

# Woman as Molester; Implications for Society

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Female sex offenders of children represent a blind spot of western society. Research over the last 20 years has noted that women can and do sexually abuse children at alarmingly high rates, yet the issue is largely ignored by the media and society at large. This paper will examine the prevalence of sex offending by women against children and then explore the culturally important myths involved in perpetuating the idea that women are sexually safe around children.

Key Words: Paedophile, sexual abuse, women, aggression.

## 1. Introduction

Old pirate movies often showed a portion of the world to be labeled with “Here Be Monsters”. Since those areas were unexplored, they were presumed to be dangerous and since they were dangerous, they remained unexplored. Eventually intrepid explorers went on to map the world and the mythical monsters turned out to be less terrifying in real life than they were in imagination. This paper is about another uncharted area that needs exploring, one not marked on any map as dangerous, perhaps because its existence is too terrifying even to mention. In a world where child molesters are viewed as the boogeyman, and childcare remains a predominantly female task, we remain in denial of the idea that women sexually molest children. It’s too scary a topic to examine, and by not examining it, we’re able to say it doesn’t exist. In doing so, we collude with the perpetrators against their victims and perpetuate the myth that all women are innocent and children in their care are safe.

In the past, police arrests for male sex abusers were few and far between, with only the most heinous and violent sex crimes being reported or prosecuted. In 1955, Weinberg estimated the average yearly incidence of father-daughter incest in the U.S. to be 1-2 cases per million<sup>1</sup>. By 1983, Finkelhor estimated the incidence to be over 1 million, so that by adulthood, approximately 20% of American women and 10% of American men have experienced some form of child sexual abuse<sup>2</sup>. For

<sup>1</sup> S. K. Weinberg, *Incest Behavior*, Citadel Press, New York, 1955

<sup>2</sup> D. Finkelhor, ‘Common Features of Family Abuse’ in D. Finkelhor, R. Gelles, G. Hotaling, & M. Straus (Eds.), *The Dark Side of Families: Current Family Violence Research*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1983.

the issue of female child molesters, it is still 1955 rather than 2009. If we use only police and court reports, estimates of prevalence are low, but these statistics are influenced by gender myths and by reporting bias.

## 2. Prevalence

As recently as 1984, an American researcher declared that "Pedophilia ... does not exist at all in women".<sup>3</sup> Before 1986, there were no scientific studies of female sex abusers. Starting in the 1990's, however, researchers began to look at the topic and to their repeated surprise, found higher and higher rates of sexual abuse of children by women. Chronologically, the studies found:

In 1986, Finkelhor estimated that women committed 20% of the sexual abuse of boys, based on his sample<sup>4</sup>.

In 1990, after the British charity KIDSCAPE hosted the first national conference on female sexual abuse, the British television program *This Morning* opened up a hotline for callers to talk about abuse by women. The first day they received over 1000 calls, 90% by folks who said they had never reported their abuse to anyone.<sup>5</sup>

In 1990, a researcher asked therapists in Minneapolis, a large city in mid-western America, to estimate the percentage of their clients who had been sexually molested by women. The therapists estimated that between 10%-39% of their clients had been sexually abused by a woman.<sup>6</sup>

In 1990, a researcher asked convicted male sex offenders about their abuse experiences: 39% reported abuse by women in childhood. He went on to analyze the type of abuse reported. Thirty-one percent reported abuse involving oral sex, intercourse or masturbation by a woman abuser.<sup>7</sup> The alarmingly high rate of

<sup>3</sup> K. Freund, G. Heasman, I.G. Racansky, G. Glancy, 'Pedophilia and heterosexuality vs. homosexuality', *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, Volume 10, Issue 3 Autumn 1984, pages 193 - 200

<sup>4</sup> D. Finkelhor, *A Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1986

<sup>5</sup> M. Elliott, 'What Survivors Tell Us-An Overview', in *Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, M. Elliott (ed), The Guilford Press, New York, 1994, pp 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> C. Kasl 'Female perpetrators of sexual abuse: A feminist view', in *The Sexually Abused Male. Prevalence, Impact, and Treatment*, M. Hunter (Ed.), Lexington Books, Lexington, MA, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in K. Freund, R. Watson, R. Dickey 'Does sexual abuse in childhood cause pedophilia: An exploratory study', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Volume 19, Number 6, December, 1990, pp 557-568.

sexual abuse by women in the histories of men convicted of sex crimes has been shown to be between: 59%<sup>8</sup> and 66%<sup>9</sup> (depending on the group studied).

