

WOMEN WHO SEXUALLY ABUSE CHILDREN

Hannah Ford



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CHILDREN

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For Mum, Dad, Lindsey and Andrew

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FOREWORD

Cultural schema in any society that enable the majority of its citizens to feel psychologically comfortable are often maintained by a process of shared minimisation and denial. This is the means by which the long held “secret” of the sexual abuse of children by women has been ignored. Should this “secret” be explored and fully accepted then the seeming social security of having women as “sexually safe” primary carers and protectors of our children would be irretrievably damaged. Therefore, despite at least a century of knowledge pointing to a significant number of women engaging in sexually abusive behaviours towards children, it is still a phenomenon that has not been sufficiently accepted.

If sexual abuse by women is accepted at all it is most often in the context of the woman being coerced into those acts by a man for his sexual gratification. The woman in this situation therefore becomes another victim of the male. Consideration is rarely given to the possibility that these women acted as equal partners or even that they may have coerced a male into offending. Women who are convicted of sexual abuse against adolescent boys can also be seen as “victims” of those boys in a society where adolescent males are seen as more sexually dominant and powerful than adult women. Those women who have acknowledged acting as sole perpetrator of sexual abuse against younger children are often seen as “mentally unwell”. Whereas men committing the exact same offence would be prosecuted, women are most often referred to psychiatric services.

The failure to accept that women can be initiators of sexual abuse is perhaps a relic of a now archaic view of women as passive or weak, which has been rejected in many activities in society. If we accept that women can take responsibility to run corporations why is it that society finds it so difficult to accept negative traits in women?

Looking at the gender of convicted sexual offenders against children, the very low percentage (1 % to 2 %) of these that are female could almost justify societal beliefs and attitudes. One possible cause of these seemingly low rates is that judges are generally in the later decades of life and therefore may reflect attitudes to women of decades earlier.

However, when research in relation to the gender of the perpetrators alleged by adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse is considered, much higher percentages are found (between approximately 6% and 60%) depending on the population surveyed. Considering the vast numbers of adults who describe sexual abuse in childhood, even if the lower percentages were the most accurate representation of reality, that is a vast number of victims who have been sexually abused by women in childhood. As Allen (1991, p. 21) states "... it does not really matter to the victims of female sexual abusers that theirs was a low-probability event. What does matter is the possibility that they may experience further stigmatisation when professionals disbelieve them". Indeed, the disbelief that women can and do perpetrate sexual abuse against children can exacerbate the distress caused by that abuse.

The 1990s saw a considerable increase in the number of books, academic papers and conference presentations relating to the issue of women as sexual offenders against children. Despite these efforts, there is still a general tenet of disbelief, even among professionals (see, for example, Denov, 2004a) and this disbelief reduces the likelihood that victims will disclose their experiences of sexual abuse by women. Thus the belief that this is a very rare phenomenon is perpetuated and society's mistaken construction of women as highly unlikely to engage in such behaviour is maintained.

Clinical work and research with abusers, males and females, adults and adolescents, have shown that sexual assaults on children are rarely impetuous or impulsive events. In most cases the child is "targeted" to fit the needs or desires of the abuser. The child and any others in the environment are "groomed" or manipulated to facilitate the abuser's access to the child and to ensure compliance. Threats and coercion are imposed on the child to prevent disclosure. The acts take place in secrecy and only the abuser(s) shares the child's experience. The only view or interpretation that the child has is that which is imposed on it by the perpetrator(s). Thus the child internalises the beliefs of the perpetrator(s). Salter (1995) working with male offenders describes how adult survivors very frequently have cognitive distortions that reflect those of their abuser/s. She argues that these cognitive distortions exist not only in the content of their thoughts but also the process of their thinking. There have been similar findings when studying the beliefs of women sexual offenders and those of their victims (Saradjian, 1997). Moreover, it is clear that victims of women perpetrators of abuse also internalise society's construction of women in relation to females as perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse (Saradjian, 1997).

