



Female sexual Abusers Facts and Fiction

Sherry Ashfield

February 2011

Lucy Faithfull Foundation's work with female sex offenders

- We have worked with female sex abusers since we were established in 1993
- We work with women in custody and the community
- Since 2005 we have worked with more than 120 females convicted of sexual offences.



Schema Models Of The World

Actions Consistent With Schema	Actions Inconsistent With Schema
↓	↓
Secure Reassured Affirmed	Insecure Anxious Disquieted (struggle to make sense within existing schema)



Making it 'OK'

- Professional groups viewed female sexual abuse as less harmful than sexual abuse by men. Moreover they made efforts either consciously or unconsciously to transform the female and her behaviour into more culturally acceptable notions of female behaviour. This ultimately led to denial of the problem.
– Denov, 2001



Response of Child Protection systems (England ,Wales,NI)

- Literature and in-depth interviews clearly identify a lack of awareness or acceptance of female perpetrated child sexual abuse as being a particular barrier to professionals identifying and responding to this type of abuse.
(Bunting 2005)



So how many are there?

- The research literature (including victim-based research studies) suggests that approximately 5% of sex offenders are female.
– Bunting, (2005) NSPCC



Convictions UK

- Approximately 1% of convicted adult sex offenders are women
- At April 2009, there were 56 women in prison for sexual offences compared with 31 in June 2005 (MoJ)
- In 2008, 84 women were under supervision in the community (MoJ)



Callers to ChildLine 2008/09

- 2,142 children calling about sexual abuse said their perpetrators were female (17% of calls) – an increase of 132% over 04/05
- Mothers were the perpetrators for 4% of girls and 20% of boys.
- Other female perpetrators included female acquaintance, aunt, sister, stepmother & grandmother (1% each)



Prevalence?

- The actual extent of the problem is even more difficult to determine than it is for male offenders. Part of the difficulty..is in the definition of sexual abuse
– Grubin 1998



Factors which may impact definition of behaviours as abusive

- Constructs of female sexuality as non threatening
- (Sexual humour that humiliates, open flirting while scantily dressed)
- Constructs of male socialisation
- (He was very grown up and mature)
- Perceived lack of intent
- (She's just 'over affectionate')
- Circumstances in which behaviours occur
- (He forced her into it)
- (Sexualisation of intimate care abuse occurring in what is perceived to be a loving ,caring relationship)
- Nature of behaviours
- (Subtle behaviours which seem similar to 'normal mothering behaviours').



Implications of gender for disclosure

- Gender of abuser can play an important role in how allegations are taken forward in Child Protection and Criminal Justice settings (Bunting 2005)
- Research and clinical experience identifies victims and female abusers report professionals 'not listening' or believing disclosures of female abuse. (Saradjian 2010)
- Child victims resort to stereotypical images of women to try and make sense of their experiences- 'she must be ill'
– (Peter 2008)



"The available literature suggests that many cases of female perpetrated abuse go underreported and under recognised."
Gannon and Rose 2008

What Do They Do? Studies of Female Sex Offenders & Children They Abuse

- Women offenders abuse girls and boys: (Connor, 1987; Rudin et al., 1995; Saradjian 1996)
- It is unclear from research at this stage whether one gender is more vulnerable than the other (Vandiver and Walker 2002)
- Some suggestion victims more likely to be prepubescent (Vandiver and Walker 2002)



Choice of Victim?

- Women who abuse older children choose in line with their perceived sexual orientation
- Women who abuse younger children are less clearly discriminating
 - Saradjian, 1996
- Typically victims tend to be known to their abuser, often in a care giving role
 - Vandiver & Kercher, 2004



Severity of Abuse?

- Severity of abuse suffered is independent of the sex of the perpetrator
 - study of children's treatment centres: Rudin et al., 1995



Sexual Acts ?

- Women can carry out all forms of sexual abuse of children
 - Saradjian, 1996. Sample of 52 women
 - McDaniels, Wilson & Bellnap 2008



Grooming

- Women who offend against very young children have no need to 'groom' as they create the child's world.
- Women are often sanctioned by society to 'initiate' adolescent males into sexual activity.
- Women are not perceived to represent a potential risk to children so fewer external barriers.
- Women 'groom' with a female slant- less likely to use physical coercion, more use of emotional statements. (McDaniels, Wilson, Bellnap 2008)
- Seduction, blackmail and gameplaying most commonly used means for adolescent females to perpetrate abuse. Tardiff et al (2005)



Motivation?

