



Sexual Abuse of Children with Special Needs: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Sexual abuse against children with special needs is a critical issue requiring multidisciplinary attention. Children with special needs are highly vulnerable due to communication barriers, dependence on adults, and limited understanding of risky situations. Abuse includes verbal, physical, psychological, and digital forms. Contributing factors are low societal awareness and inadequate tailored sexual education. Cases often occur in close environments like schools, families, or communities. This study aims to analyze sexual abuse patterns among children with special needs and raise awareness. Using a PRISMA-based Systematic Literature Review (SLR), it examines abuse types, forms, and causes. Data from Scopus (2015–2025) were filtered using keywords like 'sexual abuse' and 'children with special needs, yielding 79 articles for bibliometric analysis. Findings highlight that children with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Down syndrome) face heightened risks of verbal, physical, and digital abuse, exacerbated by gender inequality and lack of inclusive education. The study underscores the need for policy reforms and protective education programs.

Keywords: *sexual abuse, children with special needs, systematic literature review*

I. Introduction

Children with special needs (*anak berkebutuhan khusus*) are children who have physical, intellectual, emotional or sensory limitations so that they require additional support in their lives. (Marlina, 2015). Group This classified as prone to to various form violence, including abuse sexual. Data Organization Health World show that crew members have a 3 to 4 times higher risk of experiencing sexual violence than children without disabilities (Sequeira & Hollins, 2003). In Indonesia, improvement case abuse sexual against children with special needs is increasingly worrying, with most of the perpetrators coming from the victim's immediate environment, such as family and caregivers.

Sexual harassment comes from two words: harassment is the act or method of harassing, and sexual is anything related to the second party or victim. Sexual harassment is behavior or attention of a sexual nature that is wanted or unwanted, resulting in personal disturbance. Sexual harassment is a form of behavior containing sexual content that is unwanted by the object, a request for sexual acts, either verbally, or physically, the incident may occur in a public space. in verbal and physical form now often occurs in society, especially among women (Noll, 2021). Sexual abuse, as a form of gender-based violence, has severe mental, emotional, and social consequences for victims, particularly women. However, scholarly attention to sexual abuse against children with disabilities remains limited, with few studies systematically addressing its specific causes, forms, and patterns.

Therefore, this study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), a systematic, structured, and transparent literature review method to identify, evaluate, and synthesize evidence from various previous studies. With this approach, this study aims to comprehensively address the gaps in the literature regarding the forms, types, and factors of sexual harassment against children with special needs. This SLR approach was reinforced with bibliometric analysis and the PRISMA guide to enhance the validity and rigor of the literature review process. From a methodological perspective, we conducted advanced science mapping using RStudio and the Biblioshiny package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017); (Guleria & Kaur, 2021) to bridge the gaps identified in previous related research (Dwinggo Samala et al., 2023). The uniqueness of this study lies in the application of a hybrid method that combines bibliometric analysis and a systematic literature review, referred to as B+SLR. This advanced analytical framework integrates findings from systematic literature reviews (SLRs), scoping reviews, and bibliometric studies, combined with empirical data from a variety of primary studies for a more comprehensive analysis of trends and developments in the literature.

However, limited research has used the B+SLR approach, thus providing new insights into the analysis of the literature on sexual abuse among children with special needs. This analysis adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Which ensure transparency And accuracy systematic in choose, filter, and reporting the results of integrated studies in bibliometric analysis (Moher et al., 2009); (Page et al., 2021).

The B+SLR approach employed in this study explores global developments and emerging trends related to sexual abuse experienced by children with special needs. This method involves analyzing publication patterns, identifying leading contributors, and mapping influential institutions shaping the field (Donthu et al., 2021). In addition, citation analysis and productivity assessments were conducted to uncover core themes underlying sexual abuse of children with special needs. To address the primary challenges and strategic considerations surrounding this issue, the study formulates three main research questions. The first focuses on the forms and types of sexual harassment experienced by children with special needs. The second explores the contributing factors that lead to sexual abuse involving this population. The third identifies which groups of children with special needs are more frequently subjected to sexual harassment.

II. Method

A. Research Design and Data Sources

This study employed a systematic literature review approach, adhering to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, to identify instances of sexual harassment experienced by children with special needs. The PRISMA framework (Moher et al., 2009) ensures transparency and minimizes bias by guiding a rigorous three-stage process: identification, screening (including eligibility assessment), and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). Each stage was meticulously executed to ensure the validity, reliability, and relevance of the chosen literature, with the detailed workflow presented in figure 2's PRISMA flowchart.