In 1994, researchers analyzed data from a national survey of over 3,000 Americans about their victimization history of found that 6% of female survivors and 59% of male survivors reported being abused by a woman.<sup>10</sup>

In 1995, researchers summarized data from multiple sources of victimization information and found that up to 63% of female victims and as many as 27% of male victims report having been sexually victimized by a woman.<sup>11</sup>

In 1998, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that sexual offenses by women increased by nearly 11 % between 1985 and 1994.<sup>12</sup>

In 1997, researchers asked college women about their perpetration of behaviours that would constitute sexual molestation; Four percent of the college women reported engaging in at least 1 incident that met the criteria for child sexual abuse and 13% claimed that the child had initiated the event.<sup>13</sup>

In 1999, researchers asked men to describe their sexual experiences before age 16: Twenty-one percent reported non-consensual sexual experiences with woman before age 16, with a mean age of 11 years.<sup>14</sup>

In 2002, a researcher studying sexual histories of priests and nuns in Canada found that 1% of the nuns admitted to having sexual contact with children.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> M. Petrovich & D. Templer, 'Heterosexual molestation of children who later became rapists', *Psychological reports*, vol. 54, no3, 1984.

<sup>9</sup> A. Groth, 'Sexual Trauma in the Life Histories of Rapists and Child Molesters', *Victimology* Volume 4, 1979, pp 10-16.

<sup>10</sup> RT Michael, JH Gagnon, EO Laumann, G Kolata, *Sex In America; A Definitive Study*, Little Brown & Co., New York, 1994.

<sup>11</sup> B. Schwartz & H. Cellini, *Sex Offender: Corrections, Treatment, and Legal Practice*, Civic Research Institute, Incorporated, Kingston, NJ 1995, 5-19.

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, 'Sex Offenses and Offenders: An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault', U. S. Dept of Justice, Washington, DC, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> M. Fromuth & V. Conn, 'Hidden Perpetrators Sexual Molestation in a Nonclinical Sample of College Women', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1997, pp 456-465.

<sup>14</sup> A. Coxwell, M. King, G. Mezey, & D. Gordon, 'Lifetime prevalence, characteristics and associated problems of non-consensual sex in men: cross sectional survey', *British Medical Journal*, 318, pp 846-850, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> D. Markham, 'Some Facts about Women Religious and Child Abuse', *Covenant*, 2002.

In 2003, researchers looking at results from an anonymous US nationwide questioner found that 10% of the women had molested 5 children or more.<sup>16</sup>

In 2008, researchers questioned 1,845 Canadian homeless youths: 79% of boys had been sexually abused or exploited by a woman.<sup>17</sup>

In 2008, researchers comparing women who molested children from women with other sexual deviancies found that the women child molesters abused an average of 3 children each.<sup>18</sup>

In 2009, researchers assessing female sexual offender's cognitions reported that 47% of their sample reported viewing children as sexual objects.<sup>19</sup>

Retrospective studies, in which adults are asked about their childhood victimization, also show very high rates of female abuse. In a study of male victims in 1987, 60% reported being abused by women.<sup>20</sup> The same rate was found in a sample of college students in 1981<sup>21</sup>. In other studies of male university and college students in the 1980's, rates of female perpetration were found at levels as high as 72%.<sup>22</sup>

The language used in retrospective studies is key; in 1988, when an American social service agency solicited responses from men who had been

<sup>16</sup> M. Wiegel, G. Abel & A. Jordan, *The Self-reported Behavior of Adult Female Child Abusers*, paper presented at the 22nd Annual Research and Treatment Conference, ATSA, October 2003 St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>17</sup> E. Saewyc, D. Taylor, Y. Homma, & G. Ogilvie, 'Trends in sexual health and risk behaviours among adolescent students in British Columbia', *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, Vol 17 (1), 2008.

