

Women, Children and Vulnerable Groups: Criminal Law, Protection and Access to Justice

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Received 02 September 2026

Accepted 10 September 2026

Published 17 September 2026

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64880/pcjaict.v1i5.13>

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sector.

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Abstract:

Women, children and vulnerable groups are often exposed to violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination, making effective legal protection and access to justice essential. Criminal law plays an important role in preventing offences, ensuring accountability and protecting the dignity and safety of affected persons. However, legal protection is meaningful only when victims can easily access police authorities, courts, legal aid and other support mechanisms. This paper examines the role of criminal law in protecting women, children and vulnerable groups and evaluates the challenges they face in obtaining justice. It focuses on issues such as fear of reporting offences, social stigma, lack of awareness, economic dependence, delayed investigations and limited access to legal assistance. The study also highlights the importance of victim-friendly procedures, sensitive investigation and timely judicial processes. The paper argues that effective protection requires more than strong laws. It requires proper implementation, institutional accountability, accessible legal services and social support. Strengthening these mechanisms can improve confidence in the criminal justice system and ensure greater protection for vulnerable persons. The study concludes that a victim-centred and accessible approach is necessary to promote fairness, dignity and meaningful access to justice.

Keywords: Women; Children; Vulnerable Groups; Criminal Law; Legal Protection; Access to Justice; Victim Rights; Legal Aid; Criminal Justice System; Human Rights.

1. Introduction and Concept of Vulnerable Groups

Vulnerable groups are sections of society that may face a greater risk of discrimination, violence, exploitation, neglect or social exclusion because of their social, economic, physical or personal circumstances. Women, children, persons with disabilities, elderly persons, economically weaker sections and other marginalized communities may experience difficulties in protecting their rights and accessing

legal remedies. Their vulnerability often arises from unequal social relationships, lack of awareness, poverty, dependence and limited access to education and public institutions.

In the context of criminal law, the protection of vulnerable groups is particularly important because offences committed against such persons can have serious and long-lasting consequences. Women and children may face domestic violence, sexual offences, trafficking, abuse and exploitation, while other vulnerable persons may experience neglect, discrimination and different forms of criminal victimization. Therefore, the criminal justice system has an important responsibility to provide effective protection, fair investigation and meaningful access to justice.

The concept of vulnerability does not suggest that every individual belonging to a particular group is incapable or powerless. Instead, it recognizes that certain social conditions can increase the risk of harm and create barriers to obtaining justice. Effective legal protection requires a sensitive, accessible and victim-oriented approach that promotes safety, dignity and equal treatment within the criminal justice system.

2. Research Objectives and Methodology

Research Objectives:

- To examine the criminal law protections available to women, children and vulnerable groups.
- To study the effectiveness of existing protection and support mechanisms.
- To analyse the challenges faced by vulnerable groups in accessing justice.
- To suggest measures for improving legal protection and access to justice.

Methodology:

This research adopts a doctrinal and analytical methodology, based on the study of relevant laws, judicial decisions, books, research articles and other secondary sources to examine protection and access to justice.

3. Literature Review

Scholars have examined the criminal law framework for protecting women, children and other vulnerable groups from violence, exploitation and discrimination. K. D. Gaur (2020) discusses the importance of criminal law in defining offences and ensuring accountability. Ratanlal & Dhirajlal (2022) analyse the practical application of criminal laws and procedures. S. R. Myneni (2021) highlights the social causes of crime and victimisation. These studies indicate that effective protection requires strong laws, sensitive enforcement, accessible courts and adequate support systems to ensure meaningful access to justice for vulnerable individuals.

4. Legal Protection for Women, Children and Vulnerable Groups

India has developed a broad legal framework to protect women, children and other vulnerable groups from violence, exploitation and discrimination. Important laws include the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. **The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013** strengthened criminal provisions relating to sexual offences against women. Judicial decisions have also played an important role in expanding protection. In **Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997)**, the Supreme Court established guidelines against sexual harassment at the workplace, while **Nipun Saxena v. Union of India (2018)** emphasized the protection of the identity and dignity of victims of sexual offences. Despite these legal

