

# WHEN THE UNTHINKABLE BECOMES A SHARED REALITY: PSYCHOLOGICAL ROOTS AND POLICY LESSONS FROM SRI LANKA'S FACEBOOK FAMILIAL EXPLOITATION GROUPS

**Dehansa Thulindi Thilakarathna**

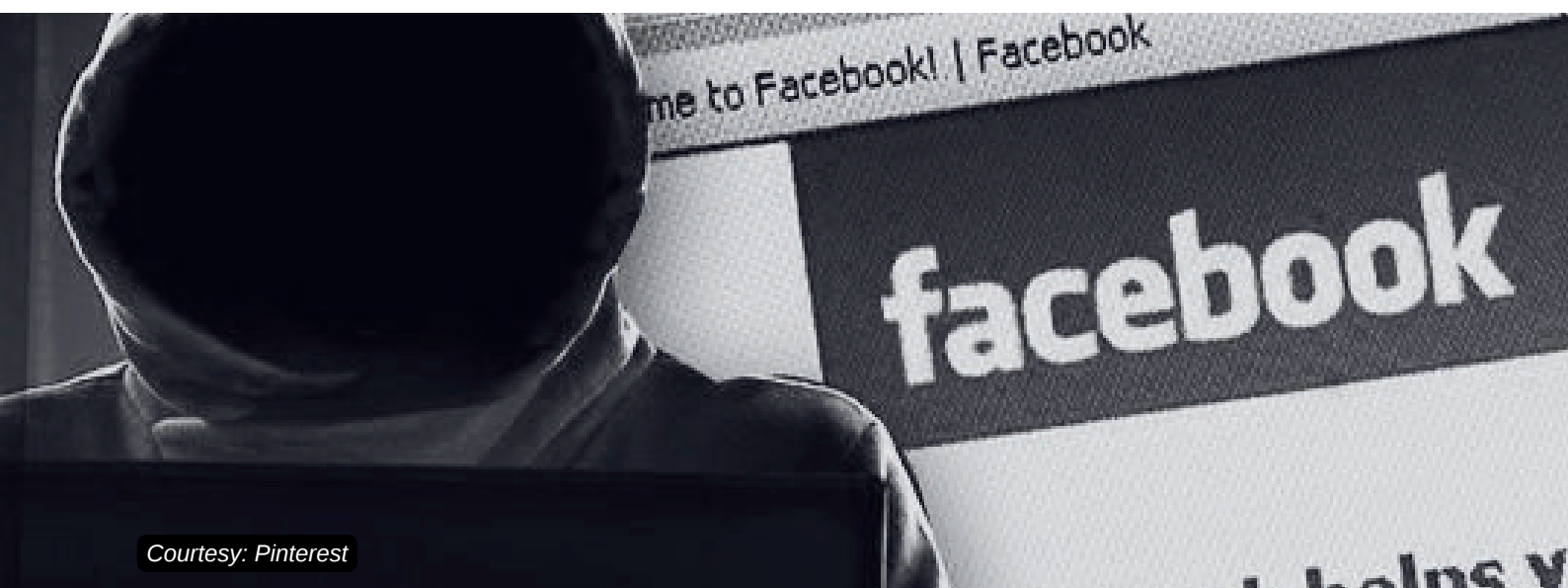
BSc (Hons) Psychology (Reading, University of West London), BA (Hons) Development Studies (Reading, University of Kelaniya)

*The satisfaction might only last a few moments, but the shame, betrayal, and psychological fallout for someone else might last much longer.... The injury is directly experienced by the victim, but society as a whole must determine what it is willing to do about it.*

For many of us in Sri Lanka, the idea of family comes with an implicit assurance of security. We are raised with an understanding of honoring our parents and elders, safeguarding our younger siblings, and recognizing familial roles like mother, father, sister, and brother as carrying obligations that extend beyond mere blood. We are raised with the proverb “නිවසේ දෙවියන් අම්මා - the mother is the divine figure of the household”. These are not simply phrases we recite. They reflect something deeply rooted in the way we understand family, the people closest to us should also be the people with whom we feel safest. And yet, what happens when sexuality crosses that boundary?