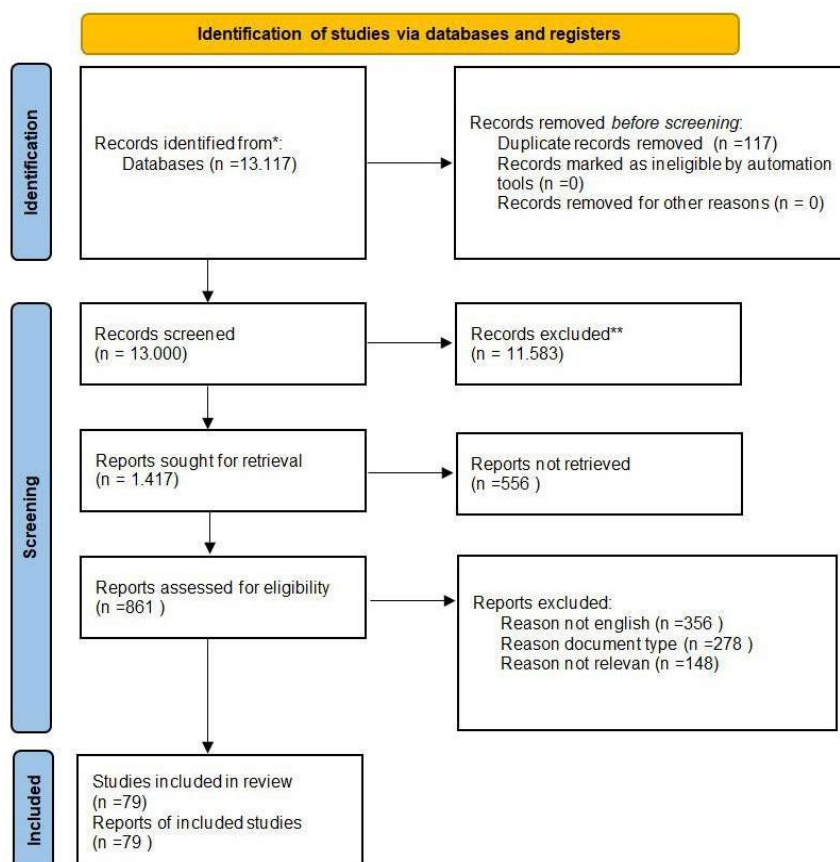


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart

B. Inclusion Criteria and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure the relevance, academic credibility, and accessibility of the studies included in this review, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. The inclusion criteria stipulated that only articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2015 and 2025 were considered, ensuring that the analysis focused on research from the most recent eleven years. Eligible documents had to be classified strictly as journal articles, written in English, and available through open-access platforms to allow full access for analysis. In contrast, studies were excluded if they were published prior to 2015, not written in English, or if their document type was not a journal article, such as conference papers, books, or grey literature. Articles with restricted or paywalled access were also omitted, along with any publications that were not sourced from credible academic databases or did not meet scholarly publication standards.

C. Documents Included in the Analysis

The document selection process was carried out systematically through screening and eligibility assessment stages. The results of this process produced 79 documents that were declared to meet the inclusion criteria for further analysis. The selection criteria were based on document type, language, accessibility level, and content relevance to the research topic. All selection stages are described in detail in Figure 1 through the PRISMA flow chart. The selected data set was then converted into CSV format for bibliometric analysis using RStudio software with the Bibliometrix package.

D. Data Quality and Credibility

The data collection process in this study was conducted rigorously to ensure that only articles meeting established quality criteria were included in the analysis. Each bibliographic metadata entry was carefully reviewed to verify the accuracy and completeness of the information, focusing on critical details such as article title, author names, publication year, keywords, and citation counts. This thorough verification process was essential to maintain the integrity of the bibliometric analysis, ensuring that the results are both reliable and valid.

The initial findings, as presented in Table 1, indicate that most metadata elements such as abstracts (AB), author affiliations (C1), DOI (DI), total citations (TC), and article titles (TI) were recorded with 100 percent completeness. This high level of completeness provides a strong foundation for bibliometric research because it ensures the availability of essential components for each analyzed article. With this level of data integrity, advanced analyses such as citation mapping and author or journal impact assessment can be performed with high accuracy and reliability.

Although the overall metadata completeness is high, several gaps were identified that may affect the depth and comprehensiveness of the analysis. Metadata fields such as keywords (DE) and publication year (PY) also showed full completeness, indicating that missing data was minimal. However, even minor gaps in keyword data may reduce the accuracy of thematic and co-occurrence analyses, which are crucial for identifying major research trends within the field.

