

WE MEASURE LITERACY ,WHY DON'T WE MEASURE SAFETY LITERACY ?

Every year we celebrate rising literacy rates. Governments publish education statistics, schools celebrate examination results, and international organizations track how many people can read and write. But there is one question almost no report asks: How many people know how to keep themselves safe? Are they safety literate ? Societies measure how many people can read and write, but rarely measure how many people can recognize danger, resist manipulation, seek help, protect themselves online, or apply safety knowledge in daily life. Academic literacy tells us whether a person can read a sentence but Safety literacy tells us whether a person can recognize a threat before it becomes harm. A student may score 95% but still not recognise online grooming ,and a graduate who is educated may even accept a fake overseas job offer that leads to trafficking We celebrate education rates, school enrollment, and exam performance, but a person may be academically educated and still not know: how traffickers manipulate victims,how online grooming begins,how unsafe relationships escalate,how social media can be used for exploitation,how to identify red flags,where to report danger,how to help someone at risk,how to protect personal information online. This is where the concept of **safety literacy** becomes essential Safety literacy is the capacity to access, understand, evaluate, and apply safety-related information to identify hazards and avoid danger. It goes beyond basic reading, empowering individuals to make informed decisions that mitigate risks and protect well-being in environments like the workplace, the internet, or healthcare in today's digital world, being safety literate means understanding how online grooming begins, recognising fraudulent job offers, protecting personal information, respecting digital boundaries, and knowing where to seek help when faced with abuse or exploitation

69,627 trafficking victims were officially detected worldwide in 2022, the highest number recorded since UNODC began global reporting. The number of detected victims in 2022 was 25% higher than in 2019, indicating a sharp increase after the COVID-19 pandemic.The ILO (international labour organisation)estimates that around 27.6 million people are living in situations of forced labour or forced sexual exploitation (modern slavery), many of whom are victims of trafficking.

Victims by Age and Gender (2022)

39% – Adult women,23% – Adult men,22% – Girls,16% – Boys

This means children account for 38% of all detected trafficking victims worldwide.

How traffickers approach them ?

Traffickers rarely begin with violence. They often use deception and manipulation, such as:

Fake job offers,False promises of education or scholarships,Romantic relationships ("lover-boy" or online romance tactics),Fake modelling or entertainment opportunities,Social media messaging and online grooming.It also includes Fraudulent recruitment agencies,Offers of migration or overseas employment,Exploiting financial hardship, conflict, or family crises

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children received 36.2 million reports through its CyberTipline in 2023, reflecting the vast scale of online child sexual exploitation concerns.

UNICEF reports that children and adolescents are increasingly exposed to online risks as internet access expands globally as one in three internet user globally is a child . A teenager may know algebra, chemistry, and world history, yet still fail to recognize the warning signs of online grooming. If our education system measures literacy but not the ability to identify manipulation, coercion, and digital threats, are we truly preparing young people for the world they live in?

Women increasingly face violence that extends beyond physical spaces into digital environments, including: Cyberstalking,Non-consensual sharing of intimate images,Online harassment,Image-based abuse,Technology-facilitated intimate partner violence.UN estimates that one in three women worldwide experiences physical and/or sexual violence during her lifetime.

These realities reinforce a simple yet urgent truth: while academic literacy equips us with knowledge, safety literacy equips us to recognize threats, make informed decisions, and protect ourselves in both physical and digital environments.

The globally accepted United Nations definition of literacy is being able to read and write a simple sentence in any language with understanding, and Indian surveys also use this definition.

Ever since their introduction in 1950, all rounds of the nationally representative household surveys from the National Statistics Office (NSO) have recorded the educational levels of the members of the surveyed households, including their literacy status. The National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) have also measured literacy over five surveys conducted since 1992.

What the data on literacy misses: The manner in which the NSS and NFHS ask the literacy question opens up the possibility that some illiterate or literate people are being missed.

All surveys assume that some people are literate and do not ask them the literacy question at all. Routine NSO surveys do not ask informants about the literacy levels of household members whom the informant has said are educated. The reason this is problematic is because we now know that merely having gone to school is not an automatic guarantee of literacy.

Annual status of education reports (ASER) asks children in Grade 8 from selected households to read a text. In 2005, ASER estimated that 86% of children in Grade 8 were able to read a Grade 2-level text with some long sentences. In 2022, the proportion of children in Grade 8 who were able to read a Grade-2 level text fell to 70%. Moreover, 2.5% of children in Grade 8 could not even identify letters in their own language. It suggested a worsening of functional literacy among school children.

