

Female Sexual Abusers: A Theory of Loss

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ABSTRACT: Awareness about female sexual abuse perpetrators has increased in recent years. However, some of the recent literature is likely to have included cases of false accusations which gives a misleading picture of the frequency of female sexual abuse and the characteristics of such women. There is a great range in the estimated frequency from different studies and the definition of sexual abuse, sample selected, and methodology must be considered. Taken as a whole, the literature indicates that although most sexual abusers are males, child sexual abuse by females does occur and is probably less rare than was once believed. There are widely different circumstances in which women sexually abuse children and these circumstances may often differ from those causing men to do so. Many studies depict female abusers as socially isolated, loners, alienated, coming from abusive backgrounds, and having emotional problems, although most are not psychotic. A theory of loss as one circumstance underlying female sexual abuse is described and four case studies are discussed in detail.

Men do most of the aberrant and deviant sexual behaviors. Men do most of the sexual abuse of children. In the past women were not believed to be perpetrators of child sexual abuse except in rare circumstances. Those women who did commit sexual abuse were seen as seriously disturbed. Maternal incest in particular has been considered to be extremely rare (Arroyo, Eth, & Pynoos; Herman, 1983; Meiselman, 1990; Wahl, 1960).

Recently, however, there has been much more discussion of women as possible perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Some researchers suggest it is not as rare as previously assumed. However, there is still considerable disagreement and confusion about just how frequently women sexually abuse children, what type of women, and under what circumstances.

In reviewing information on women as perpetrators, Finkelhor and Russell (1984) note that some studies indicating that women sexually abuse children more frequently than has been believed contain definitional problems which inflate the statistics. For example, the National Incidence Study figures suggest that almost half of the sexual experiences of children included a female perpetrator. However, according to the study definitions, a caretaker could be a perpetrator if she "permitted acts of sexual contact to occur." If a mother neglected a child while a father sexually abused the child, the mother would be listed as a sexual abuse perpetrator. Also, a mother could be listed as an active perpetrator if she failed to adequately supervise the child's voluntary sexual activities. When the data were reanalyzed to exclude these types of cases, the figures indicated 14% of perpetrators against boys and 6% of perpetrators against girls were females acting alone.

Self-report studies are another source of information. Finkelhor and Russell (1984) report that such studies indicate sexual contact between children and older women is a distinct minority of child-adult sexual contacts. They conclude that "The data