A significant limitation was found in the corresponding author metadata (RP), which was only 5.06 percent complete. This limited the capacity to conduct a comprehensive analysis of author collaboration networks, which is a key element for mapping institutional and researcher relationships in the context of sexual abuse involving children with special needs. On the other hand, metadata fields such as Keywords Plus (ID), Cited References (CR), and Web of Science Categories (WC) were entirely missing, with 100 percent data absence. These omissions are considered critical because they hinder the construction of citation networks and thematic explorations. As a result, the ability to identify broader scientific relationships and core research themes is significantly constrained. The lack of ID and CR data, in particular, restricts efforts to trace extensive citation linkages and to explore interconnected concepts across the literature. The detailed completeness of the bibliographic metadata fields collected for this study is presented in table 1, offering a foundational reference for understanding the scope and reliability of the data used:

Table 1. Completeness of Bibliographic Metadata

Metadata	Description	Missing Counts	Missing %	Status
AB	Abstract	0	0.00	Excellent
CI	Affiliation	0	0.00	Excellent
AU	Author	0	0.00	Excellent
DT	Document Type	0	0.00	Excellent
SO	Journal	0	0.00	Excellent
DE	Keywords	0	0.00	Excellent
LA	Language	0	0.00	Excellent
PY	Publication Year	0	0.00	Excellent
TI	Title	0	0.00	Excellent
TC	Total Citation	0	0.00	Excellent
CR	Cited References	1	1.27	Good
DI	DOI	2	2.53	Good
RP	Corresponding Author	4	5.06	Good
ID	Keywords Plus	79	100.00	Completely Missing
WC	Science Categories	79	100.00	Completely Missing

While certain metadata elements like ID (Identifier) and CR (Cited References) are entirely absent, this deficiency can be overcome by utilizing available data, specifically the DE (Author Keywords) provided by authors in the metadata. This allows for keyword co-occurrence analysis, albeit with a more limited scope. The use of author-provided keywords still enables the mapping of key themes in research on the sexual abuse of children with special needs, even if the scale of analysis is reduced due to these metadata limitations (Van Eck & Waltman, 2009).

A high level of metadata completeness is crucial for conducting comprehensive and precisely targeted analyses. In the field of research on sexual abuse among children with special needs, where mapping trends, citation patterns, and researcher collaborations are vital, comprehensive bibliometric data offers in-depth insights into the topic's development. Although the absence of some metadata elements, such as WC (Web of Science Category) and CR, restricts certain aspects of the analysis, the availability of other metadata ensures that the research can proceed without compromising the integrity of the analysis (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Moed, 2006; Van Eck & Waltman, 2009).

Despite partial completeness of important metadata elements, this study is well-positioned to conduct a reliable and accurate bibliometric analysis. While the absence of WC (Science Category) and CR (References Cited) data may limit certain dimensions of citation network and thematic analysis, the utilization of available metadata, particularly author-provided keywords (DE), facilitates the extraction of meaningful and credible insights. Therefore, this study makes a substantial contribution to advancing the understanding of sexual abuse among children with special needs.

E. Data Analysis

This study used RStudio and the Bibliometrix package for a quantitative bibliometric analysis of literature on the sexual abuse of children with special needs. It began with a keyword frequency analysis to identify prevalent terms in the selected articles. Subsequent analyses involved mapping the citation network and exploring collaboration patterns among authors and institutions (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021). This comprehensive analysis was vital for uncovering key themes, conceptual frameworks, and emerging areas of focus within the research on this critical topic.

RStudio with the Bibliometrix package has proven essential for citation network analysis and research trend mapping, producing in-depth data visualizations (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The Biblioshiny interface (<https://www.bibliometrix.org/>) enhances data management by making it more interactive. RStudio-Bibliometrix's ability to integrate datasets from various sources, such as Scopus, as well as its flexibility in co-citation analysis, co-occurrence of keywords, and dynamic thematic mapping, makes it highly suitable for this research.

Citation analysis was conducted to identify citation patterns and assess the impact of specific articles (Moed, 2006). This approach offered vital insights into citation frequency and article influence on the discourse surrounding the sexual abuse of children with special needs, helping identify highly influential documents in the field. A productivity analysis was also undertaken to evaluate the contributions of individual authors and institutions to the body of literature (NJ Van Eck & Waltman, 2014).

III. Results and Discussion

A. Result

An analysis has been conducted on various facilities and infrastructure. Table 1 below details the types of facilities available, shows their specific numbers and locations, describes the current physical condition of each facility, and outlines how students with physical disabilities actively utilize these facilities in their daily activities at school.