Thus, the belief that this is a rare phenomenon is also internalised by victims. This can compound their distress as not only does it increase the stigmatisation, as Allen (1991) rightly suggests, but it also increases the traumatic sexualisation, betrayal and powerlessness, those factors that have been found to be the traumagenic dynamics that lead to the numerous symptoms displayed by children and young people who have experienced childhood sexual abuse

(Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Society's construction of women and the general denial, disbelief and misunderstanding about women who sexually abuse children, is argued to actually compound the impact of the abuse for the victim (Hunter, 1990). With the social construction of women as carers, nurturers and asexual beings, particularly, as is often the case, if that female abuser is the mother or primary carer of the child, the link between care-getting, care-giving and sex is likely to be even more distorted, as is the confusion in areas of sexuality and sexual norms. With abuse by women being perceived as very rare, and women, particularly mothers, construed as generally "good", both boys and girls may conclude that they bear even greater guilt in relation to the abuse, and a greater "shame and a greater sense of their own 'badness' ". Victims of female perpetrators frequently describe very damaging reactions of shock, disbelief and minimalisation when they disclose sexual abuse by a woman perpetrator. Thus the victims will feel yet more "different" and "separate" from other human beings. Society's construction of females as "trustworthy" and nonabusers means that sexual abuse by a woman is likely to be perceived, as a greater betrayal than that by a man. While in no way arguing that to be sexually abused by a woman is in itself worse than being sexually abused by a man who is in a similar relationship to the child, clinical experience and the small amount of research to date on this issue (Sgroi & Sargent, 1993; Lind, 1995; Saradjian, 1997) would support the hypothesis that the social construction of women and the general denial of sexual abuse by women actually increases the distress for these survivors. Moreover, perpetrators will go unseen, unrecognised and consequently their behaviours will go unaddressed, thus increasing the potential number of untreated victims.

Despite this ongoing denial and disbelief, a body of research evidence is being collected that helps those of us working in this field to understand more about the women who sexually abuse children and the impact of that abuse on their victims.

In this book Hannah Ford takes us on a journey through the literature, breaking it down into bearable sections. She looks not only at the facts but also how these facts are both interpreted and distorted in a society that is resisting accepting them. She considers what is currently known and also highlights areas of research that need further exploration. Thus she provides an excellent overview of this evidence and gives an erudite snapshot of the current state of our knowledge in this field.

J. Saradjian

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have only given serious consideration to women as sexual abusers since the mid-1990s, probably reflecting the fact that until recently there was often denial that women could behave in such a way, particularly towards children. When female sexual offenders were mentioned by researchers this was often limited to a sentence or two stating that very few females sexually abused children. Yet history reveals that sexual abuse of children is not an entirely new aspect of female behaviour. Although they do not feature as significantly as males, historical sources cite reports of women involved in the sexual abuse of children. For example, Atlas (2000, p. 118) cites Petronius' description of "clapping women encircling the bed as a seven-year old girl was raped". In discussing child sexual abuse in Victorian England, Jackson (2000) reports that although 99 % of the cases of rape or sexual abuse involved male defendants, the remaining 1 % were female, which is similar to the proportion of females imprisoned for sexual offences today. Thus although women have not appeared as frequent perpetrators of sexual abuse it would seem that such behaviour was not entirely unknown in the past.

In the last few years, however, reports from victims and recent media coverage of cases of sexual abuse by women have necessitated an acknowledgement that women do sexually abuse children and that they do so in numbers larger than previously believed. Despite increasing interest in this field and an upsurge in research studies, it remains the case that comparatively little is known about women who molest children when considered against the large body of knowledge gathered about their male counterparts. Furthermore, when compared with the volume of work examining females who commit crimes generally, information on this group remains limited (Minasian & Lewis, 1999).

The research so far has also tended to focus on specific areas. Eldridge and Saradjian (2000) suggest that because sexual abuse by women is such a transgression of our expectations of female behaviour, researchers have found it difficult to understand why women behave in this way. Perhaps as a consequence of this, they suggest, research has tended to examine these women's life histories, relationships, beliefs and motivations in greater depth

than much of the research carried out with male abusers. However, this narrow focus leaves many areas largely unstudied, including the psychometric profiles of these women, the ways in which they differ from nonoffending women, factors related to their reoffending and treatment targets and outcomes.¹

As our knowledge in this area accumulates, some of our previous suppositions, such as a belief that women do not sexually abuse children or that, if they do, they do not really cause any harm, are being broken down. This is clearly of benefit to the victims of sexual abuse by women who may now be more likely to find themselves believed and their disclosures taken seriously. However, continued study is important in order to help them further, to tackle sexual offending by women and particularly to inform us of how best to intervene and prevent further offending.

