

What is known about female sex offenders and the impact on their victims?

The question of whether sexual abuse is carried out solely by male abusers has long been dispelled and we now know that sexual abuse is perpetrated by both males and females. What is less well known, because the practice has lagged behind, is the extent to which females are responsible, how and in which ways their behaviour is similar or different to that of male abusers and what impact it has on the child victim. The NSPCC has undertaken a recent survey of the research literature and current practice to try and establish a clearer picture. Their work was not confined to the incidence of abuse alone, but also looked at what resources are available to work with female sex offenders and how they are identified, dealt with and treated in the child protection and the criminal justice systems.

The work of the NSPCC is complemented by information that is emerging all the time from those practitioners in the field who are working with victims and perpetrators of female sexual abuse.

The research that is available confirms that females do commit sexual offences against children and these are often very serious offences. Identifying the abuse can be difficult for professionals; not only do they have to overcome their own reluctance to accept that it may be occurring, but often the abuse itself takes subtle forms and is masked by the day to day caring and nurturing roles of women and mothers, under cover of such tasks as administering ointments or creams or bathing and washing infants or children.

Female sexual abuse can range from voyeurism or inappropriate sexual touching to rape, penetration with objects and ritualistic or sadistic sexual abuse. Many professionals are very uncomfortable when dealing with female sex offenders and this can sometimes lead to disclosures of abuse being dismissed or minimized. This has a number of consequences; firstly if professionals discount the possibility of female sexual abuse they are far less open to evaluate any indicators and may fail to question or explore the potential for abuse to occur. Secondly, when a disclosure is made and the reaction is one of disbelief or downplaying the severity, the effect can be unbearable for the victim who, even more than before, feels isolated and stigmatised. Thirdly it is not unusual for sexual abuse by a female to be treated as less serious than that perpetrated by a male. Inevitably this has led to abusive and dangerous situations continuing, such as contact with vulnerable children being allowed for a mother but not a father.

What is known about female sex offenders?

They appear to break down into three main types; those who abuse their own children, those who abuse adolescents and those who offend with another male abuser, either through coercion or in varying degrees of participative involvement. Most sexual abuse by females takes place in the care giving environment, often in the context of their role as nurturer, in the family home, nurseries, schools and community settings.

Nearly all female sex offenders have had troubled and abusive childhoods and their relationships with their own parents or carers are often marked by damaged parent child relationships where the child has absorbed the abusive image projected on to them by the adult. Rejection, neglect and insecure attachment are common experiences and sex becomes the only route to any emotional attachment.

Most female sex offenders have been victims of serious sexual, physical and emotional abuse, few can remember feeling loved or cared for in their own childhoods. They often replay elements of their own abuse with their victims and in some cases there also appear to be links to fictitious or induced illness. Unlike male sexual abusers who usually offend alone, between 50 to 70% of female abuse takes place within the context of co-offending. Likewise a very high number of those who were coerced into sexually abusing, were themselves sexually abused.

Sexual behaviours and motivation to offend:

Female abusers admit to the same process of sexual arousal to deviant thoughts, fantasies or images as male abusers, developing arousal patterns which may be linked to certain sexual activities and are often related to specific age groups such as adolescents or to patterns of offending behaviour that include inflicting pain and suffering. Females usually follow the same grooming process as males although this is less likely to happen with their own children. Tthe child is identified and targeted, the situation set up for exploitation through bribery, entrapment, reducing inhibitions through use of alcohol or pornography for instance and the victim is given the message that they somehow are responsible.

The motivation to sexually offend may be driven by a longing for emotional closeness and physical affection or by jealousy or anger and a desire for revenge for the abuse the female has herself suffered. Often her own unresolved pain is displaced onto the child victim; a combination of guilt, sexual confusion, anger, rage, a need for power and a fear of intimacy. Some women are so immersed in the relationship with their partner that they are coerced into participating in an effort to please them or through threats of violence and the fear of losing their partner. Some female abusers are repeating patterns of abusive care that they have come to see as normal. And sometimes money is the motivating factor. Almost inevitably, the abuse is coloured by a desire for power and control.

What is the impact on the child victim of a female sexual offender?