Table 2. Data Results Findings Article in Accordance with Keywords

Keyword	Amount Article
Sexual abuse	23
Sexual harassment	7
Autism	6
Sexual assault	6
Special needs	6
Children with special needs	5
Down syndrome	7
Cerebral palsy	1
Gender-based violence	6
ADHD	2
Intellectual disability	5
On line sexual abuse	5
Amount	79

1. Demographic Distribution Results

This study analyzed 79 research articles on sexual abuse of children with special needs published between 2015 and 2025. As illustrated in Figure 2, the annual growth rate reached 0%, meaning there was no growth at all, indicating a lack of increase in research interest and underscoring the relevance of sexual abuse of children with special needs. A total of 262 authors contributed to these publications, with 12 articles written individually. The level of international collaboration was significant, with 21.52% of papers featuring co-authors from different countries, indicating that research on sexual abuse of children with special needs transcends local interests and enjoys global recognition as an effective educational and training methodology in various settings. On average, each article involved 3.34 authors, reflecting the collaborative nature of the field. The analyzed literature included 310 unique keywords, reflecting the broad thematic and conceptual diversity in microlearning research, which encompasses technology, pedagogy, and various application contexts. The average age of the documents is 4.48 years, highlighting the novelty and timeliness of the studies in this field. Furthermore, with an average of 9,617 citations per document, research on sexual abuse of children with special needs demonstrates significant academic influence.

The fact that all analyzed documents fall within this timeframe highlights two key observations. First, sexual abuse of children with special needs is still in a phase of rapid growth, with numerous recent publications forming the basis of this research. Second, despite the existence of older literature, the most significant contributions to the development of this field occurred between 2015 and 2025, underscoring the relevance of sexual abuse of children with special needs to evolving modern learning trends and needs. Figure 2 shows demographic information related to the final data set.



Figure 2. Demographic Distribution Results

2. Global Trends in Sexual Abuse of Children with Special Needs

The trend in publications related to sexual harassment from 2015 to 2025 exhibits a dynamic and often unpredictable pattern, as depicted in detail by Figure 3. The initial years witnessed a notable surge, culminating in a peak of 80 articles published in 2016. This rapid expansion, however, proved to be unsustainable, leading to a drastic decline in the subsequent year, with 2017 recording a complete absence of new publications. This abrupt halt signifies a critical period of stagnation in the research output. Nevertheless, this dormant phase was followed by a remarkable resurgence in 2023, which emerged as a pivotal turning point. During this year, the number of published articles experienced a substantial increase, reaching into the hundreds. Figure 3 visually encapsulates this entire trajectory, clearly illustrating the pronounced peak in 2016, the sharp downturn in 2017, and the subsequent robust recovery and expansion observed in 2023.

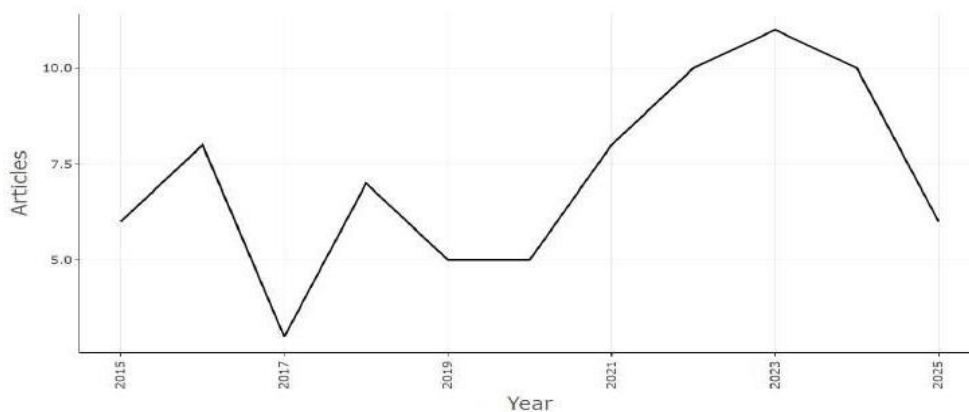


Figure 3. Annual Publication Trends

Observations of publication trends show significant variations across different time periods. Between 2015 and 2021, there was a substantial increase in publications, reaching 42 articles. However, in the following period, from 2022 to 2023, publication dynamics fluctuated, with a total of 21 articles published. This trend continued with a decline in the number of publications from 2024 to 2025, during which only 16 articles were successfully published.

3. Country Level Analysis

Analysis at the country level reveals that Spain ranks first in research publications related to virtual reality (VR) and sexual harassment. The country has published 25 documents between 2015 and 2025. In more detail, Figure 4 visualizes Spain's dominance, highlighting its significant contributions to the scientific literature in the field of VR and sexual harassment over the past decade.