<sup>18</sup> M. Wiegel, 'Adult Women Who Sexually Abuse Minors: self-reported characteristics and objectively measured sexual interest' paper presented at 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Joint Conference, MASOC/MATSA, Marlborough, Massachusetts, 4/2/09.

<sup>19</sup> A. Beech, N. Parrett, T. Ward & D. Fisher, 'Assessing female sexual offenders' motivations and cognitions: an exploratory study', *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 15, (2) 2009, 201-216.

<sup>20</sup> R. Johnson & D. Shrier, 'Past sexual victimization by females of male patients in an adolescent medicine clinic population', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 144, 1987, 650-652.

<sup>21</sup> G. Fritz, K. Stroller, & N. Wagner, 'A comparison of males and females who were sexually molested as children', *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 7, 1981, 54-59.

<sup>22</sup> M. Fromuth & B. Burkhart, 'Long-term psychological correlates of childhood sexual abuse in two samples of college men', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 13, 1989, 533-542.

sexually abused as children, they received few responses. When they changed the term from sexual abuse to sexual experience as children, they received 100 more responses.<sup>23</sup> Researchers have also found that reporting of sexual abuse by men increases when they have the opportunity to do so anonymously.<sup>24</sup>

When one compares the prevalence of female child sexual abusers to male child sexual abusers, it still appears that sexual abuse by men occurs more frequently. Yet if 1 in 10 men and 1 in 5 women were sexually molested as children<sup>25</sup> and the American population is currently 305 million, that works out to more than 40 million Americans who were/will be victims of child sexual abuse. Assuming only 10% of the abusers were woman, that means that more than 4 million Americans were sexually abused by a woman rather than a male sex abuser. That is approximately the population of New Zealand.<sup>26</sup> The above research suggests that 10% would be an extreme under-estimation.

### 3. Victims

The primary victims of female sexual abuse of children are biological relatives, with rates of 64%.<sup>27</sup> The second most common victims were the children the women babysat, with a rate of 23%.<sup>28</sup> One study found that the victims of abusive mothers were younger than the victims of abusive fathers, with the victims

<sup>23</sup> J. Crewdson, *By Silence Betrayed; Sexual Abuse of Children in America*, Little Brown, Boston, MA, 1988.

<sup>24</sup> C. Logan, 'Sexual Deviance in Females: Psychopathology and Theory', in *Sexual Deviancy*, D. Laws & W. Donohue (Eds.), The Guilford Press, New York, 2008, pp 486-507.

<sup>25</sup> D. Finkelhor & D. Russell, 'Women as perpetrators: review of the evidence', in *Child Sexual Abuse*, D. Finkelhor (Ed.), Free Press, New York, 1984, pp 12-32.

<sup>26</sup> New Zealand Population Clock, Statistics New Zealand, updated Thursday, April 2, 2009, viewed Wednesday, April 1, 2009, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/populationclock.htm>

<sup>27</sup> J. Saradjian, *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children: From Research to Clinical Practice*, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 1996, pp28.

<sup>28</sup> K. Kaufman, A. Wallace, C. Johnson & M. Reeder, 'Comparing male and female perpetrators' modus operandi: victims' reports of sexual abuse' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 10, 1995, 322-333.

of mother-son incest being the youngest of all.<sup>29</sup> The mean age of onset of the abusing behaviour by women was 32 years old.<sup>30</sup>