Sexual harassment is commonly discussed as an

obstacle that women and children face in society. We discuss catcalling, unsolicited attention, sexual messages, harassment, and maltreatment. These days, there are more opportunities for sexual exploitation and humiliation because of access to digital platforms. However, there exists an additional aspect of this dialogue that is considerably more challenging to address, what follows when sexualization originates from inside one's own family, from someone whose very relationship to you is supposed to represent trust? A mother being sexually objectified by her own child, a sister discovering that her brother has spoken about her sexually, or a child becoming uncomfortable around someone they should have been able to trust is disturbing not simply because a sexual boundary has



Courtesy: Pinterest

been crossed. Something fundamental about human security has been disturbed. This issue is not exclusive to Sri Lanka. Globally, communities are grappling with sexual violence, digital sexual exploitation, and forms of online conduct that seem to thrive in anonymity. But that global reality should make us more curious about what is happening here, not less concerned about it. Particularly in a society that speaks so strongly about family values, respect and protection, In a society that emphasises family values, respect, and protection, it is essential to inquire about the implications when behaviors contradict these principles. It is worth noting at this juncture that Sri Lanka is not without a legal response to this behavior, since the Penal Code criminalizes incest under section 364A, and the Computer Crimes Act No. 24 of 2007, alongside the newly enacted Online Safety Act No. 09 of 2024, govern conduct occurring in digital spaces. Yet the law alone cannot explain why the behaviour occurs in the first place, which is where this psychological inquiry begins.

Whereas the circumstances enumerated above are considered, our immediate response could be disgust. Perhaps it should be. But once the disgust settles, we are left with a question that anger alone cannot answer.

Why? Why does someone violate that psychological boundary? How can an individual identify someone as my mother or sister while simultaneously objectifying her for sexual pleasure? What alterations occur when anonymity mitigates the concern of identification? What occurs when individuals on the internet start



*Courtesy: Pinterest*

endorsing ideas that would typically face scrutiny? And what goes through a person's head when they realize that someone they trusted is thinking about them in this way?

Enquiring about these matters does not justify the conduct. Explanation is not justification. If anything, refusing to ask them leaves us with little more than outrage after the damage has already been done. If we desire prevention rather than reaction, we must first understand the psychological processes that lead the behaviour, the consequences that follow, and where intervention may still be viable.

Every unsettling post, anonymous remark, or sexual dream involving another individual without their agreement is underpinned by two psychological realities that demand investigation, the psyche that has violated the limit, and the psyche that may endure the repercussions. This article is an attempt to understand both. Not to justify. To understand enough to prevent.

## When Anonymity Lowers the Barrier

The internet was not the birthplace of censored sexual fantasies. Long before Facebook groups, Telegram channels, or anonymous accounts existed, humans had imaginations, desires, and urges that they were aware would not be openly acknowledged by their cultures. What technology has changed is not necessarily the existence of those thoughts, but the space available for expressing them. In ordinary face-to-face life, what a person says is attached to an identity. There is a face, a name, a family, and a social reputation behind the words. Therefore, expressing something that goes against fundamental social or familial norms bears the risk of rejection, shame, censure, and relationship damage. Such societal repercussions could be used as mental constraints. The thought may exist, but expressing it means exposing oneself to the reaction of other people.

This is the point at which "anonymity" becomes significant. The fear of being recognized is very different when the thought is no longer attached to an observable identity. Digital communication creates a degree of separation between the individual and the audience, a name can become a username, a face can remain unseen, and the immediate reaction of another person can disappear. That reduced identifiability can have an impact on what people are prepared to share online, especially when the topic is socially sensitive or shameful (Joinson, 2001). John Suler (2004) classified this extensive occurrence as the online disinhibition effect, which refers to individuals' capacity to articulate themselves more candidly or with a lower level of inhibition in digital environments compared to in-person interactions. Under this scenario, anonymity does not generate the idea, it alters the circumstances under which the idea might be articulated. What was once confidential can now be easily typed, published, and disseminated with significantly reduced social

visibility. However, once the idea is articulated, an alternative possibility arises, another individual may react to it. Another individual might acknowledge it, affirm it, or support it. At such a point, the concern surpasses mere anonymity. The person has joined a collective. Accordingly, anonymity may give the thought a voice, and the group can give that voice validation. This same anonymity that lowers psychological inhibition further complicates legal accountability, since establishing the identity of an offender behind a screen name is often the first and the most critical step in any prosecution. The Online Safety Act addresses this directly by empowering the Online Safety Commission to compel disclosure of identity information from internet intermediaries, under section 25 of the Act, where an aggrieved person seeks to trace an anonymous account.