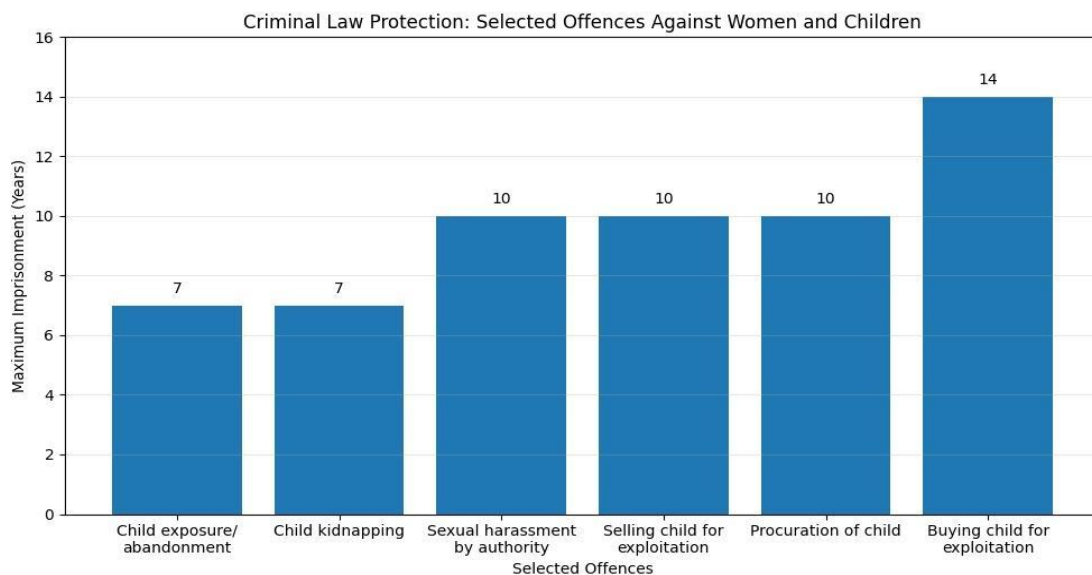
developments, effective protection requires proper implementation, accessible legal aid, sensitive investigation and timely justice.

5. Criminal Law and Protection Against Violence and Exploitation

Criminal law plays an important role in protecting women, children and other vulnerable groups from violence, abuse and exploitation. It provides legal measures to punish offences such as physical violence, sexual abuse, trafficking, harassment and exploitation. Effective criminal laws also create a sense of security by holding offenders accountable for their actions.

However, legal protection is meaningful only when victims can easily report offences and receive timely assistance. Sensitive investigation, proper evidence collection and speedy legal proceedings are therefore essential. Along with punishment, the criminal justice system should focus on victim protection, rehabilitation and support. A strong and accessible legal framework can help vulnerable persons live with greater dignity, safety and confidence.

Figure 1: Criminal Law Protection Against Selected Offences of Violence and Exploitation of Women and Children



Source: NCRB, Compendium of New Criminal Laws: Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.

6. Role of Police and Investigation Agencies

Police and investigation agencies play a central role in protecting women, children and other vulnerable groups from violence, abuse and exploitation. Their responsibilities include receiving complaints, registering cases, protecting victims, collecting evidence and ensuring that investigations are conducted fairly and promptly. Sensitive and respectful behaviour by police personnel is particularly important when dealing with victims who may be physically or emotionally distressed.

Effective investigation requires trained officers, proper evidence collection and coordination with medical professionals, social workers and other support agencies. A victim-friendly approach can reduce fear and encourage victims to seek legal assistance. However, delays, lack of training and inadequate resources may affect the quality of investigations. Strengthening specialised units, improving training and increasing accountability can help police and investigation agencies provide more effective protection and improve access to justice.

6.1 Access to Justice and Victim Protection

Access to justice is essential for women, children and other vulnerable groups who experience violence, abuse or exploitation. Legal protection is meaningful only when victims can easily approach the police, courts and other support institutions. Free legal aid, counselling, medical assistance and simplified procedures can help victims participate in the justice process with greater confidence.

Victim protection is equally important because many victims face fear, social pressure and the risk of further harm. Confidentiality, witness protection, compensation and rehabilitation services can provide necessary support. A sensitive and victim-friendly criminal justice system should ensure that victims are treated with dignity, respect and fairness throughout the legal process.

6.2 Role of Courts and Support Mechanisms

Courts play an important role in protecting women, children and other vulnerable groups by ensuring fair trials and providing effective remedies against violence and exploitation. Through their decisions, courts have strengthened victim protection and emphasized the need for sensitive and child-friendly procedures. In *Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan* (1997), the Supreme Court recognized the serious nature of sexual harassment and laid down important guidelines for protecting women in workplaces.