The types of sex acts women commit against children mirror those committed by men; fondling, penetration, oral sex, child pornography. Children abused by women report the same intensity and frequency of reactive symptoms reported by children molested by men.<sup>31 32 33</sup> For example, a Canadian study of victims of female perpetrators of child sexual abuse found that most victims reported long term difficulties with substance abuse, self injury, suicide, depression and identity issues<sup>34</sup> Both male and female child molesters tend to be poor, uneducated, unskilled and unemployed.<sup>35</sup> Both male and female molesters hold distorted beliefs about their behaviour including “children want to have sex with adults”, “children have a high sex drive” or “sex is a way of showing love”.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Gender Differences

Some minor gender differences have been shown in the research; men had a higher incidence of perpetrating anal intercourse, women had a higher incidence

<sup>29</sup> D. Finkelhor & D. Russell, ‘Women as perpetrators: review of the evidence’, in *Child Sexual Abuse*, D. Finkelhor (Ed.), Free Press, New York, 1984, pp 12-32.

<sup>30</sup> B. Rosencrans, *Last Secret: Daughters Sexually Abused by Mothers*, Safer Society Press, Brandon VT, 1997. pp 59-68.

<sup>31</sup> O. Wolfers, ‘Same abuse, different parent’ *Social Work Today, March*, , 1992, pp 13-14.

<sup>32</sup> R. Mathews, J. Hunter & J. Vuz, ‘Juvenile female sexual offender: clinical characteristics and treatment issues’, *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 9(3), 1997, pp 187-199.

<sup>33</sup> M. Rudin, C. Zalewski, & J. Bodmer-Turner, ‘Characteristics of child sexual abuse victims according to perpetrator gender’, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19(8), 1995, 963-973.

<sup>34</sup> Denov, M. ‘The Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse by Female Perpetrators’, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 19 (10), 2004, 1137-1156.

<sup>35</sup> C. Logan, ‘Sexual Deviance in Females: Psychopathology and Theory’, in *Sexual Deviancy*, D. Laws & W. Donohue (Eds.), The Guilford Press, New York, 2008, pp 486-507.

<sup>36</sup> J. Saradjian, *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children: From Research to Clinical Practice*, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 1996, pp187-202.

of using foreign objects to penetrate their victims.<sup>37</sup> Women were less likely than men to force the victims to masturbate them.<sup>38</sup> Women perpetrators were more likely to have the child engage in sexual behaviour with another adult while the women watched.<sup>39</sup> They were also more likely to force children to watch them have sex with other children.<sup>40</sup>

Studies investigating whether women abusers target male or female children have given conflicting findings; with some studies suggesting a higher rate of abuse of girls, other suggesting a higher rate of abuse of boys and several studies indicating that there is no difference.<sup>41 42 43 44</sup> It does appear as the victim age drops, the number of male victims increases.<sup>45</sup>

Women molesters lack empathy for their victims and deny any consequences to their victims, as do male molesters.<sup>46</sup> One study found that found

<sup>37</sup> K. Kaufman, A. Wallace, C. Johnson & M. Reeder, 'Comparing male and female perpetrators' modus operandi: victims' reports of sexual abuse' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 10, 1995, 322-333

<sup>38</sup> G. Search, *The Last Taboo: Sexual Abuse of Children*, Penguin, London, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> A. Aylward, M. Christopher, R. Newell, & Gordon, *What about Women Who Commit Sex Offences?*, Notes from ATSA conference, October, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> S. Kelley, R. Brant & J. Waterman, 'Sexual abuse of children in day care centers', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 17, 1993, pp 71-89.

<sup>41</sup> D. Finkelhor, G. Hotaling, I. Lewis & C. Smith, 'Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics and risk factors', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 14, 1990, pp19-28.

<sup>42</sup> G. Adshead, M. Howett & F. Mason, 'Women who sexually abuse children: the undiscovered country', *The Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 1, 1994, pp 45-56.

<sup>43</sup> K. Faller, 'A clinical sample of women who have sexually abused children', *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 4(3), 1995, pp 13-30.

<sup>44</sup> D. Vandiver & G. Kercher, 'Offender and Victim Characteristics of registered female sex offenders in Texas: a proposed typology of female sexual offenders', *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 12(2), 2004, pp 121-137.

