



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL**
**ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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Ms. Sumiti Ahuja, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi,

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Dr. Navtika Singh Nautiyal

Dr. Navtika Singh Nautiyal presently working as an Assistant Professor in School of law, Forensic Justice and Policy studies at National Forensic Sciences University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat. She has 9 years of Teaching and Research Experience. She has completed her Philosophy of Doctorate in 'Intercountry adoption laws from Uttranchal University, Dehradun' and LLM from Indian Law Institute, New Delhi.



Dr. Rinu Saraswat

Associate Professor at School of Law, Apex University, Jaipur, M.A, LL.M, Ph.D,

Dr. Rinu have 5 yrs of teaching experience in renowned institutions like Jagannath University and Apex University. Participated in more than 20 national and international seminars and conferences and 5 workshops and training programmes.

Dr. Nitesh Saraswat

E.MBA, LL.M, Ph.D, PGDSAPM

Currently working as Assistant Professor at Law Centre II, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi. Dr. Nitesh have 14 years of Teaching, Administrative and research experience in Renowned Institutions like Amity University, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Jai Narain Vyas University Jodhpur, Jagannath University and Nirma University.

More than 25 Publications in renowned National and International Journals and has authored a Text book on Cr.P.C and Juvenile Delinquency law.



Subhrajit Chanda

BBA. LL.B. (Hons.) (Amity University, Rajasthan); LL. M. (UPES, Dehradun) (Nottingham Trent University, UK); Ph.D. Candidate (G.D. Goenka University)

Subhrajit did his LL.M. in Sports Law, from Nottingham Trent University of United Kingdoms, with international scholarship provided by university; he has also completed another LL.M. in Energy Law from University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, India. He did his B.B.A.LL.B. (Hons.) focussing on International Trade Law.

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With this thought, we hereby present to you

LEGAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND CRIMINAL ACCOUNTABILITY OF FOSTER CARE AGENCIES IN PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING SEXUAL ABUSE BY FOSTER PARENTS

AUTHORED BY - ADV. KAJOL SAHANI

Foster care agencies, whether public (state-run) or private, have significant legal responsibilities to ensure the safety and well-being of children in their custody, including preventing and addressing sexual abuse by foster parents. These responsibilities stem from their role as guardians of vulnerable children, often mandated by federal and state laws.

Below, I'll explain their obligations and the mechanisms for holding them accountable when they fail, with a focus on the U.S. context as of March 31, 2025.

Legal Responsibilities of Foster Care Agencies..

Foster care agencies are tasked with protecting children who have been removed from their biological families due to abuse, neglect, or other risks. When it comes to preventing sexual abuse by foster parents, their responsibilities include:

1. **Screening and Vetting Foster Parents:** Agencies must conduct thorough background checks on prospective foster parents. Federal law, under the Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997), requires states to check criminal records, including sex offender registries, and assess histories of abuse or neglect. Many states also mandate home studies and interviews to evaluate suitability. The goal is to identify and exclude individuals who might pose a risk to children.
2. **Training and Education:** Agencies are required to provide foster parents with training on child welfare, including how to recognize and prevent abuse. This training aims to equip caregivers with the tools to maintain a safe environment and spot warning signs of misconduct, either by themselves or others.
3. **Ongoing Supervision and Monitoring:** Once a child is placed, agencies must regularly visit foster homes, interview children and caregivers, and respond to any complaints or red flags. Federal guidelines, like those from the Child Welfare Act, emphasize diligent

oversight to ensure safety. Neglectful supervision—missing signs like behavioral changes or physical injuries—can leave children vulnerable..

4. **Responding to Abuse Allegations:** If sexual abuse is suspected or reported, agencies must act swiftly. This includes removing the child from harm, notifying law enforcement, and cooperating with investigations. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) mandates reporting of suspected abuse, and agencies must have protocols to investigate and address incidents.
5. **Placement Decisions:** Agencies must prioritize placing children in safe, stable environments tailored to their needs. Rushing placements due to shortages of foster homes, without proper vetting, can increase risks—a problem often linked to systemic underfunding or high demand.

These duties create a "special relationship" between the state (or its contracted agencies) and foster children, implying a heightened obligation to protect them from foreseeable harm, including sexual abuse by foster parents..

