The Nature and Prevalence of Sexual Abuse by Women and our Understanding of it
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).
The paradox, however, as Elliott¹ points out, is that we can accept that women physically abuse their children but not that they may sexually abuse them. Featherstone (1996) and Parker (1995), for example, reported figures suggesting that women perpetrate 50% of the physical violence inflicted on children (cited in FitzRoy, 1998). Similarly, Cawson, Wattam, Brooker and Kelly (2000) found that in their sample of young adults reporting physical violence at home, the mother was most frequently reported to be responsible (49% of cases), followed by the father (40% of cases). Elliott goes on to suggest some reasons why sexual abuse by females is minimised. First, sexual abuse by women may be seen as more threatening. Women are expected to love children and care for them, not to hurt them. Accepting that women can sexually abuse children changes how we view women. As she says, children are often told that if they are in trouble, they should ask a woman for help, presumably because she is thought to be “safe”. By accepting that women may sexually abuse, however, what advice should we offer to children? Acknowledging that women can abuse children shatters feelings of security and safety for children and thus makes it more difficult to accept. This may be true even for those working in professions dealing with abuse issues. Denov (2001, p. 322) quotes one psychiatrist who commented, “Psychiatrists feel uncomfortable dealing with female sex offenders . . . a lot of [my colleagues] are more offended and more grossed out by females doing this [sexual assault] than they are by males – partly because they don’t think of females as being sexual predators”. The attitudes of professionals will be examined in the next chapter.

Another possible reason for denying sexual abuse by women is the difficulty in understanding how women may sexually abuse children without possessing a penis. This may have contributed to beliefs that even if women do abuse they are unlikely to cause significant harm, which is discussed in Chapter 7. As women are also usually the primary caregivers, Elliott² reports, it is easier to hide their abuse under the guise of childcare. Pizzey (1997)³ describes one mother who forced her sons to hold down their brother while she placed suppositories into his anus. She had also given him enemas when he was younger. Whilst abusive, the behaviour was disguised as medical care, which was very confusing for the victim and may have made it more difficult for others to detect. Even if healthcare professionals recognise females as abusers, the fact that women, as the primary caregivers, are most likely to accompany their children on visits to the doctor means that a child abused by

² See note 1.
their mother, for example, will have difficulty in revealing what is happening and the abuse is likely to remain undetected (Elliott & Peterson, 1993).

In addition to beliefs that abuse by women causes less harm, sexual relations between an older woman and younger male child or, particularly, an adolescent may be viewed as acceptable. A young male who has sex with an older woman may be viewed enviously by his peers who think he is “lucky” for having been “initiated” by an older woman. Mendel (1995) notes that many films differ in their portrayal of male and female victims of sexual assault. Portrayals of sexual abuse of females are often filmed with sensitivity, he states, but several films depicting sexual relations between boys and adult women portray the event as neutral, positive or even humorous. Such views may extend to professionals working in the field. Saradjian (1996, p. 7) quotes an officer investigating the case of a 14-year-old runaway boy who was being sexually abused by a woman in return for somewhere to stay: “He fell right on his feet there didn’t he . . . lucky sod”. Similarly, Weber (1999) writes of cases in which women had sexually abused both their sons and daughters but were prosecuted only for abusing their daughters. Perpetuation of these stereotypes prevents a deeper understanding of the damage female abusers can cause. However, as awareness of female-perpetrated abuse increases, we should not assume that such stereotypes remain; heightened awareness may help to challenge these beliefs.

**HOW MANY WOMEN SEXUALLY ABUSE?**

A further barrier to accepting sexual abuse by women is that many studies have suggested such abuse to be rare. McConaghy (1998) reports that in the USA, as increased attention was given to the problem of adult–child sexual contact, there was a rapid rise in the reported prevalence of such contact and a corresponding increase in community concern. Mayer (1992) observes that during the two previous decades, as awareness of male sexual offending grew, it was predicted that the figures would also rise for female offenders. However, this is not reflected in many of the studies. Grubin (1998) reports criminal statistics showing that less than 1% of sexual offences are committed by women. Frei (1995), summarising a number of studies, suggests an incidence rate for female perpetrators of between 1% and 4%. Official data continue to suggest that the number of female abusers is low. Vandiver and Kercher (2004) reported that in 2001 adult females constituted 1.6% of the registered sexual offenders in the state of Texas. Denov (2003a) quotes similar figures from both the UK and Canada, with 1.5% of adults convicted of sexual assault in Canada in 2000 being female, while in the UK, 2% of adults convicted of a sexual offence were female. It is important to note, however, that statistics such as these are likely to be influenced by beliefs about females
as abusers in criminal justice system (CJS) agencies. Chapter 2 focuses on this.