<sup>45</sup> G. Richardson, F. Graham, S. Bhate, & T. Kelly, 'A British Sample of sexually abusive adolescents: Abuser and abuse characteristics', *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health*, 5, 1995, pp 187-205.

<sup>46</sup> J. Matthews, R. Mathews & K. Speltz, 'Female sex offenders: a typology', in *Family Sexual Abuse: Frontline Research and Evaluation*, M. Patton (Ed.), Sage, Newbury Park, NJ, 1991, pp 199-219.

that these women had lower levels of guilt about their offenses than men.<sup>47</sup> Men are more likely to admit to offending than women (49% to 27%).<sup>48</sup> When it came to using violence as part of their sexual abuse, studies have indicated that women were as likely as men to use violence including beating or burning the victim.<sup>49</sup> One study found that 25% of the women sexual abusers used a weapon to threaten the child.<sup>50</sup> Another study found that 70% of the female sex abusers used extraneous violence against their victims.<sup>51 52</sup>

It appears that in those cases that do come before the Criminal Justice System, the female abusers generally are either not arrested, not prosecuted or not sentenced to jail time.<sup>53 54</sup> For those cases that do result in incarceration, female offenders generally were not required to seek sexual deviance treatment.<sup>55</sup> The British Home Office study found that the average sentence length for sex crimes for males was 41.2 months, and that for females was 22.2 months.<sup>56</sup>

## 5. Paedophilia

<sup>47</sup> C. Allen, *Women and Men Who Sexually Abuse Children: A Comparative Analysis*, The Safer Society Press, Brandon, VT, 1991.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Correctional Service of Canada, Toronto, Date Modified 8/8/08, Viewed 4/1/2008, <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/pblct/so/female/toc-eng.shtml>

<sup>50</sup> C. Lewis & C. Stanley, 'Women accused of sexual offences', *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 18, 2000, pp 73-81.

<sup>51</sup> J. Marvasti, 'Incestuous mothers', *American Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, 7 (4), 1986, pp 63-69.

<sup>52</sup> R. Johnson & D. Shrier, 'Past sexual victimization by females of male patients in an adolescent medicine clinic population', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 5, 1987, pp 650-652.

<sup>53</sup> D. Vandiver & G. Kercher, 'Registered female sex offenders in Texas; an oddity or an overlooked population' 2002, cited in H. Ford *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, Chichester, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> D. Finkelhor, L. Williams, & N. Burns, *Nursery crimes: Sexual Abuse in Day Care*, Sage, Newbury Park, NJ, 1988.

<sup>55</sup> A. Aylward, M. Christopher, R. Newell, & Gordon, 'What about Women Who Commit Sex Offences?', Notes from ATSA conference, October, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> C. Grey & K. Rogers, Home Office Research Development Statistics, London, created October, 2001, viewed 4/1/09, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/prisoc01.pdf>

Very few studies have discussed the issue of a woman's motivation for sexually abusing a child. Researchers appear to have been reluctant to acknowledge female sexual desire for a child as a motivation. Studies attributed the abuse to feelings of power and control<sup>57</sup> or to feelings of loneliness and isolation.<sup>58</sup> Those few studies that have investigated the topic found that all the women in their samples of female child sexual abusers acknowledged arousal or fantasies about their victims, and that their arousal during abuse was linked to feelings of power.<sup>59</sup> Women can and do meet the diagnostic criteria for Pedophilia. In 1999, a researcher found that 36% of the women in his sample met criteria for Pedophilia, and another 29% met the criteria for sexual sadism.<sup>61</sup> In 2003, data from a sample of U.S. women found that 33% admitted to being sexually aroused by children.<sup>62</sup>

## 6. Red Herrings

The issue of female child molesters is generally so discomfoting that any discussion on the topic results in multiple digressions and diversions. The most common is the idea that any woman who does this "must" be mentally ill. It's more comfortable to assume that these women are mentally ill than to think about women having sexual interests in children. This is a red herring for several reasons. First, studies of female criminals who do not engage in sexual offenses against children are rated as having an equally high rate of mental illness. In other words, women

<sup>57</sup> J. Saradjian, *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children; From Research to Clinical Practice* John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1996.