## When One Anonymous Voice Finds Another

Once a group begins to respond positively to behaviour that would otherwise be socially unacceptable, the psychological environment surrounding that behaviour begins to alter. Endorsement, involvement, and repetition can convey a significant message without verbal articulation. In this context, this behaviour is permissible. What is considered taboo in the broader community may also start to take on a new significance within the group.

This is important since humans pick up some social norms by watching the actions and responses of those around them. In a virtual community, the continual endorsement of negative actions might establish a localized norm, a perception of what individuals in this specific environment seem to accept or promote. Empirical studies conducted within messaging-app contexts have demonstrated that individuals may adhere to cyber-aggressive group standards, especially when they perceive a lower level of accountability for their reactions (Bleize et al., 2021). More recent experimental evidence found that the presence of aggressive messages in group chats increased expectations that others would respond aggressively, demonstrating how quickly existing behaviour in a digital group can shape perceptions of what is normal there (Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020). This does not imply that a Facebook group can effortlessly transform a seemingly harmless individual into a perpetrator. The primary psychological issue is reinforcement. Social psychology has always acknowledged that group identity and anonymity can enhance adherence to the norms that become prominent within a group, a phenomenon described by the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) (Reicher et al., 1995).

There is also a moral dimension to this process. Bandura's concept of moral disengagement describes how people can temporarily distance their behaviour from their usual moral standards (Bandura, 1999). This

is perhaps what makes these groups psychologically concerning. They do not merely connect people. They can create a small social world in which people begin validating one another. What is unsettling to the external society may eventually transform into commonplace dialogue among those within. And once something begins to feel ordinary, distinguishing the line between "I would never say this" and "people like me talk about this" can become increasingly challenging. Sri Lankan law has begun to recognize that harm can be collective as well as individual, and whereas the Online Safety Act specifically criminalizes the willful communication of statements intended to cause harassment through the publication of private information, under section 20, and separately provides for the identification of 'declared online locations' used for prohibited purposes, including child abuse material, under section 28. This offers a legal foothold against the very group dynamics this section describes, though its application depends on the Commission's own willingness to pursue network-level patterns rather than isolated posts.

## A Theory of Forbidden Desire

Sexual thoughts involving close family members may feel almost impossible to comprehend, but the idea of attraction within family relationships is not entirely new to psychology. Over a hundred years ago, Sigmund Freud attempted to comprehend a portion of this unsettling realm through one of his most controversial concepts, the Oedipus complex. Freud believed that in early life, a kid can subconsciously cultivate affection for the opposite-sex parent, coupled with emotions of competition against the same-sex parent. Freud characterized this phenomenon in boys as an unconscious bond with the mother and competition with the father. Importantly, he understood this as part of childhood psychosexual development—not as a conscious decision, and certainly not as permission to pursue sexual behaviour within the family (Freud, 1924/1961).

It is therefore tempting, particularly when looking at some of the disturbing conversations now appearing online, to connect them directly to Freud. However, establishing the link is not a straightforward task. Freud's theory fails to adequately explain the reasons an adult could sexualise, photograph, expose, or exploit a family member. It also does not imply that such conduct is a typical result of childhood maturation. The Oedipus complex is, therefore, one of Freud's most contentious concepts, particularly due to enquiries regarding its universality and empirical support (Simon, 1991). What Freud gives us, then, is not an explanation for what is happening today, but an important reminder. The human mind has always contained aspects of sexuality that society finds difficult to discuss. Yet, a thought is one thing. Turning another human being into something that can be sexually discussed, displayed, exchanged, or consumed is another. In this transformation, the individual on the

the receiving end, the mother, sister, or daughter, faces the peril of being degraded from a person of dignity and autonomy to an object of sexual pleasure.

This leads us to a psychological mechanism that is far more pertinent to comprehending the behaviour we observe, "sexual objectification."

## When Someone's Humanity Becomes Secondary

Sexual objectification occurs when a person is reduced primarily to their body or sexual value rather than recognized as a complete human being with thoughts, emotions, and autonomy (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In light of the phenomena we are observing online, this is quite unsettling. A mother, sister, daughter, or any female might be diminished to a mere representation to be objectified, analyzed, or disclosed, while the individual behind that representation and her entitlement to privacy are dismissed as of lesser importance. Studies indicate that sexual objectification can also reduce the extent to which observers attribute human qualities and moral concern to the person being objectified (Loughnan et al., 2010).