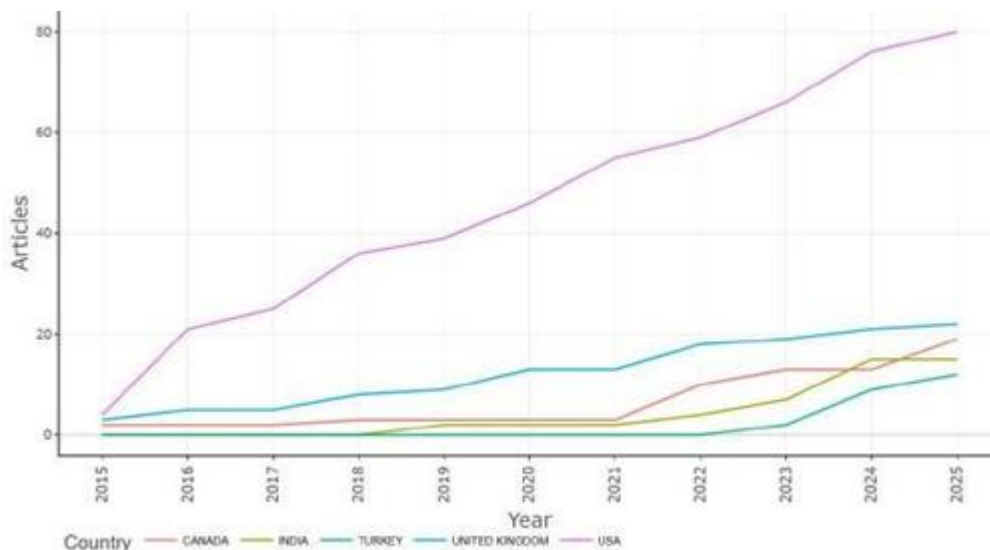


Figure 4. Country Level Analysis

An analysis of the geographical distribution of publications and their impact reveals significant disparities between countries. The United States (USA) leads with the highest number of publications, reaching 80 articles. Other countries that have made substantial contributions include the United Kingdom with 22 articles, Canada with 19 articles, India with 15 articles, and Turkey with 12 articles. In more detail, Figure 4 presents a comprehensive visualization of the country-level analysis graph, which not only displays the number of publications but also provides information on the average citations per article. This data clearly illustrates the USA's dominance in the number of publications and how other countries contribute to the global research landscape based on citation metrics.

Table 3. Countries Most Often Cited

Country	TC	Average Article Citation
USA	355	12.22
Indonesia	77	77.00
United Kingdom	61	12.20
Sweden	35	35.00
Netherlands	34	17.00
Finland	26	13.00
Germany	26	13.00
Spain	26	8.70
Italy	21	21.00
Ireland	18	9.00

The table presented illustrates article citation data by country, providing an overview of the impact and visibility of research from various geographical regions. The “TC” (Total Citations) column shows the total number of citations received by articles from each country, while the “Average Article Citations” column reflects the average number of citations per article.

Based on the table, the United States (USA) dominates with the highest number of citations, at 355, and an average of 12.20 citations per article. Interestingly, Indonesia ranks second in total citations with 77, but shows a significantly higher average of citations per article, reaching 77.00. This indicates that despite having a lower total number of citations than the USA, each article from Indonesia tends to have a very substantial citation impact.

The United Kingdom (UK) is in third place with 61 total citations and an average of 12.20 citations per article, showing a similar pattern to the USA in terms of average. Nordic countries such as Sweden and Finland also made significant contributions, with Sweden reaching 35 total citations (average 35.00) and Finland 26 total citations (average 13.00).

Other European countries such as the Netherlands (34 total citations, average 17.00), Germany (26 total citations, average 13.00), Spain (26 total citations, average 8.70), and Italy (21 total citations, average 21.00) also show variations in citation contributions and impact. Ireland rounds out the top list with 18 total citations and an average of 9.00.

This analysis highlights that the total number of citations does not always correlate directly with the average citations per article, indicating differences in publication patterns and research impact across countries. This data is essential for understanding the global research landscape and identifying the main contributors and most influential articles from each country.

4. Key Contributors and Influential Affiliates

a. Most Relevant Authors

An analysis of author contributions identified several academics who consistently published articles on children with special needs and sexual abuse between 2015 and 2025. Table 4 presents a list of the most relevant authors and the number of articles published by each. Leading authors, such as Lio Minli and Parent Sylvie, stand out for their consistent contributions to this field. This reflects the number of articles contributed by each author in collaborative research, providing insight into the relative contributions of each author in various studies. The most relevant author data is shown in the table 4.