<sup>58</sup> J. Chasnoff, W., Burns, S. Schnoll, K. Burns, G. Chisu, & L. Kyle-Spore, 'Maternal-Neonatal Incest', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 56 (4), 1986, pp577-580.

<sup>59</sup> R. Mathews, J. Matthews & K. Speltz, 'Female sexual offenders', in *The Sexually Abused Male: Volume I*, M. Hunter (ed.), Lexington Books, Lexington, Kentucky, 1990.

<sup>60</sup> J. Mathews, 'Working with female sexual abusers', in *Female Sexual Abuse of Children; The Ultimate Taboo*, (M. Elliot (ed.), John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1993.

<sup>61</sup> J. Federoff, A., Fishell & B. Federoff, 'A case series of women evaluated for paraphilic sexual disorders', *The Canadian journal of Human Sexuality*, vol 8 (2), 1999, pp 126-140.

<sup>62</sup> M. Wiegel, G. Abel & A. Jordan, *The Self-reported Behavior of Adult Female Child Abusers*, paper presented at the 22nd Annual Research and Treatment Conference, ATSA, October 2003 St. Louis, Missouri.

who molest kids share similarities to other types of female offenders.<sup>63</sup> Second, studies indicate that woman molesters do not have a high rate of severe, debilitating mental illness such as psychosis.<sup>64 65</sup> Third, even if some abusers have diagnosable psychiatric illnesses, it can't necessarily be concluded that this caused the offense. One study reported that of the 23 women coded as being "mentally ill", only 3 cases showed that the mental illness was related to the offending behaviour.<sup>66</sup> Another showed that the female sexual abusers had a high rate of Personality Disorders, which would not prevent someone from knowing whether or not they are causing abuse or that abuse is wrong.<sup>67</sup>

Another common diversion from the topic of female child molesters involves the existence of male coercion. It is more comfortable to believe that a man coerced a woman into this behaviour rather than to consider that a woman would intentionally and purposely molest a child. The idea seems to be that a woman's sexuality is latent until activated by a man.

Research, however, indicates that, while some women do abuse in tandem with a male partner, this is not always due to coercion. Cases can be divided into women who abuse alone, those who do abuse secondary to male coercion, those who begin as coerced and go on to abuse alone, those who molest with others as a non-coerced team and, finally, those who coerce others.<sup>68 69</sup> However, the majority of women who sexually abuse children do so alone.<sup>70 71 72 73</sup> Further, even if a

<sup>63</sup> M. Messer, B. Maughan, D. Quinton & A. Taylor, 'Precursors and correlates of criminal behavior in women', *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health*, 14, 2004, 82-107.

<sup>64</sup> K. Faller, 'Women who sexually abuse children', *Violence and Victims*, 2(4), 1987, pp 263-276.

<sup>65</sup> J. Saradjian, *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children; From Research to Clinical Practice* John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1996.

<sup>66</sup> K. Faller, 'A clinical sample of women who have sexually abused children', *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 4(3), 1995, 13-30.

<sup>67</sup> A. Green & M. Kaplan, 'Psychiatric impairment and childhood victimization experiences of female child molesters', *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 33 (7), 1994, pp 954-961.

<sup>68</sup> J. Saradjian, *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children; From Research to Clinical Practice* John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1996.

<sup>69</sup> B. Gallagher, 'The extent and nature of known cases of institutional child sexual abuse', *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 2000, 795-817.