And ultimately, for what purpose? In such instances, the objective may be sexual stimulation or brief moments of pleasure. In certain situations, sexual arousal can affect judgement and decision-making and focus

attention on immediate sexual cues (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006). However, arousal does not negate autonomy or accountability. The unsettling disparity still exists. The satisfaction might only last a few moments, but the shame, betrayal, and psychological fallout for someone else might last much longer. This may be what makes objectification significant to this discourse. When an individual's humanity is relegated to a subordinate status in favor of personal pleasure, empathy has already lost part of its place in the interaction.

## Sexual curiosity in a culture of silence

Sexual curiosity does not disappear simply because we refuse to talk about it. Although sex education is taught in schools, research has shown that there are substantial knowledge and delivery gaps, including teacher discomfort and situations where children are not given the necessary information (UNFPA Sri Lanka, 2019). For several households, discussions often extend no further than puberty, menstruation, or reproduction. Discussions regarding consent, boundaries, healthy relationships, sexual emotions, and respect for individual autonomy may be conspicuously absent. The problem is that when reliable conversations are absent, young people do not stop being curious. In contemporary society, solutions are merely a search away, and pornography may serve as a source for



Public group · 7.1K members

Join Group

About

Photos

Events

Files

Albums

Courtesy: Instagram

shaping perceptions of sexuality. This is significant as pornography not only depicts sexual activities but also conveys specific sexual narratives, concepts on the appearance of sex, what is deemed attractive, and which sexual scenarios are perceived as typical. Studies indicate that pornography may influence sexual scripts, especially when audiences regard the content as authentic (Krahé et al., 2022). This is pertinent to our conversation as online pornography encompasses situations including familial and step-familial themes. Their existence does not mean that watching such content causes someone to develop incestuous desires or commit abuse such a conclusion would go far beyond the evidence. The issue arises when individuals repeatedly engage with fictitious sexual narratives without possessing sufficient sexual or media literacy to discern fantasy from healthy, consenting relationships in reality.

## A Poverty We Rarely Talk About

The lack of comprehensive sexual education could consequently be indicative of a broader issue. Understanding the biochemistry of sex is one thing, and developing healthy relationships, understanding consent, controlling desire, respecting boundaries, and acknowledging the autonomy of others is quite another. The absence of these discussions signifies a lack of not only information but also a broader range of emotional and psychological competencies. This could be interpreted as a type of "psychological poverty," which is a term used to describe a lack of empathy, emotional literacy, healthy sexual awareness, self-control, and respect for interpersonal boundaries rather than a psychiatric diagnosis. Importantly, this has little to do with intelligence, education, or social class. A person may know that something is wrong and still learn to downplay the harm, justify the behaviour, or place their own gratification above another person's dignity. Psychology reminds us that moral reasoning and empathy are not traits we can just assume maturity will bring, but rather complicated abilities developed via social experience and maturation (Decety & Cowell, 2014). This deficit is, in part, a policy failure as much as a psychological one. Sexuality education remains inconsistently mandated and unevenly delivered within Sri Lanka's national school curriculum, leaving the acquisition of consent literacy and emotional boundary-setting largely to chance (UNFPA Sri Lanka, 2019).

This may be the point at which the problem transcends mere sexuality. When an individual's privacy transforms into a form of entertainment, when degradation serves as a source of pleasure, or when group affiliation facilitates the acceptance of such conduct, we may be witnessing a profound deficiency in our ability to acknowledge and empathize with the psychological experiences of others. And the consequences of that failure are not experienced only by the person causing the harm. They are carried by the person who was supposed to be able to trust them.

## The Betrayal Within

Up until now, we have made an effort to comprehend some of the psychological mechanisms that might surround the individuals who are producing the harm. However, the gravity of this matter becomes significantly more apparent when we focus on the individual undergoing it. The subject matter extends beyond merely the sharing of images or the occurrence of disparaging dialogues online. Documents and information disseminated among these groups highlight apprehensions around sexual harassment, abuse, and exploitation taking place within families, particularly affecting children and other susceptible relatives.