Table 4. The Most Relevant Authors in Research

Authors	Articles	Articles Fractionalized
Liao, Minli	2	1.33
Parents, Sylvie	2	0.58
Ahmad, Imtyaz	1	0.33
Akmane, Elina	1	0.09
Akyürek, Gökçen	1	0.25
Alamdarloo, Ghorban Hemati	1	0.25
Alex, N	1	0.33
Ali Nathwani, Apsara	1	0.25
Altson, Chaterine	1	0.25
Adersson, Neil	1	0.33

b. Writer Productivity

The productivity of authors shows that most wrote only two articles, while a small number contributed three articles. Specifically, this study found that 9.92% of authors contributed to only one document. The proportion of authors who published more than one article on research into sexual abuse of children with special needs was very small, at only 0.8%. This distribution indicates that most contributions came from authors who were less productive in terms of quantity. This phenomenon may reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the topic or the inherent challenges of conducting research in such a sensitive field, which may limit the frequency of publication per individual. This pattern may also suggest that the field is still in its developmental stage, with broader participation from researchers who are new to the field or who are participating in specific projects. The writer productivity data is shown in the table 5.

Table 5. Writer Productivity

Written Documents	N. of Authors	Proportion of Authors
1	260	0.992
2	2	0.008

c. Impact on Authors: h-index, g-index, and m-index

In addition to evaluating the number of publications, researchers also evaluate the impact of each author's h-index, g-index, and m-index. These indices serve as important metrics for measuring the overall quality and impact of an author's academic contributions. For example, authors such as Liao Minli demonstrate outstanding performance with an h-index of 2 and a total citation (TC) of 16, indicating that their research has a significant influence in the relevant literature. It is worth noting that Lio Minli was involved in collaborations on both published papers, and both papers have garnered substantial citations. This reflects the strength of their combined contributions to the literature on sexual harassment, as well as their relatively high and consistent number of citations, as shown in table 6.

Table 6. The Most Relevant Authors in Research

Authors	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC	NP	PY_start
Liao Minli	2	2	0.200	16	2	2016
Ahmad Imtyaz	1	1	0.500	5	1	2024
Akyürek Gökçen	1	1	0.500	1	1	2024
Alamdarloo Ghorban Hemati	1	1	0.167	2	1	2020
Alex N.	1	1	0.333	1	1	2023
Ali Nathwani Apsara	1	1	0.250	3	1	2022
Adersson Neil	1	1	0.091	10	1	2015
Andrews Mandy J.	1	1	0.250	4	1	2022
Anganthi Nisa Rachmah Nur	1	1	0.333	1	1	2023
Antfolk Jan	1	1	0.125	12	1	2018

d. The Most Influential Institutions

This paragraph details the leading institutional contributors to research on the discussed topic, as evidenced by their publication output. Riga Stradins University is the most prolific with 11 articles, followed by Université Laval with 6. Several institutions, including IMHANS, Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry, and the University of Amsterdam, each contributed 5 articles. A further five institutions, such as Aga Khan University and Northwestern University, each published 4 articles, indicating a broad base of contributing research centers. Overall, the data underscores the significant role these institutions play in advancing the field, with Riga Stradins University as the primary contributor by volume.

Table 7. Most Relevant Affiliates

Affiliation	Articles
Riga Stradins University	11
Universite Laval	6
Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (IMBHANS)	5
Ar-Raniry State Islamic University	5
University of Amsterdam	5
Aga Khan University	4
Hacettepe University	4
Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine	4
University of Roehampton	4
Vilnius University	4

B. Discussion

Sexual abuse against children with special needs constitutes a grave violation of human rights, marked by complex dynamics and heightened vulnerability. Unlike typically developing children, children with special needs are more susceptible to experiencing multiple forms of abuse simultaneously and recurrently. This susceptibility stems from limitations in communication, comprehension of social contexts, and self-defense, rendering them easy targets for perpetrators (Marlina et al., 2022). A systematic review of 79 articles retrieved from the Scopus database reveals that sexual abuse experienced by children with special needs manifests in a wide spectrum of forms, each contributing uniquely to their trauma and vulnerability.

Verbal sexual abuse is one of the most prevalent yet often underestimated forms of abuse affecting children with special needs. It includes lewd comments, sexual jokes, and unsolicited sexual propositions. Although commonly perceived as minor infractions, verbal abuse can significantly impact the psychological well-being of children with special needs, who may not grasp the meaning of the words but still feel fear or discomfort. Research has indicated that children on the autism spectrum are particularly vulnerable to this form of abuse due to their difficulties in understanding social nuances and implicit messages (Marlina et al., 2023; Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014). These early verbal violations often serve as precursors to more invasive forms of abuse, underscoring the urgent need to address escalating patterns of victimization.

