

The Final Taboo

In a real life horror story, an Ontario woman was sentenced to a 31/2 year prison term earlier this year for webcasting sexual assaults on her two-year old son. During the sentencing, Ontario Court Justice Guy DeMarco spoke directly to the young mother. "Society expects that a mother will protect her child no matter what from harm. Not only did you not protect your child, but you hurt him and broke the trust," (*CBC news January 29, 2010*)

It is the last taboo, something that we cannot even begin to contemplate – women as sexual predators. Female sex offenders have been in the spotlight lately with a recent Oprah show focusing on a man sexually abused by his own mother and a high-profile case in Britain involving a nursery worker.

Most information indicates that although most sexual abusers are male, child sexual abuse by females does occur and is less rare than was previously believed. The circumstances in which women sexually abuse children differ widely and these circumstances may often differ from those causing men to do so.

How widespread is it?

In 2002, approximately 800 sexual assaults by women were reported to Canadian police (3% of the total sexual offenders that year). (*Public Safety Canada, Recidivism rates of female sexual offenders*)

The percentage of women and teenage girl perpetrators recorded in case report studies is small and ranges from 3%-10% When the victim is male, female perpetrators account for 1%-24% of abusers. When the victim is female, female perpetrators account for 6%-17% of abusers. (*Statistics from: The Invisible Boy, Frederick Mathews, Ph.D., C.Psych. The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence Health Canada March 1996*)

Some characteristics of Female Offenders

In case studies of 19 female sex offenders conducted by Correctional Service of Canada a number of characteristics of the offenders were identified:

Age at sexual offence - average 33 years

History of Abuse - over 90% indicated some form of abuse in their history.

Low socio-economic status is considered to be characteristic of female sex offenders - Information on socio-economic status was available for 9 of the 19 offenders. Of these 9, almost 90% (8) were rated as low in socio-economic status

Female sex offenders are often poorly educated. Information available on 9 of the female sex offenders indicated that the level of education obtained ranged from grade 5-6 to grade 11. None had pursued studies beyond high school and some had obtained further education while incarcerated.

Female sex offenders commonly have substance abuse problems - 12 of 13 women in this sample were found to have substance abuse problems

Offences committed by female sex offenders do not generally include violent force. In 7 of the 10 cases, offenders used violence during their offences. Females may be more likely to use verbal coercion than overt physical force.

Women sexual offenders often fall into certain profiles or typologies:

- Teacher/Lover (Mary Kay Letourneau)
- Predisposed Intergenerational (a lone female perpetrator with a history of incest with more than one person.)
- Male-Coerced or Male-Accompanied - abuse being initiated by male partner (Karla Homolka)
- Experimental/Exploiter: (A lone teen perpetrator who targets young male children within a baby-sitting context.)

The results of the Corrections Canada study indicated that for this federally sentenced group of women, the two largest categories were male-coerced (4) and male-accompanied (5).

Who are the Victims?

A common research finding indicates that **victims of female sex offenders are generally female children of the offender.** 25 of the 33 victims (76%) in this sample were either children of the offender or children sharing a familial relationship with the offender, and 80% of these victims were the offender's own children. Where the sex of these victims was known, seven were the offender's son, and nine were the offender's daughter. In this sample of female sex offenders, victimization of individuals outside the family is relatively uncommon (24%).

Why Abusive Behaviour by Female Offenders Goes Unreported

- Children are reluctant to report the person they depend on.
- Inappropriate sexual behaviour is often masked in bathing, dressing or comforting the victim. Women in general and mothers more specifically, have more freedom than men to touch children.
- When boys are the targets of female offenders, they are less likely to disclose. The public is more willing to accept the female abuser's claim that she had a "relationship" with the victim. And in cases in which the male is a teenager, there is a prevailing sense that boys are not harmed by sexual liaisons with older women or the Mrs. Robinson syndrome.
- Female sexual predators go unreported because of a lack of awareness by the public. This inability to view female sex offenders as threatening is part of a greater reluctance to criminalize women's actions.

Child sexual abuse is a crime no matter who is the perpetrator. We have to be aware and accept the fact that women can be sexual predators; female sexual abuse is often not recognized because of the disbelief that it can happen. Women should face the same sanctions and punishments of the law that is meted out to male abusers. Child sexual abuse is not only a violation of the

child's body but also a violation of the child's mind, spirit and sense of trust. Trust is violated in the worst possible way, by someone that the child may love or on whom they are dependent such as a parent. When the violator happens to be female, the sense of trust may prove difficult or impossible to repair.