When sexual abuse originates from a family member, the psychological trauma might entail an especially deep sense of betrayal. Betrayal Trauma Theory, formulated by Jennifer Freyd, provides clarity on the reasons why damage inflicted by a reliable or relied-upon individual can engender a particularly challenging psychological dilemma. According to Freyd (1996), the same relationship that is meant to symbolize safety, attachment, or care is instead linked to risk. For a young individual, this may be particularly complex. A youngster could rely emotionally, physically, or financially on the same adult who is abusing or taking advantage of them. They might simultaneously harbour affection, apprehension, and reliance for that individual. Investigations on childhood sexual abuse have linked these experiences to heightened risks in mental health, emotional regulation, and subsequent interpersonal dynamics, while results differ significantly, and trauma should not be regarded as an inevitable life sentence (Hailes et al., 2019). When the victim is an adult, the same betrayal concept applies. A mother subjected to sexual harassment by her child, a sister taken advantage of by her sibling, or an individual with a disability mistreated by a carer confronts more than the act of sexual violation alone. The bond that was meant to foster trust has instead contributed to the damage. For people who depend on family members for care, communication, mobility or financial support, vulnerability may be compounded by barriers to disclosure and escape. International evidence consistently identifies children and adults with disabilities as facing elevated risks of sexual violence and victimization (Jones et al., 2012, Mailhot Amborski et al., 2022). It is noteworthy that Sri Lankan criminal law does address familial sexual violations directly via the Penal Code, section 364A, whereby incest has been made into a punishable offense, covering intercourse between persons in specified degrees of blood, half-blood, or adoptive relationship. Nevertheless, the provision has notable limits, since it is confined to penetrative intercourse and an enumerated list of relationships, meaning that non-penetrative sexual exploitation, objectifying commentary, or the sharing of sexualized material about a family member outside those degrees may fall completely outside the scope.

Furthermore, it must be made very clear that a child cannot consent to being sexually exploited when they are used for financial or sexual gain. No sum of money, familial influence, or digital normalization alters that fact. The repercussions cannot solely be assessed by the physical state or the visual representations on a display. The damage may extend to a more foundational aspect, the victim's perception of trust, security, and interpersonal connections.

And for a child, that psychological story does not necessarily end when the abuse ends. The child grows up.

## Where the Law Currently Stands

The Penal Code speaks to the family betrayal we have just discussed, but it falls largely silent on the digital dimension that runs through this entire article, the group, the screenshot, the anonymous post. That silence is not absolute. When the harm moves from the home into a Facebook group or a Telegram channel, the Computer Crimes Act of 2007 becomes the first point of legal contact, though it was drafted with hacking and data breaches in mind rather than sexual exploitation, and its reach into the kind of content described here is more incidental than deliberate. The Online Safety Act of 2024 was built for precisely this newer terrain. It criminalises the wilful publication of private information intended to cause harassment, treats child abuse material circulated through online accounts as a distinct offence, and, perhaps most usefully for the anonymity this article has spent so much time unpacking, allows an aggrieved person to apply for the disclosure of an anonymous account holder's identity. In principle, this closes some of the gap between a psychological account of disinhibition and a legal one of accountability.

Two further pieces complete the picture, and both concern what happens after a disclosure is made rather than the offence itself. The National Child Protection Authority, established under its 1998 Act, is not simply the operator of a helpline. It is a statutory body with a mandate to shape national child protection policy, advise on legal reform, and monitor how cases move through the system. And when a case does reach a courtroom, it is the Evidence (Special Provisions) Act of 1995 that determines whether a screenshot, a group chat log, or a recording pulled from one of these forums can be admitted at all, a question that matters enormously given how much of the harm this article describes exists only in digital form.

None of this framework is negligible. But laid against the psychological mechanisms traced earlier, disinhibition, group validation, and objectification, it becomes clear that the law is better equipped to punish an act once it has surfaced than to intervene in the conditions that produced it. That distinction is where the recommendations below begin.

## Childhood Leaves an Echo

Even if a child may outgrow the age at which the abuse took place, the psychological experience may not go away as they become older. Childhood sexual abuse has been linked to heightened chances of subsequent challenges related to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, interpersonal interactions, and sexual health (Hailes et al., 2019). When injury originates from a trusted individual, the youngster may develop intricate perceptions of trust, closeness, and security in future relationships. But risk is not destiny. An abused child is not permanently damaged, nor are they destined to repeat what was done to them. According to research on resilience, children can recover, especially if they have access to safety, supportive relationships, and suitable psychiatric care (Domhardt et al., 2015). The aim of acknowledging long-term consequences is not to forecast a child's future, but to safeguard it. The youth impacted today will evolve into the adults who influence the families and communities of tomorrow. If children represent the future of Sri Lanka, safeguarding that future necessitates ensuring their psychological well-being in the present.