Physical sexual abuse represents the most commonly documented and severe form in the literature, encompassing inappropriate touching, forced hugging, and, in extreme cases, penetration. Children with special needs with intellectual disabilities or cognitive impairments are disproportionately targeted, as they often struggle to articulate their experiences or distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate physical contact (Sequeira & Hollins, 2003). These physical violations are not only traumatic but also difficult to detect, particularly when the child cannot communicate the abuse, making the threat of digital abuse even more concerning in the contemporary era.

Another disturbing dimension is sexual coercion, where perpetrators use threats, psychological pressure, or outright violence to force children with special needs into sexual acts. Frequently, these coercive acts are committed by individuals in positions of authority, such as teachers, caregivers, or even family members. The imbalance of power and the child's dependence on the abuser often silences the victim and conceals the abuse from discovery. This systemic silence paves the way for more insidious forms of exploitation that are even harder to uncover.

Sexual exploitation, for instance, often occurs under the guise of mentorship or emotional closeness. Perpetrators manipulate children with special needs by offering rewards or affection in exchange for sexual favors, distorting the child's understanding of boundaries and relationships. These exploitative acts are particularly difficult to detect when they are embedded within seemingly nurturing relationships, as they are often misinterpreted by observers as legitimate care or support (Zhao et al., 2025). This misrepresentation contributes to the invisibility of more severe forms of abuse, such as sexual torture, that occur in highly controlled environments.

Sexual torture is characterized by deliberate infliction of pain on the victim's sexual organs, often with the intent to punish, humiliate, or dominate. This form of abuse is most frequently reported in institutional settings such as rehabilitation centers or specialized education facilities where oversight is minimal. The hidden nature of these environments creates opportunities for unchecked abuse, leading to severe psychological and physical trauma. These compounded experiences, in turn, reflect broader patterns identified through bibliometric analysis of the academic literature on this issue.

Analysis of the 79 reviewed articles shows dominant keyword patterns such as "sexual abuse" (23 articles), "sexual harassment" (7 articles), "sexual assault" (6 articles), and "online sexual abuse" (5 articles), reflecting the multidimensional nature of sexual violence experienced by children with special needs. These findings underscore that sexual abuse is not merely physical; it encompasses emotional, psychological, and technological dimensions. Moreover, many cases reveal that multiple forms of abuse often co-occur, producing long-lasting and compounded psychological consequences for victims (Noll, 2021). Notably, existing literature consistently highlights that females with intellectual disabilities,

particularly those diagnosed with conditions such as Down syndrome or autism spectrum disorder, are disproportionately represented among victims of multiple forms of sexual abuse (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014; Marlina et al., 2021). This pattern signals a critical imperative for the development of specialized prevention and intervention strategies that are responsive to the unique vulnerabilities of this population.

Sexual abuse against children with special needs does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is shaped by a complex interplay of factors that intersect across individual, environmental, and systemic-social dimensions. A systematic review of 79 scholarly articles reveals that these contributing factors can be broadly categorized into three main domains: individual vulnerabilities, environmental conditions, and broader systemic and societal dynamics.

At the individual level, the primary risk factors relate to the cognitive and communicative limitations experienced by many children with special needs. Children with autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disabilities often struggle to articulate distressing experiences or interpret social cues, making them less likely to report incidents of abuse clearly or promptly. These children frequently lack the ability to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate physical contact, increasing their susceptibility to grooming and boundary violations. Furthermore, many children with special needs receive little or no sexuality education tailored to their cognitive level, resulting in limited awareness about bodily autonomy, the right to refuse unwanted advances, and recognition of abusive behaviors. This combination of limited self-protection skills and a high level of dependency on adult caregivers creates power imbalances that are easily exploited by perpetrators. These individual vulnerabilities are often compounded by environmental factors that further elevate the risk of abuse.

Environmental contexts play a significant role in shaping the conditions under which sexual abuse occurs. Research consistently shows that the majority of perpetrators of sexual violence against CWSN are individuals within the child's immediate surroundings, such as family members, teachers, caregivers, or neighbors (Marlina et al., 2021). These relationships, which should ideally serve a protective function, frequently become channels for sexual exploitation. The risk is exacerbated in settings where supervision is inadequate, including both private homes and institutional environments like schools or rehabilitation centers. Moreover, when these environments lack accessible and disability-sensitive reporting mechanisms, victims face substantial barriers in seeking help or justice. The failure of these systems to respond appropriately to disclosures of abuse highlights broader structural deficiencies that enable such violence to persist.

