

Female sexual abuse of children: 'the ultimate taboo'

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Keywords: children; sexual abuse; female; survivors; abusers

My mother sexually abused me

Mother tried to own me, making me solely her possession. She kept me so isolated from other people that I never had any friends or confidants. Partly it was her way of keeping our 'secrets' safe, and partly it was her way of making sure that I loved only her. She was so jealous of my relationships with other people. She said that she had me so she'd have someone to love her. Nothing was ever mentioned about my being loved.

I was so brain-washed into feeling sorry for her that I could not have blamed her for the sexual abuse, even if I had wanted to. Using sympathy and guilt worked wonders for Mother, enabling her to manipulate me into just about anything. She told lies upon lies to make me feel sympathy for her. She's still doing it. What hurts the most about being sexually abused by your mother is the total isolation. If Mother could not love or nurture me, why did she have to keep me so isolated that I could not get love from someone else? It made me grow up believing no one loved or cared about me. I still find it difficult to believe. I don't think that all the love in this world and the next will ever be enough to fill the void of not having known love, caring or nurturing all those years. I feel so bad and dirty inside that I cannot fathom anyone even wanting to love me.

I'm anxious, depressed, tearful, unable to eat, unable to sleep and unable to function. Mostly I stay in bed covered with several blankets, staring into space. I feel I'm nothing special. It's like I am nothing. I expect nothing; I ask for nothing. I merely accept what life dishes out - good or bad.

The woman who wrote this had been sexually abused by her mother from the time she was a baby until she was 16 years old. She is now 40, the mother of a seriously disturbed 10-year-old daughter and married to a man who was himself sexually and physically abused as a child. She has been bulimic, suicidal, agoraphobic and self-mutilating. Yet, she only recently was able to tell and be believed about the sexual abuse and has now started therapy. When she was 30 and about to give birth, she told a doctor about the abuse and her fears. He told her

... not to be so silly - mothers don't abuse children sexually. Maybe you are worried about being a mother, but don't let your imagination run away with you.

Only men abuse

Of course, 10 years ago, doctors and other professionals were only just finding out about sexual abuse of girls by men, so it is not surprising that the doctor would have been sceptical about a woman saying she had been abused by her mother. Indeed, I remember being presented with my first case of sexual abuse in 1968 and being totally unprepared for such a revelation. I did not believe it possible that an 11 year old had been sexually abused by her stepfather, a bank manager.

Over the years, we have all learned that child sexual abuse is a much greater problem than anyone had imagined. Brownmiller¹, Rush², Miller³, Bass⁴, Butler⁵, Herman⁶, Sgroi⁷ and countless others wrote about the problem and women started coming forward to talk about the abuse they had suffered at the hands of men. The statistics indicated that the overwhelming majority of victims of sexual abuse were girls sexually abused by their fathers.

We accepted that because we could only go on what people told us. The books and articles concentrated on female victims, and male abusers. Then adult men started talking about the abuse they had suffered as children - again from men. Statistics projected a boy to girl ratio of victims variously as 1:6, 1:9 and 1:12. This was disputed by Porter, Colao and Mitnick who, on the basis of their work, concluded that the ratio of girl to boy victims was much closer. They indicated that perhaps 40-50% of victims of sexual abuse were boys⁸. It seemed that boys were almost equally at risk from sexual abuse by men.

Indeed, in a survey carried out by Mrazek *et al.* in the UK it was found that 98% of the reported abusers were male⁹.

Women could not do such things

Although society has begun to recognize that men abuse children, the possibility that sexual abuse of children could be perpetrated by women causes enormous controversy and distress. It is thought that even raising the possibility of women abusing detracts from the much larger and more pervasive problem of male abuse of children. However, the fact that there are women who sexually abuse children should not be used to diminish the scale of the problem of men who sexually abuse children. What it does mean is that perhaps the accepted knowledge about child sexual abuse needs to be re-examined.

I remember vividly giving a talk at an RAF base several years ago and stating that abusers were men. At the end of the talk an officer came up and, with tears in his eyes, said 'It isn't only men, you know - my mother did it to me'. He walked away quickly before I could respond. It made me think that maybe we should at least give the victims of female sexual abuse permission to talk.

Victims begin to tell

Then on a local radio phone-in programme, we raised the issue of child sexual abuse by women. The presenter and I talked for a few minutes before the calls started coming through:

Finally someone is willing to open up the subject of female sex abusers and really listen to us. This is fabulous - a day I thought I would never see. I am 58-year-old man who was sexually abused from the age of 4 to 12 by my aunt ...

Paper read to
Section of Clinical
Forensic
Medicine,
19 June 1993

A woman said:

My mind knows it wasn't my fault - that it was her dirt, her filth, but it's also mine: I grew with it as part of my body, dressed with it, ate with it, cried with it, slept with it. I can't seem to separate myself from her. Yet, I felt and feel utterly, utterly alone and evil to the core. Knowing how she used me hurts beyond all physical pain. It means the end of the hope that I was really loved by my mother . . .