## The Fear Reaches Beyond the Victim

The impact of what is being exposed does not end with those who experience the harm directly. As these stories, screenshots, and allegations enter public discussion, they begin to affect the way ordinary people think about safety, trust, and the future. For many, particularly young women, the fear is no longer limited to what may happen to someone else. It becomes more personal, what kind of society are we becoming, and would I feel safe bringing a child into it? This does not imply that every household is perilous or that males, in general, should be regarded with distrust. However, when familial sexual abuse becomes apparent, it can undoubtedly contest beliefs regarding the origins of safety and the individuals we are meant to trust.

This illustrates how the repercussions extend beyond the isolated victim. The injury is directly experienced by the victim, but society as a whole must determine what it is willing to do about it.

## From Understanding to Action

The first step in prevention is to make it more difficult for abuse to go unnoticed. Families, schools, and communities must know how to react safely when children and vulnerable adults disclose what is occurring to them. In Sri Lanka, allegations of child maltreatment may be communicated via the National Child Protection Authority's 1929 Child Helpline, and online occurrences can additionally be reported through appropriate cybercrime and platform reporting channels (National Child Protection Authority [NCPA],

n.d. Sri Lanka CERT, n.d.). It is worth noticing, though, that these two channels tend to appear side by side in guidance documents without much sense of how a case actually moves between them. A family reporting familial sexual abuse that also involves digital sexual content may find itself explaining the same story twice, once to the NCPA and once to CERT, with little visible coordination between the two, and the police and the school system sitting somewhere outside that loop entirely. A defined referral pathway between the NCPA, Sri Lanka CERT, the Police, and the Ministry of Education would perhaps do more for a family in that position than either agency operating well on its own, since the harm this article describes rarely respects the boundary between "family matter" and "online matter" that these institutions are currently organised around.

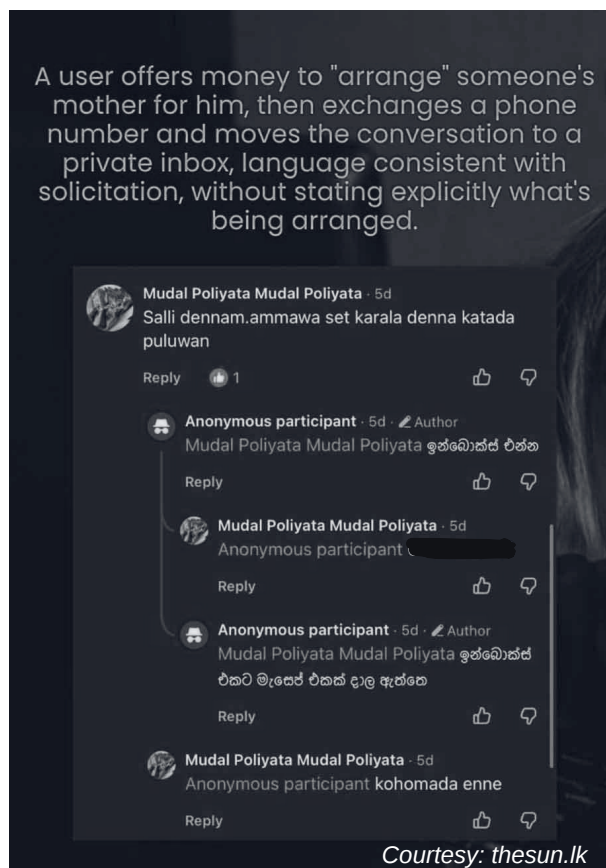
Reporting needs to safeguard the victim instead of further compromising their safety. Abusive images or videos must not be redistributed under the guise of awareness. Pertinent evidence should instead be retained appropriately for law enforcement. It may also be worth asking whether the NCPA, given its existing mandate to advise on legal reform, could be better positioned to examine whether Section 364A's narrow, act-specific definition of incest still reflects the fuller range of familial sexual harm this article has described, since a helpline can only do so much if the underlying offence it feeds into has not kept pace.

Additionally, the digital spaces themselves need to be prevented. Facebook, Telegram, and similar platforms

require ongoing oversight and regulation of groups that promote sexual exploitation, non-consensual sexual material, or abuse, especially in cases involving minors. Dismissing one organization merely for another to emerge under an alternate designation cannot be perpetuated indefinitely. Instead of treating each post or group as an individual occurrence, patterns of recurring accounts, administrators, and networks should be found and looked at. Some of the legal tools for this already exist, though they remain underused. The Online Safety Act allows for the declaration of 'online locations' used for prohibited purposes, which, applied with more consistency, could shift enforcement away from the current pattern of chasing one group after another once it has already reappeared under a new name. Similarly, its provision allowing an aggrieved person to seek disclosure of an anonymous account holder's identity might matter more to ordinary victims if it were easier to invoke without needing legal representation to navigate it.