Sexual abuse by a female is extremely damaging and appears to be more traumatic for the child than abuse by a male, particularly when maternal abuse is involved. The reasons seem to be partly because of the confusion that follows around the connection between nurturing and sex and partly because of the heightened sense of stigmatisation and shame as the child comes to believe that they were somehow responsible for something bad and unspeakable. Victims of female sexual abusers often have to reframe the activity in line with the cognitive distortions of the abuser, for instance a 13 year old boy who has been sexually abused over a period of years now believes that he raped his own mother.

Victims of female sexual abuse often carry a sense not just of isolation and betrayal, but feel further set apart from other victims of male perpetrated abuse to such an extent that it's not unusual for victims to say they have been sexually abused by a male rather than by a female. It is only with greater awareness and understanding from others that victims can feel confident about disclosing the full facts. This makes it even more essential that all professionals, but particularly therapists and clinicians, are alert and are open to the possibilities of female sexual abuse and understand the difficulties of revealing it.

What are the consequences for child victims?

Children who have been sexually abused by a female are more likely to repress the experience, which, at its extreme, can lead to the development of dissociative identity disorder (DID) or psychosis which carries poor chances of recovery. The experience of the abuse and the aftermath can result in intense feelings of rage and destructiveness towards women and a mistrust of any relationships. Victims may show high levels of aggression towards themselves or others and the rape and murder of women and children can be a consequence. Victims of female abusers are more likely to go on to sexually offend than victims of male abusers. Nearly all struggle with their individual and sexual identity.

The consequences of female sexual abuse appear to be more significant and more harmful than abuse perpetrated by a male with more than half of male victims and three quarters of female victims feeling so damaged that they believe they have little hope of recovery. The sexually abusive relationship, especially when it has been maternal abuse, can lead to over identification and enmeshment with the abuser with the victim finding it almost impossible to separate and establish their own individuality, as illustrated in these quotes taken from work by Saradijan:

'I hate her but I know that I am just like her'
'If I broke truly free I would just fade away'
'I used to dress in men's clothes just so I could be different'

Some children find it too painful to acknowledge that their own mother could have hurt them in this way and are unable to accept that what happened to them was sexual abuse. They try to justify it in other ways, often by repressing or denying the memories or insisting that it has not harmed them. Very young children may of course have great difficulty in remembering, but the lasting emotional trauma continues to affect their lives. When the abuse has taken place from a very young age learning disabilities and cognitive impairment can be additional consequences.

Many victims report enduring and often extensive somatic and psychological symptoms.

Prosecutions and treatment:

Once identified, it seems that female sex offenders are often treated differently within the criminal justice system. Allegations or disclosures are even less likely to result in prosecution and evidence that would convict a male offender is often not seen as strong enough to convict a female offender. Even when they are convicted, women usually receive a lower sentence. To add to this imbalance there are few resources for intensive assessment or treatment and this is compounded by a lack of validated risk assessment tools which are drawn from work that is based on the much greater number of male sex offenders. Assessments carried out by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, which is one of the few centres that can offer a specialist service, will look in detail at the following:

- the history of the offences and the pattern of offending
- the offender's beliefs about their victims
- their approach leading up to and following the abuse
- the context of the sexual abuse including the use of pornography, sexual fantasy, substance misuse
- the meaning of sex for the woman
- their beliefs about self and others
- history of emotional, sexual or physical abuse and the quality of significant relationships

What helps in treatment?

First of all any child victim needs to be safe and protected and the female abuser must be safe from any violent or abusive partner where this is relevant. The boundaries and ground rules in relation to treatment need to be clear and the therapeutic environment should be empathic but not cross the threshold into collusion. Female abusers need strategies and support that helps them to manage their own feelings and opportunities to experience relationships that are not exploitative or abusive. If treatment is to work there need to be goals that aim to improve their self esteem and help women to understand and make sense of their own lives. Treatment should enable the abuser to learn and practise new emotional and practical skills and to make

best use of their support systems. Lastly, female sex offenders must recognise and understand the risk factors around their abusive behaviours and to learn new ways of coping with the impact of their own experiences without channelling their needs through the sexual abuse of children.

The sexual abuse of children by females is no longer a hidden activity, but the response of the childcare and criminal justice systems is still very erratic with limited specialist resources available. However a body of practice is developing with more widespread recognition in the field and a greater understanding of the impact on victims.

Refs:

Bunting, L. (2006) *Females who sexually offend against children* NSPCC

This article has drawn from additional material from Hilary Eldridge of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation and Jacqui Saradjian.