A man in his fifties disagreed that it was abuse:

Looking back it seemed no great drama. Even though I was only 7 years old, I knew how to fondle her and suck her breasts. Oral sex lead to full intercourse which my mother and I engaged in until I left home, aged 23 . . .

We had more calls than we could deal with and by the time I got back to the Kidscape office, it was apparent that this was an issue which would not go away. The letters started arriving the next day:

During the war, my brother and I were evacuated to a house in the country. The woman who took care of us made us touch her. She had friends over and we had to engage in all kinds of kinky sex. We were terrified . . .

Rubbish - women don't sexually abuse children. It must have been the children misunderstanding motherly love . . .

My teenage babysitter began sexually abusing me when I was 6. It went on for about 4 years. I actually thought that babysitters did that to all the kids until we got another babysitter. When I tried to get her to have oral sex, she told my mother and I got into trouble. Believe me, I kept it all a secret until now. It was bad enough being abused, though some of it I liked. What was worse than the abuse was being in trouble for something I didn't even understand and certainly could not control. To this day I hate all forms of physical contact and the thought of sex makes me physically ill.

The letters and calls went on and on - from men and women who were sexually abused by their mothers, relatives, babysitters and other carers. Most had never told or had not been believed. Many had been unable to find anyone willing to talk or listen.

Professional denial

One 60-year-old man said:

I tried to tell my therapist when I was 35. She told me that I was having fantasies about my mother and that I needed more therapy to deal with it. In reality, my mother had physically and sexually abused me for as long as I could remember. The abuse was horrific, including beatings and sado-masochistic sex. It took a lot of courage for me to tell. When she (the therapist) didn't respond, I quit therapy and spent the next 15 years in hell. I began to think that maybe I had just imagined it all, but why were the memories so vivid and in such detail? Just hearing that this has happened to others has helped to restore my sanity. Maybe now I can find someone who will listen and believe me. Sixty years is a long time to wait.

Sixty-five per cent of the survivors who tried to tell a therapist, doctor, teacher or other professional were not believed the first time they disclosed. Overall, 86% of those who tried to tell anyone were not believed the first time they disclosed.

Why has it taken so long

Why has it taken so long to bring out the problem of female sexual abuse? Female sexual abuse seems to be more of a taboo because:

(1) Female sexual abuse is more threatening - it undermines feelings about how women should relate to children.

(2) It has taken years for people to recognize that children are sexually abused, but that sexual abuse has been placed in the context of male power and aggression. Women are not supposed to be sexually aggressive and the male power theory eliminates them as possible abusers, unless they are coerced by males. Yet, in the majority of the 127 cases presented here, male coercion was not present. . .

(3) People find it difficult to understand exactly *how* a woman could sexually abuse a child. They are not seen to be capable of this kind of abuse.

(4) When adult survivors of female abuse have told their stories, they have often met with the rebuttal that they are fantasizing. A child recently told that her mother had sexually abused her, along with the child's father. The therapeutic team took the view that she was clearly projecting and fantasizing. The abuse by the father was never in doubt. Only after a second assessment by a well-known team at a children's hospital, was the child believed.

(5) Current statistics indicate that sexual abuse of children by females is rare. Estimates are that 5% of abuse of girls and 20% of abuse of boys is perpetrated by women¹⁰. Previous statistics indicated that child sexual abuse was rare, even by males. That has since been shown to be untrue. Statistics are based upon what we are told and may give a false picture if some victims are not telling.

Not telling

The issue of victims not telling was highlighted after the Kidscape First National Conference on Female Sexual Abuse in March 1992. The television programme *This Morning* opened up a hotline for callers to talk about abuse by women. In the course of 1 day, they had over 1000 telephone calls. Ninety per cent of the callers had never told anyone about their abuse before that programme. The vast majority of the callers were women.

It is possible that bringing the problem of female sexual abuse of children into open discussion will unleash a flood of stories and change our perception of the role of women in child sexual abuse. It is equally possible that we may confirm that abuse by women is rare.

What do we know?

How many of the victims of female sexual abuse are boys?

How many are girls? Of the 127 cases discussed here, approximately 33% were men; 67% were women.

Do victims of female abuse suffer in similar ways to victims of male abuse?

Like the victims of male abuse, their lives have been dramatically affected. They have: turned to drugs, alcohol, solvents; often attempted suicide; and may have gender identity problems. One man, made to dress in girl's underwear by his abusers, has continued this behaviour into adult life and has difficulty with relationships. A disturbing aspect of some of the cases is the hatred of and violence towards women and girls that some of the men admit feeling. The abused also often have:

- (i) difficulties maintaining relationships
- (ii) unresolved anger, shame and guilt

- (iii) self-mutilated
- (iv) been anorexic or bulimic
- (v) suffered chronic depression
- (vi) suffered from panic attacks
- (vii) become agoraphobic
- (viii) in some cases, sexually abused children
- (ix) been fearful of touching their own children

How much abuse by mothers affected the adult survivors?