At the systemic and societal level, sexual abuse against children with special needs is perpetuated by institutional neglect and the absence of inclusive policies. Most sexuality education programs fail to account for the specific needs of children with disabilities, leaving them ill-equipped to understand their rights and recognize abuse. This inadequacy is further reinforced by widespread societal ignorance regarding the sexual and reproductive rights of individuals with disabilities (Zhao et al., 2025). Social stigma also plays a crucial role, as children with special needs are often perceived as unreliable or incapable of distinguishing reality from imagination, leading to the dismissal of their testimonies. Such perceptions not only silence the voices of victims but also obstruct legal action against perpetrators. Compounding this issue is the widespread lack of professional training among educators, healthcare providers, and social workers, who are often ill-prepared to identify non-verbal signs of trauma or behavioral changes indicative of abuse (Noll, 2021). These gaps in institutional response underscore the urgent need for comprehensive, cross-sectoral interventions to break the ongoing cycle of violence.

The analysis of the reviewed articles reveals that not all categories of disabilities present the same degree of vulnerability to sexual abuse. Certain groups of children with special needs appear to be disproportionately affected, with specific types of disabilities more frequently associated with victimization. Among these, children with Down syndrome were most often identified as victims in the literature, appearing in seven studies, followed closely by children with autism (six articles), general intellectual disabilities (five articles), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in two articles, and cerebral palsy in one study.

Children with Down syndrome and those on the autism spectrum dominate abuse reports due to several compounding factors. Both groups commonly experience difficulty in interpreting social cues, understanding interpersonal boundaries, and articulating feelings of discomfort or distress. Their cognitive and communicative challenges often prevent them from identifying inappropriate behavior or expressing opposition. Additionally, children with these conditions often display high levels of compliance and a tendency to trust adult figures, traits which, although socially desirable, unfortunately render them more accessible and exploitable to potential perpetrators (Brown-Lavoie et al., 2014; Kentner et al., 2018). These characteristics create an environment of increased risk, especially when combined with insufficient protective measures within their immediate surroundings.

Similarly, children with general intellectual disabilities are also identified as highly vulnerable to sexual abuse. Their limited understanding of concepts such as bodily privacy, healthy relationships, and personal boundaries makes it difficult for them to recognize abuse when it occurs. Furthermore, when they attempt to report such incidents, their cognitive limitations often hinder their ability to construct coherent and credible narratives. As a result, their testimonies are frequently dismissed or underestimated by legal authorities and institutional actors, which in turn contributes to the under-prosecution of cases involving victims from this group.

This pattern of vulnerability highlights the urgent need for disability-specific protective frameworks and targeted interventions. The consistent appearance of these disability groups across multiple studies underscores a critical gap in safeguarding mechanisms that must be addressed. As the next section will discuss, strategies for prevention, education, and reporting must be tailored to the unique needs and capacities of these at-risk populations to ensure their safety and access to justice.

IV. Conclusion and Suggestion

Sexual abuse against children with special needs is a serious and multifaceted issue that manifests in various forms, including physical, verbal, and digital abuse. A systematic review of 79 scholarly articles reveals that the most prevalent types of abuse include verbal harassment, sexual coercion, sexual exploitation, and technology-mediated sexual violence. These forms of abuse often overlap and recur, leading to complex and long-lasting psychological consequences for victims. The contributing factors can be broadly categorized into three domains: individual factors, such as limited communication abilities and a lack of understanding regarding bodily boundaries; environmental factors, such as perpetrators from within the child's immediate circle and inadequate supervision; and systemic-social factors, including the absence of inclusive sexual education and pervasive societal stigma toward disability. The interplay of these factors significantly heightens the vulnerability of children with special needs while simultaneously obstructing their access to legal and social protection.

The review further identifies that children with intellectual disabilities, particularly those diagnosed with Down syndrome or autism spectrum disorder, are among the most frequently victimized groups. These children face considerable challenges in recognizing abusive behavior, asserting personal boundaries, and communicating their experiences in a coherent and credible manner. In light of these findings, it is essential to prioritize the prevention of sexual abuse against children with special needs through comprehensive, multisectoral strategies. Such efforts should involve increasing public awareness, delivering developmentally appropriate sexuality education, and strengthening legal protections that are inclusive and accessible. Collaboration among families, educators, healthcare professionals, social workers, and policymakers is crucial to establishing environments that are safe, responsive, and sensitive to the specific needs of children with disabilities. Through these coordinated measures, the fundamental rights of children with special needs to live free from sexual violence can be upheld and effectively safeguarded.

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