However, prevention must start before a victim is affected by the behavior. Sexual education must encompass consent, bodily autonomy, limits, healthy relationships, and media literacy, rather than allowing youth to navigate these matters independently. Additionally, parents and educators must have the courage to talk about sexuality without demeaning healthy sexual curiosity. Holistic sexuality education encompassing relationships, consent, rights, and responsible decision-making is globally acknowledged as a crucial element in the development of youth (UNESCO et al., 2018). Much of this, in the Sri Lankan context, may come down to consistency rather than absence, since the curriculum gestures toward these themes, but whether a child actually encounters them with any depth still seems to depend heavily on which school, and which teacher, they happen to have. This unevenness has already been documented rather than merely suspected. UNFPA's own review of Sri Lankan sexuality education found teacher discomfort itself to be one of the recurring reasons content on consent and boundaries goes undelivered even where it exists on paper (UNFPA Sri Lanka, 2019). If that is the case, it may be less a curriculum problem than a training and mandate problem. Leaving schools free to interpret an optional framework will likely keep producing the same gaps, and a more standardised, legislated requirement, paired with proper teacher preparation rather than an unsupported expectation that teachers simply manage the discomfort themselves, might be the more durable fix.

Psychological services also play a part in this context. An individual who acknowledges enduring sexual thoughts, impulses, or actions that may jeopardize another person ought to have access to private professional assistance prior to taking any action. Intervention may target problematic sexual interests, flawed beliefs, self-regulation, empathy, and other pertinent risk factors based on individual evaluation. In instances of prior abuse, therapy does not supplant accountability or legal duty, and both may be essential



to mitigate additional damage (Gannon et al., 2019). Where this becomes complicated is in situations where a practitioner learns that a client poses an ongoing risk to a specific family member. Sri Lankan law offers little clarity on what, if anything, that practitioner is expected to do with that knowledge, and this is perhaps a question worth resolving before it is tested in a harder case. Prevention also entails stopping more psychological harm for people who have already experienced it. Survivors require secure avenues for disclosure, trauma-sensitive assistance, safeguards against retaliation, and, when appropriate, expert psychological treatment. Individuals ought not to be compelled to incessantly validate their anguish in a public forum to get credibility or safeguarding.

Prevention must not be solely the responsibility of psychologists, law enforcement, or governmental bodies. Guardians possess a responsibility. Educational institutions possess a function. Technology firms possess a responsibility. Mental health practitioners possess a significant function. The judicial system possesses a function. Additionally, regular users have a part to play. When detrimental content emerges on the internet, we can report it instead of disseminating it, safeguard evidence rather than amplify the victim's plight, confront rather than engage, and voice our concerns when silence would facilitate exploitation.

We might not be able to stop every negative thought from coming into someone's head. However, we may construct a community where such notions are less prone to receive support, less inclined to manifest as actions, and significantly less likely to target a victim.

## Conclusion

What we are witnessing should concern us not only because of what is going on right now, but also because of what it exposes about trust, safety, sexuality, empathy, and the ties that keep families intact. When those tasked with safeguarding become a source of dread or abuse, the damage extends beyond an isolated incident. It has the potential to alter an individual's perception of safety, interpersonal connections, and the concept of home. Psychology cannot reverse that damage, nor can comprehending the psychology underlying the behaviour justify it. Nothing in this text should be interpreted as a defense, normalization, or justification of harmful people. Comprehension is not synonymous with justification. Conversely, comprehension affords us the chance to identify the circumstances that facilitate the emergence, validation, and perpetuation of detrimental conduct, thus providing us with an additional opportunity to disrupt it. We are unable to alter past events, although we can affect future occurrences. We could substitute silence with education, detect warning signals earlier, protect the vulnerable, assist those who have already been abused, intervene before destructive thoughts turn into terrible actions, and hold those who cross that line accountable. Awareness may be most

significant when it transcends mere recognition of a situation and transforms into a motivation to shield others from encountering it. Yet, this psychological insight alone cannot close the gaps that remain in Sri Lanka's legal and policy frameworks. It must be utilized to mold and develop the frameworks further to translate the understanding obtained into protection. Such a task requires deliberate policy attention, which the following recommendations attempt to outline.