= Criminal Accountability of Foster Care Agencies

While foster parents who perpetrate sexual abuse face direct criminal liability—charges like assault, rape, or child molestation—agencies themselves are rarely criminally prosecuted as entities. However, accountability can still arise in specific ways:

1. **Negligence Leading to Criminal Facilitation:** If an agency knowingly places a child with a foster parent with a history of abuse, or ignores clear warning signs (e.g., prior complaints), its actions could be seen as facilitating a crime. Prosecutors might pursue charges against individual caseworkers or administrators for reckless endangerment or failure to report abuse, though this is uncommon and depends on state laws.
2. **Mandatory Reporting Failures:** Under CAPTA and state laws, agency staff are mandatory reporters. Failing to report suspected abuse to law enforcement can lead to misdemeanor or felony charges against individuals within the agency, depending on the jurisdiction and severity of the lapse.
3. **Systemic Failures:** In extreme cases, if an agency's gross negligence or misconduct (e.g., falsifying records or covering up abuse) contributes to widespread harm, criminal investigations could target leadership. However, proving intent or direct causation is challenging, so such cases are rare.

In practice, criminal accountability for agencies is limited because legal systems tend to focus on the abuser's actions rather than systemic failures. Instead, civil lawsuits and regulatory penalties are more common avenues for holding agencies accountable.

Civil Accountability and Consequences

When agencies fail to prevent or address sexual abuse, survivors often turn to civil litigation:

1. **Negligence Lawsuits:** Survivors can sue agencies for failing to meet their duty of care—e.g., inadequate vetting, ignoring complaints, or poor supervision. Successful claims may result in financial compensation for damages like medical costs, therapy, and emotional trauma. For example, courts have held agencies liable when they missed obvious red flags, such as a foster parent's prior allegations of abuse.
2. **State vs. Private Agency Liability:** Public agencies often enjoy sovereign immunity, shielding them from lawsuits unless waived by state law (e.g., Minnesota limits immunity for willful negligence). Private agencies, contracted by the state, lack this protection and are more vulnerable to litigation, though they may argue they followed state protocols.
3. **Systemic Reform:** High-profile cases can spur legislative or policy changes, like stricter vetting laws or increased funding for oversight, though these are slow to materialize and vary by state.

Challenges and Realities :

- **Loopholes and Inconsistencies:** Some states don't explicitly disqualify registered sex offenders or traffickers from fostering, creating gaps abusers exploit. Even with clean records, foster parents can offend if agencies rely too heavily on background checks without assessing behavior or intent.
- **Resource Constraints:** Underfunding and staff shortages often lead to rushed placements or missed oversight, though this doesn't absolve agencies of responsibility—it highlights systemic flaws.
- **Proof and Statutes of Limitations:** Proving agency negligence requires evidence of foreseeability and failure to act, which can be hard to obtain. Time limits for filing claims also vary, though many states have extended or removed them for childhood sexual abuse cases (e.g., California's AB 218).

Conclusion

Foster care agencies bear a clear legal duty to prevent and address sexual abuse by foster parents through vetting, training, monitoring, and swift response. Criminally, accountability is limited to individual staff in rare, egregious cases, but civil lawsuits offer a stronger path for survivors to seek justice and compensation. The system's effectiveness, however, often falters due to resource shortages and inconsistent standards, leaving children at risk despite these obligations. Addressing this requires not just legal enforcement but also broader reforms to prioritize child safety over expediency.

Analysis of landmark cases of foster care abuse:

1. A landmark case regarding foster care abuse, *Natasha Armes v. Nottinghamshire County Council*, saw the Supreme Court rule that a local authority was "vicariously liable" for abuse committed by foster parents, holding them responsible for the actions of those they recruited, trained, and supervised.

Here's a more detailed explanation:

The Case:

Natasha Armes, a woman who was abused as a child by her foster parents in the 1980s, sued Nottinghamshire County Council, arguing they were responsible for the abuse because they had placed her with the foster parents.

The Ruling:

The Supreme Court, in a 4-1 majority decision, agreed with Armes, finding Nottinghamshire County Council "vicariously liable" for the abuse committed by the foster parents.

Vicarious Liability:

"Vicarious liability" means that an employer (in this case, the local authority) is responsible for the actions of its employees (in this case, the foster parents) if those actions were done in the course of their employment.

The Court's Reasoning:

The court reasoned that the local authority had a significant role in the fostering arrangement, including recruiting, training, supervising, and paying for the foster parents, and placing children with them. This created a relationship where children were vulnerable to abuse, and

the local authority was essentially in charge, making them responsible for the actions of the foster parents.

Impact:

This ruling established a precedent, meaning that local authorities could be held responsible for abuse committed by foster parents in cases where they played a significant role in the fostering arrangement

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2. Sheela Barse vs State of Maharashtra :

The petitioner in Sheela Barse vs State of Maharashtra was a journalist, outlined in her communication to this Court that, during her interviews with fifteen women prisoners at Bombay Central Jail, five of them claimed to have been subjected to police assault in the police lockup.