Those who were sexually abused by their mothers seem to have an overpowering need to find bonding mother-love. Many of the survivors say that, though they hate their mothers for what they did, they still want to be loved by their mothers and would not confront them - as one woman said 'with flowers, let alone with the abuse that she perpetrated on me'.

Was the abuse always negative

Twelve per cent of the male victims said that the sexual relationships with their mothers and other female members of the family, had been wholly beneficial and natural. Some of these relationships continued into adult life.

One difficulty for male victims is that the idea of the older women 'initiating the boy' into the joys of sex, is often the subject of jokes or is viewed with approval. One Canadian man related how a female relative had

acted out her sexual anxiety on me when I was 12. I was supposed to like it, but I have found women repulsive ever since.

This myth of the boy enjoying sex with older women is just as harmful as the myth that girls 'ask for sex from older males'.

None of the women in this study felt that the abuse was in any way beneficial, though some have said that the abuse sometimes felt good. This has caused them considerable pain and confusion.

Are women forced to abuse by men

It is often assumed that, if a female has sexually abused a child, it must have been done either with a male partner or under the influence of a male partner. Yet, more than three-quarters of the women and men say they were abused by female abusers acted alone and often there was no man in the family at that time. However, the number of cases is small - 127 people. It would be wrong to generalize without proper representative research.

Who are the abusers

The women who were abused ($N=95$) reported that the vast majority of their abusers were related to them (85%). When abuse was perpetrated by two abusers in the family, the mother was almost always involved (in 100% of dual female abusers and 95% of dual male/female abusers, the mother was one of the abusers). The co-perpetrator in these cases was the grandmother, aunt, father, stepfather or brother. When a single perpetrator was reported: 62% were mothers, 7% were grandmothers; 7% were stepmothers; 13% were babysitters; and the remaining 11% were aunts, sisters, teachers and nuns.

The male victims ($N=32$) reported that 91% of their abusers were related to them. When a single perpetrator was reported: 96% were mothers; 4% were stepmothers. When two perpetrators were reported;

mothers were abusers in 45% of the cases, along with sisters, grandfathers, and other males; 22% of dual abusers were stepmothers; and 33% were babysitters and family friends.

Cycle of abuse

The abused who admitted sexually abusing children were a minority in the study. Seven per cent of the female victims said they had abused children; 22% of the male victims reported abusing children. It is quite possible that others had abused, but did not feel comfortable about disclosing the abuse.

Types of abuse reported

The kinds of abuse reported by the survivors included: touching genitals; oral sex; penetration with objects; sucking breasts; forced mutual masturbation; intercourse; and a combination of beating and sexual abuse.

Age of child when abuse began

Seventy-five per cent ($N=95$) of the victims in this study were able to determine how old they were when the abuse started. Eighty-three per cent of the women who could remember, said the sexual abuse started before the age of 5, 16% were between the ages of 5 and 10; 1% were between the ages of 10 and 15. Fifty-five per cent of the men reported the abuse started before the age of 5; 35% were between the ages of 5 and 10; 10% were between the ages of 10 and 15.

Conclusion

The survivors are beginning to provide us with some sketchy details. Ninety-six per cent of the men and women said the abuse they suffered dramatically adversely affected their lives. That is not surprising. Seventy-eight per cent of the survivors said they could find no one willing to help or believe. That is profoundly disturbing. Some said they were told that the abuser must have been male and were offered help to remember the 'real' abuser.

Uncovering cases of female sexual abuse has been traumatic. There is a strongly held view that the issue of female sexual abuse should not be raised publicly, but should be dealt with in private. A journalist in a recent article in a national newspaper insisted that it was wrong to give all this attention to female sexual abuse. All this attention? There has been little attention paid to female sexual abuse. There are few books and articles to help us understand how to deal with even the small number of cases of female abuse so far reported. Evert wrote the first survivor account¹¹. Welldon devotes considerable space to the issue of female incest¹² and Mathews *et al.* have published the first study of female abusers¹³. Allen published a comparative analysis of female and male child abusers¹⁴. The literature review by Jennings in *Female Sexual Abuse: The Ultimate Taboo*¹⁵ confirms the paucity of materials available.

There is still concern that any attention paid to female sexual abuse will detract from the major problem of abuse by males. There is no question that abuse by males is still statistically the largest reported problem. What is disturbing is the idea that suppressing discussion and acknowledgment of female sexual abuse has prevented people disclosing for fear of going against established opinion.

Perhaps we will eventually confirm the statistics that 95% of sexual abusers of children are men or

perhaps we will have to reevaluate the whole issue of sexual abuse. If the response to *Female Sexual Abuse of Children: The Last Taboo* is any indication of the problem, then we will have to re-evaluate. In a period of only 4 months, there have been hundreds of letters and telephone calls from adult survivors. It is frightening to think that there may be thousands more who are waiting for the right question or the right time to tell. More worrying are those who do not tell, but who take out their pain on themselves and their families. The implications for health care professionals are enormous.

Acknowledgment: This article is based upon a chapter in *Female Sexual Abuse of Children: The Ultimate Taboo*.¹⁵

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(Accepted 3 November 1993)