year-old can give consent to a partner within 3 years of age gap	2002
Canada	16	14 – 15 years partners can give consent to 5 years older	2006

### Socio-Legal Challenges

**Social Challenges:** In cases of POCSO Prosecutions, in many cases, family opposes adolescent relationships across families due to inter-caste, inter-faith, or inter-religion. Thereby recasting criminal courts to be an instrument of enforcing familial honour rather than focusing on child welfare. The incarceration of boys, despite the consent of the girls, reinforces stereotypes of male involvement in patriarchy thus undermining female agency, stigmatising males as offenders. The consequence continues after acquittals where adolescents suffer social stigma and educational disadvantages that interfere with their long-term development. The judiciary is faced with the tricky exercise of balancing the duty of the State to protect with the fundamental rights of adolescents to privacy, autonomy and choice that are guaranteed under Article 21.

**Economic Challenges:** Indigent accused often lack access to bail and adequate legal representation, which leads to prolonged detention without proper education and employability, thus leading to cycles of poverty. The diversion of investigative effort towards consensual adolescent cases places a burden on the already overloaded system, which diverts time, funding and specialised support from serious cases. The long-term consequences of criminalisation include limited access to jobs, education and credit, which cumulatively come to bear an invisible economic burden upon youth productivity in a demographic dividend - reliant nation.

<sup>13</sup> National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India 2023: Statistics on Crimes Against Children (2024), <https://ncrb.gov.in/en/crime-india>

<sup>14</sup> Harvard Law Review, Statutory Rape Law and the Romeo and Juliet Exception, 127 Harv. L. Rev. 939 (2014), <https://harvardlawreview.org/2014/02/statutory-rape-and-romeo-juliet-exception>

<sup>15</sup> Government of Canada Department of Justice, Age of Consent to Sexual Activity, (last modified 2022), <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/other-autre/clp/faq.html>

<sup>16</sup> Crown Prosecution Service, Rape and Sexual Offences: Chapter 7 – Children under 16, (2023), <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/rape-and-sexual-offences-chapter-7>

<sup>17</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies, Age of Consent Laws in Australia, (2021), <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/resource-sheets/age-consent-laws>

<sup>18</sup> German Federal Ministry of Justice, German Criminal Code (Strafgesetzbuch), Section 182 – Sexual Abuse of Young Persons, [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\\_stgb/englisch\\_stgb.html#p1600](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_stgb/englisch_stgb.html#p1600)

<sup>19</sup> Supreme Court of India, State of Uttar Pradesh v. Anirudh (2026) (discussion on consensual adolescent relationships under POCSO), <https://main.sci.gov.in>

**Cultural Challenges:** Reluctance of societal norms towards premarital sexual relationships frequently places an adverse image on adolescent intimacy and this therefore heightens resistance to clauses that are viewed as normalising such behaviour. The misuse of POCSO in 'honour-based' contexts reinforces endogamy in social structures, thus entrenching this patriarchal gatekeeping over the sexuality and autonomy of the female. Critics point to the miasma of moral panic in believing that such an exception will run riot, lead to promiscuity among spirits and people can't maintain moral control, but go back to the triangle to the close formation of the context of apprehensions about the breakdown of the family institution as a whole. The unavailability of structured education on sexual issues around consent and awareness of the risks makes interpretive misconceptions of reforms and thus leads to exploitation and misinformation of adolescents.

**Legal challenges:** POCSO Act have a strict liability, so there is no need for any kind of mens rea on the accused person i.e intent, or knowledge of the age of the minor is irrelevant. The act itself invokes criminality without the consent or belief as to maturity. This brings up legal issues such as over criminalisation against article 21 (right to life and liberty) in India since consensual teen relationship 16-18 years gets punished by aggravation of criminal offences giving no consideration to relationship - Supreme Court criticised 2026 in cases for disproportionately punishing with outsized punishment when there is no exploitative intent. Other issues relate to their equality violations under Article 14, chasing equal application isn't known as adolescent autonomy norms, evidentiary burdens wherein complaints through family's falsity make 'non-consent' regardless of 'consensual' relations in making calls for mens rea incorporation, incompatibilism close-in age defences to be inside conformal proportionality. Critics also point to perverse incentives to have an abortion or elope to avoid charges as reinforce the need to add the clause back in such a way that delivers fairness without sacrificing child protections.