This also has implications on the assumption of surveys that everyone who completed school is literate, and on the literacy rates that such surveys produce.

India measures literacy through an individual's ability to read and write with understanding, along with indicators such as educational attainment and school enrolment. While these measures reflect academic progress, they fail to assess whether individuals can recognise real-world risks such as online grooming, trafficking, or cyber abuse. This is the gap that safety literacy seeks to address.

Academic literacy and safety literacy are not competing ideas—they are complementary. Academic literacy enables individuals to read, write, understand information, and succeed in examinations. Safety literacy, on the other hand, equips them to recognise danger, prevent exploitation, respond to real-life risks, and apply knowledge in situations that threaten their well-being. While academic literacy measures educational achievement, safety literacy measures an individual's ability to protect themselves and contribute to a safer community. In today's digital age, true education must embrace both.

Many people believe human trafficking only involves kidnapping by strangers, whereas it often begins with deception, false promises, or someone the victim knows.

People assume online grooming happens only to young children, but teenagers and young adults can also be targeted.

Many think being educated or digitally active automatically makes someone safe online.

Some believe privacy settings or simply "being careful" are enough, overlooking the role of manipulation and psychological coercion. "One misconception I encountered repeatedly was the belief that education alone protects people from exploitation. Yet awareness sessions revealed that even academically accomplished individuals often struggled to identify the warning signs of grooming or trafficking."

What surprised me most during the awareness work was not the complexity of the threats, but how ordinary they appeared. Many risks began with something as simple as a friend request, a flattering message, or an attractive job opportunity. To understand how people perceive safety literacy, I asked one of my juniors what the term meant to them. They replied that it meant not talking to strangers and staying cautious on social media by being aware of scams and potential threats. While their response reflected a basic understanding of online safety, it also highlighted that safety literacy is often viewed narrowly, when in reality it means a much broader range of skills, including recognising online grooming, identifying trafficking tactics, protecting digital privacy, and knowing how to seek help. Before volunteering, I viewed literacy primarily as the ability to read, write, and succeed academically. Working on awareness around human trafficking and online grooming changed that perspective. I realised that a person may excel in examinations yet remain vulnerable if they cannot recognise manipulation. My experience as a volunteer did not diminish the importance of academic literacy—it expanded my understanding of it. True education should empower people not only to read books, but also to read situations, question manipulation, recognise danger, and protect themselves and others. Until we value

these abilities alongside academic achievement, our understanding of literacy will remain incomplete. The question, therefore, is not only whether safety literacy matters, but whether our education system is prepared to measure it

For this we should adopt Policy Proposal: Measuring Safety Literacy

1. Introduce a Safety Literacy Index

Governments should develop a Safety Literacy Index alongside literacy and education indicators. This index could measure whether people, especially students, can: Recognize online grooming and trafficking warning signs or Identify fake job, Protect their digital identity and privacy, Know how and where to report online abuse or suspicious activity.

2. Integrate Safety Literacy into School Curriculum

Schools should include age-appropriate, evidence-based lessons on: Online grooming and exploitation, Human trafficking prevention and Digital privacy and cybersecurity.

3. Conduct Annual Safety Literacy Assessments

Just as students are assessed in mathematics, science, and languages, schools could assess practical safety skills through: Scenario-based questions, Role-play activities, Case studies and Digital safety quizzes also Problem-solving exercises.

A society that measures literacy but not safety literacy celebrates education without fully preparing its people for the realities they face. Safety literacy also means to build a system how much people are really becoming safety literate and whether the gap between policy and practice is being addressed or not?

As I witnessed through my work with Project A.S.H.A., I came to realise that prevention begins with awareness. Project A.S.H.A. is an initiative dedicated to combating human trafficking, online grooming, and exploitation through education, advocacy, and community engagement. Through its Haryana Chapter, including outreach efforts across many states, the initiative works to empower young people and communities with the knowledge and skills to recognise risks before they escalate into harm. Such grassroots efforts demonstrate that safety literacy is not just a concept—it is a practical tool for prevention. Yet lasting change will require these community initiatives to be complemented by systemic reforms, ensuring that safety literacy becomes an integral part of education and public policy.

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