Notably, two of these individuals asserted that they not only experienced assault but also endured torture while in custody. Considering the gravity of the allegations, the Court, treating the letter as a writ petition, issued notices to all relevant parties, summoning them to present reasons why the writ petition should not be granted.

Simultaneously, the Court directed the Director of the College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, Bombay, to independently interview the women prisoners, ensuring the absence of anyone else during the process. The objective was to verify the accuracy of the allegations made to the petitioner.

In her subsequent report, the Director highlighted, among other findings, the absence of adequate arrangements for providing legal assistance to women prisoners.

Furthermore, she noted that two foreign national prisoners had lodged complaints, asserting that a lawyer had deceived and defrauded them. The lawyer allegedly misappropriated nearly half of their belongings and jewelry under the pretext of retaining them for the payment of legal fees.

Issues Raised :

The issues raised in Sheela Barse vs State of Maharashtra were:

- Whether the adverse treatment experienced by female prisoners is justifiable or not?

- Whether the mistreatment of female prisoners can be deemed a violation of the rights protected under Article 21 of the Constitution?
- Whether it is the responsibility of State Authorities to provide legal counsel to prisoners or not? Rule :

Our Constitution, through Article 39A, a fundamental principle of state policy, mandates that the state must furnish free legal assistance to its citizens to ensure universal access to justice. Article 21 not only guarantees the right to life and liberty but also ensures equality before the law under Article 14. In line with this, the court has held that, as mandated by Articles 14, 19 and 39A of the Indian Constitution, indigent individuals in detention must be afforded legal aid.

To address any mistreatment of female detainees in jails, the court has directed social workers to submit reports. In furtherance of this commitment, the Supreme Court has issued notifications to the Inspector of Jails, urging the establishment of “legal aid organisations” at both the High Court and District levels. Additionally, Section 160(1) of the CrPC stipulates that only female police officers are authorised to conduct searches on female suspects.

Judgement in Sheela Barse vs State of Maharashtra:

In disposing of the petition, the court in Sheela Barse vs State of Maharashtra issued the following directives:

Legal assistance to a financially disadvantaged or indigent accused, facing the threat to life or personal liberty, is not just a statutory requirement under Article 39A but is also a constitutional imperative outlined in Articles 14 and 21. Providing such assistance is a fundamental aspect of justice and its absence may lead to injustice, eroding the foundations of democracy and the rule of law.

A person detained in jail may lack knowledge about avenues for seeking help to assert innocence, defend constitutional or legal rights or safeguard against torture, ill-treatment, oppression and harassment by custodians. It is crucial to ensure the availability of legal assistance to prisoners, whether they are under-trials or convicted individuals.

The Inspector General of Prisons in Maharashtra is directed to issue a circular to all

Superintendents of Jails in the state. The circular should mandate the submission of lists to the Legal Aid Committee of each district, containing details of under-trial prisoners, specifying entry dates, nature of offences (categorising male and female prisoners separately) and particulars of individuals arrested under suspicion (under Section 41 of the Code of Criminal Procedure) and held in jail for more than 15 days. The circular should further instruct:

- Facilities for lawyers nominated by the district Legal Aid Committee to enter jails and interview prisoners
- Furnishing necessary information to nominated lawyers about the prisoners in jail.
- Posting notices within the jail premises informing prisoners about designated days when lawyers from the district Legal Aid Committee will be available for counselling.
- Granting permission for prisoners to meet such lawyers within sight but out of hearing of any jail official.

* Segregation of Female Suspects: Select four or five police lock-ups in decent localities exclusively for the detention of female suspects. These lock-ups should be guarded by female constables.

Female suspects should not be housed in lock-ups where male suspects are held.

* Female Interrogation Procedures: Interrogation of females should only take place in the presence of female police officers or constables.

* Informing Arrested Persons: Persons arrested must be immediately informed of the grounds for their arrest. It should be promptly communicated to the arrested person that they are entitled to apply for bail. The Maharashtra State Board of Legal Aid and Advice is tasked with creating pamphlets outlining the legal rights of an arrested person in Marathi, Hindi and English. Printed copies of these pamphlets in all languages must be affixed in each cell of every police lock-up. Upon arrival at the police station, the pamphlet should be read out to the arrested person in a language they understand.