## References

- Ariely, D., & Loewenstein, G. (2006). The heat of the moment: The effect of sexual arousal on sexual decision making. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 19(2), 87– 98. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.501>
- Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(3), 193– 209. [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0303\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327957PSPR0303_3)
- Bleize, D. N. M., Anschütz, D. J., Tanis, M., & Buijzen, M. (2021). The effects of group centrality and accountability on conformity to cyber aggressive norms: Two messaging app experiments. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 120, 106754. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106754>
- Decety, J., & Cowell, J. M. (2014). The complex relation between morality and empathy. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 18(7), 337 – 339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2014.04.008>
- Delivering comprehensive sexuality education whose role is it? UNFPA Generation-to-Generation dialogues -6 #g2glk. (2019). <https://srilanka.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA%20G2G%20Post%20Brief%20FINAL.pdf>
- Domhardt, M., Münzer, A., Fegert, J. M., & Goldbeck, L. (2015). Resilience in survivors of child sexual abuse, A systematic review of the literature. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 16(4), 476 – 493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838014557288>
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T.-A. (1997). Objectification theory – Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173 – 206. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>
- Freud, S. (1961). The dissolution of the Oedipus complex. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 19, pp. 173 – 179). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1924). <https://archive.org/details/standardeditiono19freu>
- Freyd, J. J. (1996). *Betrayal trauma, The logic of forgetting childhood abuse*. Harvard University Press. <https://books.google.lk/books?id=r-DcXX3GwFYC&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- Gannon, T. A., Olver, M. E., Mallion, J. S., & James, M. (2019). Does specialized psychological treatment for offending reduce recidivism? A meta-analysis examining staff and program variables as predictors of treatment effectiveness. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 73, 101752. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2019.101752>

- Hailes, H. P., Yu, R., Danese, A., & Fazel, S. (2019). Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: An umbrella review. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 6(10), 830 – 839. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30286-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30286-X)
- Hilvert – Bruce, Z., & Neill, J. T. (2020). I'm just trolling, The role of normative beliefs in aggressive behaviour in online gaming. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 102, 303–311. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.003>
- Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self – disclosure in computer-mediated communication, The role of self awareness and visual anonymity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31(2), 177 – 192. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.36>
- Jones, L., Bellis, M. A., Wood, S., Hughes, K., McCoy, E., Eckley, L., Bates, G., Mikton, C., Shakespeare, T., & Officer, A. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities, A systematic review and meta analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet*, 380(9845), 899 – 907. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(12\)60692-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(12)60692-8)
- Krahé, B., Tomaszewska, P., & Schuster, I. (2022). Links of perceived pornography realism with sexual aggression via sexual scripts, sexual behavior, and acceptance of sexual coercion: A study with German university students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(1), 63. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010063>
- Loughnan, S., Haslam, N., Murnane, T., Vaes, J., Reynolds, C., & Suitner, C. (2010). Objectification leads to depersonalization, the denial of mind and moral concern to objectified others. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(5), 709 – 717. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.755>
- Mailhot Amborski, A., Bussi eres, E.-L., Vaillancourt-Morel, M.-P., & Joyal, C. C. (2022). Sexual violence against persons with disabilities, A meta analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 23(4), 1330 – 1343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838021995975>
- National Child Protection Authority. (n.d.). 1929 call center helpline. Government of Sri Lanka. <https://childprotection.gov.lk/en/what-we-do/1929-call-centre-helpline>
- Reicher, S. D., Spears, R., & Postmes, T. (1995). A social identity model of deindividuation phenomena. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 6(1), 161 – 198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779443000049>
- Simon, B. (1991). Is the Oedipus complex still the cornerstone of psychoanalysis? Three obstacles to answering the question. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 39(3), 641– 668. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000306519103900303>
- Sri Lanka CERT. (n.d.). Report incident. [https://cert.gov.lk/report\\_incident](https://cert.gov.lk/report_incident)
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321– 326. <https://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Children's Fund, UN Women, & World Health Organization. (2018). International technical guidance on sexuality education – An evidence-informed approach (Rev. ed.). UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/UQRM6395>
- United Nations Population Fund Sri Lanka. (2019). Policy brief 8: Comprehensive sexuality education in Sri Lanka. <https://srilanka.unfpa.org/en/publications/policy-brief-8-comprehensive-sexuality-education-sri-lanka>