In the light of these figures, it is not surprising that female sex offenders make up only about 0.5% of all sex offenders in prison and a tiny proportion of the UK female prison population. As shown in Table 1.1, this proportion (around 1%) has remained fairly stable over time and is considerably smaller than the proportion of male sex offenders comprising the male prison population. However, the figures in Table 1.1 do not specify the type of sexual crime for which women were imprisoned and could therefore include offences against adults as well as children.

Some studies present a slightly different picture, although the rates are often still quite low. Allen (1990) cites Finkelhor’s (1986) conclusion that in the general population, women commit 5% of abuse of girls and 20% of abuse of boys. Harrison and Cobham (1993) reported that 9% of abusers reported to ChildLine were female and that boys were more likely than girls to be abused. ChildLine figures for the year 2004/5 reveal that overall 11% of callers about sexual abuse were calling about a female abuser. Further breakdown of these figures indicated that 3% of 6,538 girls calling about sexual abuse were calling about a female and that 2% of the girls calling about a female abuser were calling about their mothers. Meanwhile, 35% of the 2,099 boys calling about sexual abuse were calling about a female abuser and 17% of the boys calling about a female were calling about their mothers (ChildLine, personal communication). However, as many victims of female abusers are young, possibly too young to be able to use a telephone or gain access to one, this could potentially distort the picture presented to the organisation. White (1992) found that the rate of reported sexual abuse of boys by women is higher in the USA than in the UK. However, this potentially reflects differences in reporting rates; the USA may simply have become receptive to disclosures of abuse by women at an earlier stage, encouraging more victims to report their experiences. This suggestion is endorsed to some degree by Blues, Moffat and Telford (1999, p. 169) who stated that, “whilst there has been a developing awareness of women as sexual abusers in the USA from around 1984… it was only some eight years later that this knowledge base crystallised into a national UK conference”.

**METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN ESTABLISHING RATES OF ABUSE BY WOMEN**

Perhaps the key question, then, is whether abuse by women is rare or just underreported. It is certainly significant, as Mendel (1995) notes, that self-report studies find higher rates of female abuse than those relying on officially reported cases. Kasl (1990) asked therapists in Minneapolis to estimate the percentage of their clients who had been sexually abused by women. Their
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of females in prison for sex offences</th>
<th>As percentage of total sentenced adult female prison population (total N)</th>
<th>Number of males in prison for sex offences</th>
<th>As percentage of total sentenced adult male prison population (total N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.96 (1,464)</td>
<td>3,939</td>
<td>11.3 (34,856)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.68 (1,774)</td>
<td>4,069</td>
<td>10.5 (38,805)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.17 (2,047)</td>
<td>4,780</td>
<td>11.5 (41,624)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.17 (2,142)</td>
<td>4,910</td>
<td>11.9 (41,205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.15 (2,258)</td>
<td>5,080</td>
<td>12.1 (41,987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.10 (2,535)</td>
<td>5,090</td>
<td>11.9 (42,951)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.77 (2,842)</td>
<td>5,283</td>
<td>11.6 (45,601)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.84 (3,078)</td>
<td>5,472</td>
<td>11.4 (47,798)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.88 (3,063)</td>
<td>5,471</td>
<td>11.0 (49,555)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1.19 (3,121)</td>
<td>5,854</td>
<td>11.5 (50,769)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

responses ranged from 10 % to 39 %. Studying a sample of African-American men, Duncan and Williams (1998) reported that 51 % of the men described sexual abuse by a female while 57 % reported being abused by a male. Denov (2003a) emphasises the disparity between the two sources of data with, she notes, official data suggesting prevalence rates for female sexual abuse of between 1.2 % and 8 %, while some self-report data suggest a prevalence rate of 58 %.