This book aims to bring together the expanding body of knowledge about female sexual abusers. Taking heed of Eldridge and Saradjian's (2000) comments about the specific focus of some of the previous research, this book aims to highlight some of the less well researched areas and to link female sexual abuse of children with research developing in other areas, including women who sexually assault adult males, sexually abusive adolescent females and the nonoffending partners of male abusers. In so doing, it is hoped that this will help in broadening our thinking about female perpetrators.

The book is organised into five main parts. The first discusses the rates of sexually abusive behaviour in females and how such behaviour is conceptualised and understood within the criminal justice system and other relevant professions, as well as within the general population. It then moves on to consider the specific nature of sexual abuse committed by females, including the acts committed and the process of offending, as well as considering how this may or may not be similar to sexual offending by men. The second part considers some of the relevant factors in female sexual offending, which in Eldridge and Saradjian's (2000) view have been most strongly focused upon. These chapters include discussion of the personal factors and previous experiences that may influence female sexual abuse of children, as well as examining the question of whether females are most likely to abuse others under the coercion and duress of a male partner. The final chapter in this section examines possible motivations for sexual offending by females and the work to develop female abuser typologies. The third part examines the consequences of female abuse for the victims and challenges earlier beliefs that sexual abuse by females is generally not harmful.

Having described the extant research in this area, the fourth part of the book moves on to consider the gaps in the current literature and offers suggestions for areas in need of further study. This is followed by a discussion

¹ Hilary Eldridge at the Tools to Take Home Conference: "Treating women who sexually abuse children". Birmingham, April 2003.

of treatment issues and approaches for sexually abusive women and the formulation of appropriate treatment for such women in the context of current knowledge. The final part of the book aims to broaden awareness of other areas related to child sexual abuse committed by women. Although not offering a fully comprehensive review of the literature, the first chapter in this final part examines what is known about the nonoffending partners of male abusers, critically examines the suggestion that such women collude with the sexual abuse of their children, and considers the many issues facing women in this situation. The final chapter outlines the knowledge base relating to female adolescents and children who abuse children, considering their specific characteristics and treatment needs and, where appropriate, drawing parallels with their adult female counterparts.

I

The Nature and Prevalence of Sexual Abuse by Women and our Understanding of it

1

THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE BY WOMEN

Although research attention is now being directed towards women who sexually abuse children, this is a comparatively recent development, initially hindered by disbelief that women would behave in this way towards children and supported by the low rates of sexual abuse by women in official statistics. This first chapter therefore examines these issues more fully, outlining some possible reasons for the disbelief surrounding women as abusers and evaluating the low rates of female sexual abuse. In evaluating these low rates it is essential to consider some of the methodological issues in estimating rates of abuse, and this discussion forms the basis of the second part of the chapter.

Estimating the prevalence of sexual abuse by women has been difficult as the issue is one that until recently has been insufficiently researched. Part of the reason for this has been the comparatively slow rate at which society has come to accept females as abusers. There are a number of possible reasons for this, the first being that the role defined for women – that of child carers – does not encompass the possibility that a woman may abuse a child sexually. As Allen (1990, p. 111) states, “women are socialised to be the victims of child sexual abuse, not the perpetrators”. It is only since the mid-1970s or so that there has been widespread acknowledgement of child sexual abuse by men (Olafson, Corwin & Summit, 1993), or universal acknowledgement of child sexual abuse as a problematic behaviour. McConaghy (1998) cites a survey by Hunt (1974) which found that 25 % of boys and 13 % of girls in the USA aged between 13 and 19 did not agree with the statement “a parent and child having sex with each other is something I would consider abnormal or unnatural, even if both of them wanted to do it”. Acknowledgement of abuse by women has appeared still more recently; Rowan, Rowan and Langelier (1990) report that no data were available on female sexual abuse of children before 1986. Furthermore, many attempts to explain child sexual abuse have focused on theories of male power and the subordination of women and children. Discussing sexual abuse by females may raise concern that we are trying to deny the importance of patriarchy (Koonin, 1995).