#### Rationale for age Proximity Exceptions Under Pocso

**Encourages Constitutional Proportionality:** A Romeo Juliet clause is an addition to the principle of proportionality to strengthen the criminal law through that clause, i.e. it ensures the punishment under POCSO is as per the actual nature of the conduct. By differentiating consensual age proximate adolescent relationships (16 to 18 years and age limited age gap) from predatory abuse, it harmonises the statute with the equality mandate of Article 14 and the personal liberty protection provision of Article 21 and prevents mandatory imprisonment of 7 to 10 years in non-exploitive<sup>20</sup>

**Enhance adolescent autonomy:** This exemption reflects psychological and biological maturation of consent capacity of the late adolescent period. It facilitates informed consent within peer relationships with two to three years of difference, which promotes Article 21 Protection for Bodily Integrity, Privacy and Reproductive Choice in late adolescence. With safeguards such as expert psychological assessment, the sworn affidavit of age verification, the mandatory supervision of a child welfare committee, and the judicial evaluation of the voluntariness make the provision filter out the exploitative elements and the imbalance of power. It will ensure that adolescent empowerment does not result in impunity for abuse<sup>21</sup>

**Filter frivolous FIRs:** The provision enables the authorities to screen out the weaponised FIRs regarding caste-based or honour-related cataracts, especially considering the NCRB statistics that point out the significant acquittal trends in metro POCSO prosecution. By making the preliminary inquiries mandatory under section 173 of Cr PC would rationalise the process of investigation and prevent the investigative efforts from being spent on mere accusations of abuse.

**Prevent abuse of the Child Protection Law:** POCSOs strict liability regime - the offences have been made non-bailable with any consent defence under it excluded as it has been notoriously used for familial vendettas by a person. It has been often misused in cases that are brought because of the parental disapproval over a relationship that is into related or an elopement. NCRB statistics reflect a huge acquittal rate in urban POCSO prosecution reflects a good number of such cases involve consensual relationships that fall apart due to hostile witnesses, dearth of forensic corroboration or retraction of testimony; diversion of resources from actual child protection. A Romeo Juliet clause reverses this systematic misuse with multi layered procedural protection designed for precision that requires sworn parental non insistent affidavits, comprehensive victim impact assessment by psychologist and mandatory pretrial referral to the Child Welfare Committees under J.J Act for intensive counselling sessions, family mediation etc. this calibrated mechanism preserves mandatory child centric ethos of POCSOs for the genuine vulnerable minors under 16 years while aggressively protecting growing adolescence from protracted harassment by the legal machinery which scars the future under trial detention, employment black listing, social stigma and life long criminal record. It turns family feuds around to a restorative outcome such as supervised reunion or community-based rehabilitation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Srushti Shukla et al., Legal Complexities of Adolescent Relationships: A Study of Protection of Child Sexual Offences Cases in India, Cureus (May 17, 2024), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11180359/>

<sup>21</sup> Age of Consent: Challenges and Contradictions of Sexual Violence Laws in India, 6 Sexual & Reproductive Health Matters (2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/26410397.2021.1878656>

<sup>22</sup> Balancing Protection and Autonomy: Rethinking POCSO's Approach to Adolescent Relationships, LiveLaw (2025), <https://www.livelaw.in/articles/balancing-protection-autonomy-rethinking-pocso-approach-adolescent-relationships-288751>

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## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

Adolescents who have consensual sexual relationships are often targeted for criminal prosecution under strict statutory rape and age of consent laws, when there are no overtones of exploitation and abuse. This over-criminalizing of normative teen relationships creates major legal and social difficulties that punish mutually agreed upon age-appropriate behavior and fail in an important way to protect minors from legitimate predatory behavior. To cope with this, the study proposes that Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act be amended to include a close-in-age exemption (i.e., three years of age between partners) based on comparative legal studies and international best practices in the countries studied.

The paper advocates to bring back the age of consent to sixteen years, which was under the prevailing legal regime in India prior to 2012, but with explicit procedural safeguards included, including standardised methods of finding age, as well as child sensitive trial procedures. It highlights the role of acknowledging adolescence sexual autonomy including same-sex relationships as a way to avoid unnecessary criminalisation of consensual behaviour. The proposed age gap is consistent with global practice, and provides a reasonable trade-off between safeguarding minors and accommodating their escalating capacities for making decisions. The study further emphasises the importance of Legislative Reforms and it must be complemented by educational and awareness-driven efforts. Introducing scientifically accurate and age-appropriate sex education in schools is necessary so that adolescents can be equipped with the information needed to make informed decisions. Equally important is the creation of accessible support systems, allowing young people to be able to seek support in a safe, confidential, and non-judgmental manner, without fear of being judged or having their rights infringed upon. The overriding objective is to ensure that the law is both protective and fair enough that it distinguishes between consensual adolescent relationships and exploitative or coercive behaviour so that it promotes both child welfare and adolescent autonomy.

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