Taking a different approach, Fromuth and Conn (1997) asked college women about their perpetration of behaviours that would constitute the sexual molestation of a child. Four per cent reported at least one incident that met the criteria for child sexual abuse. While this is not a large proportion, as the authors state, “this figure is likely to be an underestimate given that the women may have forgotten these experiences and had little reason for reporting such socially unacceptable behaviour” (Fromuth & Conn, 1997, p. 462). The issue of recall may be an important one; McConaghy (1998) cites work by Williams (1994), which found that over one-third of women with a documented history of sexual victimisation in childhood failed to report this when interviewed 17 years later, most apparently because of an absent or impoverished memory of it. The extent to which such recall failure results from “blocking out” past traumatic events remains to be determined.

The context of sexual abuse may also influence the likelihood of it being reported. Faller (1987) suggested that underreporting of abuse by women is likely to occur in single-parent families in which the child has no other significant adult to tell. In a study of the rape and sexual assault of adult women, Myhill and Allen (2002) noted that offences perpetrated by a close relation are less likely to be reported than those involving an offender who is not well known or a stranger to the victim. A similar dynamic could operate in the sexual abuse of children and, as Chapter 3 describes, female offenders may be more likely to target victims who are well known to them, and often related. Victim gender may also be influential. Meston, Heiman and Trappell (1999) summarise the work of several researchers suggesting that there is a tendency for males to underreport their sexual abuse experiences, which is perhaps emphasised by Robertelli’s (1998) comment that in 50 years of practice he has accumulated information about only three cases of incestuous abuse of males by female offenders. King, Coxell and Mezey (2000) describe their work from the late 1980s, which constituted the first British study of men who had survived sexual assaults. They found that although all the men felt the assault had had a major impact on their lives, less than half reported it in the immediate aftermath, and over one-quarter disclosed it for the first time by responding to the research. However, they present no comparable findings for female victims. Hetherton (1999) suggests that disclosure of abuse is less likely if victims believe their experiences to be extraordinary in any way or that their claims will not be taken seriously. Thus, underreporting may also be likely as a result of the denial of female abuse. Survivors who describe
their experiences may find themselves disbelieved or accused of fantasising. Longdon (1993) reports that survivors have received disbelieving or negative statements from therapists when they disclosed their abuser was a woman. So desperate were these survivors to get help that some eventually said their abuser was a man.

However, victims may also attempt to deny female abuse to themselves. As Hetherton (1999, p. 163) states, “processes that construct women as caring and nurturant may prompt victims to reframe dubious activities, inhibiting disclosure of ambiguous behaviours”. Peluso and Putnam (1996) describe earlier work by Crewdson (1988) which found that when an agency asked to hear from men who had been sexually abused as children it received very few responses. When the agency changed from using the term “sexual abuse” to “sexual experiences”, more than 100 men responded. Peluso and Putnam suggest that, perhaps like society in general, some boys may try to reframe abuse experiences as rites of passage or “getting lucky”.

The method used to elicit information about abuse experiences may influence the ease with which it is obtained. In discussing incest, Demause (1991) reports that disclosures increase as the researcher moves from using simple questionnaires to detailed face-to-face interviews. This may be true for abuse by females, but, as this may be particularly difficult to reveal, victims may be more willing to reveal such experiences in anonymous questionnaires. There may be subtle differences in the nature of the information obtained from these different methods. Nelson and Oliver (1998) report that while boys’ reactions to sexual experiences with women remained generally positive, their responses in interviews revealed more ambivalent feelings than they had expressed in questionnaires.

Other features of interview situations may influence the information obtained. Kasl (1990) cites work by Carlson (1990) which asked male perpetrators in therapy about their experiences of abuse. She reports that at the start of the treatment programme few revealed abuse by a woman but that this figure rose to 39% at the end of the programme. She suggests these findings indicate that length of time in therapy may be an important factor in discovering sexual abuse by females. A one-off research interview, then, may not be sufficient to obtain such information, although this could be true for those abused by perpetrators of either gender. Even the gender of the interviewer may exert influences. Coxell, King, Mezey and Gordon (1999) reported that male subjects recruited by a male researcher were more likely to report sexual molestation as adults and children, or consensual sexual experiences as children, than subjects recruited by the female researcher. This could be an anomaly of this particular study but is interesting nonetheless. It appears to contrast with findings reported by Duncan and Williams (1998) that sexually abused and sexually abusive males are more comfortable talking about sex with a female rather than male interviewer. The extent to which this depends on the sex of their abuser is unknown, however.
Incorporating technology into research may overcome some of these potentially confounding gender effects. Coxell et al. (1999) interviewed participants by computer, asking them to enter their own data and stated that this method has been shown to increase the reporting of sensitive information. However, this is very impersonal and may be similar to asking people to complete questionnaires, the effect of which has already been discussed. The most appropriate methodologies for gathering such information are therefore yet to be determined.