Support mechanisms such as legal aid, counselling, victim compensation, shelter services and child-friendly courts help vulnerable persons access justice more effectively. These mechanisms reduce the practical and emotional difficulties faced during legal proceedings. Judicial intervention, combined with institutional support, can therefore make the justice system more accessible, responsive and protective for those who require special assistance.

7. Challenges in Effective Implementation of Protective Laws

Despite the existence of several protective laws, women, children and other vulnerable groups often face difficulties in receiving effective justice. Lack of awareness, social stigma, fear of retaliation, delayed reporting and inadequate institutional support can prevent victims from seeking legal remedies. Weak investigation and delays in trials may further reduce the effectiveness of legal protection.

The Supreme Court in ***Lalita Kumari v. Government of Uttar Pradesh* (2014)** emphasized the importance of prompt registration of FIRs in cases involving cognizable offences. The judgment strengthened accountability at the initial stage of the criminal justice process and highlighted the importance of timely access to legal protection.

Effective implementation requires trained police personnel, victim-sensitive procedures, speedy investigation and stronger support services. Legal protection becomes meaningful only when vulnerable persons can approach institutions without fear and receive fair, timely and respectful assistance throughout the justice process.

7.1 Technology and Emerging Challenges in Protection

- ❖ Online Safety: Technology has created new risks such as cyberbullying, online harassment and digital exploitation.
- ❖ Digital Awareness: Women, children and vulnerable groups need greater awareness about safe and responsible use of digital platforms.
- ❖ Protection of Personal Data: Safeguarding personal information is essential to prevent misuse and identity-related offences.

- ❖ Technology-Based Support: Digital complaint systems, helplines and emergency applications can improve access to protection and assistance.
- ❖ Emerging Challenges: Rapid technological developments require laws and protection mechanisms to continuously adapt to new forms of crime.

8. Findings & Discussion

Findings:

The study finds that women, children and other vulnerable groups continue to face significant barriers in obtaining effective protection and access to justice despite the existence of several criminal laws and protective mechanisms. Legal provisions alone are not sufficient when victims experience fear, social stigma, lack of awareness, financial difficulties and delays in the justice process. The findings also highlight the importance of sensitive policing, timely investigation, victim support services and accessible courts. Children and other vulnerable persons require special protection because their dependence and social circumstances may prevent them from reporting offences. Technology has created new opportunities for reporting and assistance but has also introduced new forms of abuse and exploitation. Therefore, effective protection requires coordinated efforts, stronger implementation and a victim-centred criminal justice system.

Discussion:

The protection of women, children and other vulnerable groups remains an important concern within the criminal justice system. Although various criminal laws and protective mechanisms have been introduced, their effective implementation continues to face practical challenges. Delays in investigation and trials, lack of awareness, social stigma, inadequate support services and limited access to legal assistance often prevent victims from obtaining timely justice. The discussion highlights the need for a victim-centred approach that ensures safety, dignity and equal access to justice. Police authorities, courts, legal aid institutions and social welfare agencies must work together to provide effective protection and support. Special attention should also be given to vulnerable persons who face multiple forms of discrimination and exploitation. Strengthening institutional accountability, improving awareness and ensuring sensitive handling of victims can make the criminal justice system more accessible, responsive and effective.

9. Conclusion and Suggestions

Conclusion:

The protection of women, children and vulnerable groups remains an essential concern of the criminal justice system. Although various laws and protective mechanisms have been introduced to address violence, abuse, exploitation and discrimination, their effectiveness depends largely on proper implementation. Timely reporting, sensitive policing, fair investigation and accessible legal support are necessary to ensure meaningful protection.

Access to justice must extend beyond the availability of laws and courts. Victims often face social, economic and psychological barriers while seeking legal remedies. Therefore, stronger support services, legal awareness, victim assistance and institutional accountability are required. A humane and responsive criminal justice system can help create a safer environment where vulnerable persons are treated with dignity and receive effective protection and justice.

Suggestion:

- Strengthen Legal Awareness: Conduct regular awareness programmes so that women, children and vulnerable groups understand their legal rights and available remedies.
- Improve Police and Investigation: Provide specialised training to police officers for handling sensitive cases with dignity, empathy and efficiency.
- Ensure Faster Access to Justice: Strengthen support systems and promote timely investigation and disposal of cases involving vulnerable victims.
- Provide Victim Support Services: Ensure access to counselling, legal aid, medical assistance and rehabilitation services throughout the justice process.
- Promote Effective Implementation: Regular monitoring and coordination among government authorities, police, courts and social organisations can improve the practical implementation of protective laws.

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