Sheela Barse Case Summary

In the landmark case of Sheela Barse vs State of Maharashtra, the petitioner, a journalist and social activist, brought attention to the alleged mistreatment of female prisoners in Bombay Central Jail. The Court, recognising the constitutional imperative under Article 39A, Articles 14 and 21, emphasised the necessity of providing legal assistance to indigent accused individuals.

The directives in given in Sheela Barse v. State of Maharashtra included the segregation of female suspects in police lock-ups, female interrogation protocols and the immediate notification of arrests to Legal Aid Committees. The Court also mandated surprise visits to police lock-ups by designated judges to ensure compliance. This case underscored the importance of protecting the rights of prisoners, especially vulnerable female detainees and established guidelines for legal aid and humane treatment within the criminal justice system.

Role of monitoring and training in prevention Foster care abuse:

Child welfare services in the United States serve over 500,000 youth in out-of-home care at any point in time (AFCARS, 2005). The majority of these youth are served via some form of foster care. Youth who enter foster care are likely to have experienced some form of child abuse or neglect and/or other traumatic events (e.g., domestic violence, impaired caregiver, traumatic loss) (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004; Henry, Cassett, Auletta, & Egan, 1991). It is well known that youth in foster care display a wide range and depth of behavioral, developmental, social, and educational problems (e.g., Farmer et al. 2001; Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994; Smucker, Kauffman, & Ball, 1996).

Given the severity of foster children's trauma histories and resulting difficulties, it seems apparent that individuals who are becoming foster parents should receive solid training in the range of domains that will be necessary to successfully 'parent' these children during the time they reside in foster care. Such a position has a long history of wide endorsement and support (Christiansen & Fine, 1979; Galaway, Nutter, & Hudson, 1995; Ruff, Blank, & Barnett, 1990; Runyan & Fullerton, 1981). A recent study using data from Caring for Children in Child Welfare, a supplemental study to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) designed to evaluate the impact of child welfare, Medicaid, state Child Health Insurance Plans (CHIP) programs and policies on service use indicates that there is tremendous variation in the training that foster parents receive (Hurlburt, Leslie, Barth, & Landsverk, in press).

In a recent companion article (Barth, et al., 2005), we reviewed the evidence base for parent-training interventions that are currently being used or have potential to be used with families who come into contact with child welfare agencies because of allegations of abuse/neglect. This review identified a range of parent training approaches with varying levels of 'evidence'

(Chambless & Ollendick, 2001; Hoagwood, 2003; Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2002). This review also pointed out the strong disjuncture between training for ‘biological’ parents and ‘substitute’ parents. Few of the identified approaches in the parent-training review had any evidence base with foster or substitute parents. Only in the last three years have any of the identified approaches (i.e., Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, The Incredible Years) been the subject of empirical investigation with a focus on foster parents (Linares, Montalto, Li, & Oza, 2006; McNeil, Herschell, Gurwitch, & Clemens-Mowrer, 2005). Aside from these recent investigations, a search of training programs for foster parents identified a distinct set of training programs developed specifically for foster parents. Therefore, the current review and evaluation examines training specifically for foster parents.

Dimensions for Examining Foster Parent Training :

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Published in final edited form as: Child Youth Serv Rev. 2008 Dec 1;30(12):1403–1416. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.04.008 Current Status and Evidence Base of Training for Foster and Treatment Foster Parents Shannon Dorsey 1, Elizabeth MZ Farmer 2, Richard P Barth 3, Kaylin Greene 2, John Reid 4, John Landsverk 5

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PMCID: PMC3108010 NIHMSID: NIHMS78121 PMID: 21647272

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Dimensions for Examining Foster Parent Training

The initial review of parent training focused specifically on interventions designed to help parents involved with child welfare develop increased competence in parenting maltreated children. This required efforts to understand how parent training fit within the child welfare services context, which includes consideration of information about case management and legal

processes, as well as the usual training on dyadic care for children. As such, it quickly became evident that a review of training programs for foster parents would also need to be broad. An evaluation of training for foster parents and treatment foster parents must include the relevant dimensions that potentially influence the development and implementation of such training. For the current review, we included legal requirements, recommendations and practice parameters developed by relevant organizations, as well as empirical support for the potential training protocols.

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Published in final edited form as: *Child Youth Serv Rev.* 2008 Dec 1;30(12):1403–1416. doi: 10.1016/j.chilgyouth.2008.04.008

Current Status and Evidence Base of Training for Foster and Treatment Foster Parents Shannon Dorsey 1, Elizabeth MZ Farmer 2, Richard P Barth 3, Kaylin Greene 2, John Reid 4, John Landsverk 5

Author information

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PMCID: PMC3108010 NIHMSID: NIHMS78121 PMID: 21647272

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