Defining Sexual Abuse

Another difficulty lies in defining sexual abuse. Studies of abuse by males have used many definitions – some exclude noncontact abuse, some require that force be used, some include single abusive episodes and so on. Other variants in the definition of child sexual abuse include victim age, the age differential between perpetrator and victim, the relationship between the perpetrator and victim and issues of consent or legality (Cawson et al., 2000). The definition of abuse is perhaps even more important in the case of female perpetrators as their abuse may be disguised as childcare. Banning (1989) agrees with this, suggesting that a woman's behaviour is more likely to be seen as affectionate than as intentionally abusive. Mayer (1992) suggests that society is likely to tolerate more affectionate displays of behaviour by females, again leading to potential difficulties in determining whether boundaries have been breached.

The breadth and consistency of the definition used will influence the rates of sexual abuse obtained. Kasl (1990) illustrates this through work by Carlson (1990), who described four levels of sexual abuse by women:

- Chargeable offences such as oral sex, intercourse or masturbation.
- Offences such as voyeurism, exposure, seductive touching, sexualised hugging or kissing, extended nursing or flirting.
- Invasions of privacy including enemas, bathing together, washing the child beyond a reasonable age, excessive cleaning of the foreskin or asking intrusive questions about bodily functions.
- Inappropriate relationships created by the adult such as substituting the child for an absent partner, sleeping with the child, unloading emotional problems on the child or using them as a confidant for personal or sexual matters.

Carlson’s data indicated that 31% of male sex offenders on a treatment programme experienced the first level of abuse. The proportion rose to 50% when the second form of abuse was also considered. If all four levels were considered, nearly all the men had experienced some form of sexual abuse by women. This aptly demonstrates how reported rates of abuse by women may differ depending on the behaviours included in the definition.
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The victim’s reaction is also important in establishing rates of abuse by male and female perpetrators. If a teenage boy enjoyed sex with an older woman, for example, he is unlikely to report it as abuse. Therefore, as Dube and Herbert (1988) (cited in Briggs & Hawkins, 1996) suggest, researchers may fail to uncover abuse because they ask the wrong kind of questions. Mendel (1995) reports that studies asking about “sexual activity in childhood” and those asking about “sexual activity in childhood construed as abusive” yield different results; the first type reveals a broader range of sexual activity and a higher rate of abuse by females. This is supported by Coxell et al.’s (1999) study of men attending general practices who described sexual experiences before the age of 16. Of 126 men who responded, 21% reported non-consensual sexual experiences with a female perpetrator before the age of 16. The mean age of the victim in these cases was 11. Sexual experiences were reported by 193 men which they perceived as consensual but which happened when they were under 16 and the perpetrator was more than 5 years older. Of these men, 91% reported a female perpetrator and the mean age of the victims at the first consensual experience was 14.

It is important to recognise, then, that the language employed in research questions can influence the outcomes. It is also important to be clear about the consequences of including or not including particular components in any definition of abuse. Duncan and Williams (1998, p. 769) emphasise this:

Combining cases which the teen does not define as abuse with cases which involve force, threat or coercion may confuse or muddy statistical findings. On the other hand, removing these cases from analyses altogether may ignore an important type of early sexual contact that might have negative consequences similar to those more traditionally defined cases of childhood sexual abuse.

It is therefore not difficult to see why there are so many different estimates of rates of abuse by women.

The intention of this chapter has not been to suggest that females abuse in the same numbers as males. However, it seems plausible that rates of female abuse may be higher than official data have indicated. Several authors (Allen, 1990; Krug, 1989; Lawson, 1993) proffer additional arguments as to why sexual abuse by females is underreported. The interested reader should refer to these papers.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- There are a number of possible reasons why sexual abuse by women has not been readily acknowledged. These include societal expectations of women as carers of children, as well as stereotypical beliefs about sexual activity between older women and younger males.
Official data tend to suggest that few sexual offences are committed by women. However, self-report studies indicate higher rates of female perpetration.

A number of methodological variations may influence the estimated rates of sexual abuse by women. These include the specific language and acts incorporated in a definition of abuse and the methods used to ask people about abuse experiences.

Reporting rates are also likely to be influenced by the context of the abuse, the victims’ feelings about the experience and whether they think they are likely to be believed.