- Sexual gratification/deviant arousal
- Desire for affection, closeness, intimacy
- Fear of violence from partner
- Fear of loss of partner
- Pleasing partners
- Jealousy
- Revenge – for rejection or for own abuse
- Other motives related to own abuse
- Anger
- Desire for power and control
- Money
- Nathan & Ward, 2002; Gannon, Rose & Ward, 2008



Society's attitude to women – impact on victims

- Abuse by women may be:
 - More traumatic as more unexpected
 - More confusing association between sex and nurturance
 - Greater sense of guilt and shame – 'something about me'
 - Where intrafamilial, more problems of confusion and disbelief for other family members, including male carers.



Issues for survivors of abuse by mothers: Saradjian 2004

- Developing sense of self separate from mother – often very difficult due to extent of enmeshment
- Need to maintain link with mother to validate existence
- High level of mistrust of others or extreme dependency
- Problems with sexuality and sexualisation of relationships
- Anger and aggression to others and self harm
- Impact of trauma on general brain processing and development.
- Impact on parenting skills as only frame of reference may be abusive.



Differences compared with males

- More likely to have experienced verbal, physical and sexual abuse from childhood (Gannon & Rose 2008)
- Sexual abuse more severe and frequent than male counterparts
- More likely to co-offend with another, usually male
- More likely to abuse in care giving situation (Giguere & Bumby, 2007)
- More likely to be trapped in abusive relationships through adulthood. (Lewis & Stanley 2000)
- More likely to have traits of severe passivity and dependency (Hunter & Matthews 1997) (Lewis and Stanley 2000, Gannon, Rose & Ward, in press)



Difference compared with males :contd

- Higher levels of low self esteem, emotional loneliness and externalised locus of control (Beckett 2007)
- Less likely to report use of alcohol or drugs around time of offence
- Lower levels of emotional congruence with children (Beckett 2007)
- Core thinking about ownership of children (Elliott et al 2009)
- Reconviction rates much lower 1-2% v 10-15% (Sandler & Freeman 2009)



Similarities to male counterparts

Female abusers like males are not one homogenous group

Similarities in offence supportive thinking but with a gender slant

- Abuse by women is not harmful, or less harmful than abuse by men
- Children as sexual beings- imbuing the individual child with adult characteristics
- General sexual behaviour is out of control
- Men are entitled to have their sexual needs met
- The world around me is a dangerous and hostile place

(Eldridge, Elliott, Ashfield 2009, Beech Parrott, Ward & Fisher – 2009, Gannon & Rose 2009)



Risk Assessment

- Reconviction rates are very low for female sex offenders, so identifying static risk assessment protocols is very difficult.
- Measures used for assessing risk in males are not appropriate for use with females (Sandler & Freeman 2009)
- To date the only static risk factor identified in relation to rearrest for women is a previous convictions for a non sexual offence against a child. (Sandler & Freeman 2009)
- Need for assessments which are individual and gender responsive informed by empirical research.



The Offence Process for Women?

Women engage in similar acts to men. But how they arrive at that place (their pathway to offending) is uniquely female. Consequently they warrant separate explanations than those constructed for their male counterparts.”
Harris (2010)

A simple transfer of knowledge from the male sexual offender literature is simply not appropriate.
Cortoni (2010)



Final Thoughts

- Research outcomes indicate we cannot simply assume what works for men will work with women.
- To fail to recognise sexual abuse by women is to leave victims unprotected and unheard.



Reading List

- Bunting, L. (2005). *Females who sexually offend against children: Responses of the child protection and criminal justice systems*. NSPCC Policy Practice Research Series. London: NSPCC.
- Gannon, T. Cortoni, F. (2010) *Female Sex Offenders-Theory, Assessment and Treatment* Wiley-Blackwell.
- Denov, M. S. (2001). *A culture of denial: Exploring professional perspectives on female sex offending*. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 43, 303-329.
- Eldridge, H., Elliott, I. A., & Ashfield, S. (2009). Assessment of women who sexually abuse children. In M.C. Calder (Ed.), *Sexual abuse assessments: Using and developing frameworks for practice* (pp. 213-227). London: Russell House Publishing.
- Ford, H. (2006). *Women who sexually abuse children*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons
- Peter, T. (2008). *Speaking about the unspeakable: Exploring the impact of mother-daughter sexual abuse*. *Violence against Women*, 14, 1033-1053.