<sup>70</sup> A. Aylward, M. Christopher, R. Newell, & Gordon, *What about Women Who Commit Sex Offences?*, Notes from ATSA conference, October, 2002.

woman says she felt coerced by a male partner to abuse a child, that she worried that he would leave her if she did not engage in this behaviour, one cannot generally state she was “made” to do so. A partner may have created an environment in which the woman feels it to be acceptable or desirable to abdicate the responsibility for her own behaviour. But she is still responsible when she puts her own needs before those of her children. In some ways, the Woman as Victim digression is really the same thing as the Woman as Mentally Ill digression. They both remove any moral responsibility or agency from the woman and perpetuate the stereotype that women are weak and dependent and only really exist in context with men: this is what woman X does in context Y. If she had not been in context Y, she would not have done the violence, and so she cannot be held genuinely responsible. Further, once she is removed from context Y, she will never do it again. It is the psychological version of the British common law doctrine that the husband and wife are one person and that person is the husband”<sup>74</sup>

Past sexual victimization is another diversion often heard when one discusses female child molesters. Women convicted of sexual offenses against children relate that they themselves were molested in their youth. Not all female molesters have a history of victimization; of the female offenders incarcerated by the Correctional Service of Canada 1995, only half indicated a history of sexual victimization.<sup>75</sup> However, like their male counterparts, and like women criminals who do not have a history of sex crimes, female child molesters grew up in chaotic, non-intact families,<sup>76</sup> were involved in foster care<sup>77</sup> or had parents who had a history

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<sup>71</sup> A. O’Connor, ‘Female sex offenders’, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 150, 1987, pp615-620.

<sup>72</sup> Correctional Service of Canada, *Female Sex Offenders in the Correctional Service of Canada, Case Studies*, modified :8/8/08, viewed 4/3/09.

<sup>73</sup> A. Kalders, H. Inkster & E. Britt, ‘Females who offend sexually against children in New Zealand’, *The Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 3(1), 1997m pp 15-29.

<sup>74</sup> S. French, ‘Partners in Crime; Defending the Female of the Species’, in *No Angels: Women Who Commit Violence*, A. Myers & S. Wight (Eds.), 1996, pp 42-43.

<sup>75</sup> Correctional Service of Canada, *Female Sex Offenders in the Correctional Service of Canada, Case Studies*, modified :8/8/08, viewed 4/3/09.

<sup>76</sup> A. Green, & M. Kaplan, ‘Psychiatric impairment and childhood victimization experiences in female child molesters’, *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 33(7), 1994, pp 954-961.

<sup>77</sup> J. Harper, ‘Prepuberal male victims of incest; a clinical study’, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 17, 1993, pp 419-421.

of unstable relationships and multiple partners.<sup>78</sup> Female child molesters often deconstruct the issues involved in their abusing to excuse themselves and usurp their victim's position. The problem with mentioning women's past sexual victimization is that it in no way explains their sexual abuse of others. The theory of intergenerational transmission of sexual violence has been found to contribute to male victims becoming offenders, but not to females. The abuse of men by a female relative was highly correlated with the male victim becoming an offender, but no such correlation has been found with female victims/offenders.<sup>79</sup> Further, the majority of victims of childhood sexual abuse of both genders do not go on to become molesters.

The final logical fallacy or Red Herring involves an odd attempt at forming hierarchies of victimization. Historically, penetration of a female child was viewed as a crime against her father's property; her virginity. A father would not be able to get as much of a Bride Price if the child was not a virgin. Therefore, penetration sexual abuse was considered "worse" than other forms of molestation. Relatedly, males who were anally penetrated during sexual assault were viewed as having been "treated as a woman", again separating penetration's status from other forms of sexual abuse. In modern discourses on victimization, some attempts have been made to order categories of victims, such as claiming female victims of male child molesters are somehow "more" victimized than others, due to the existence of a patriarchal society.<sup>80</sup> However, by claiming that certain victims are "more", one automatically implies that other victims are somehow "less"; less important, less deserving of resources and sympathy. In this way, the perpetrator's status (male or female) takes precedence over the survivor's needs.

#### **7. Power and Violence**

The sexual abuse of children by women gives the lie to the myth that women are the "gentler sex", are "powerless" and would never use their position of power over children to exploit them, to harm them, to rape them. In western society, it is now debatable whether women are able to hold any systemic power or if the Patriarchy still remains intact. However, women, especially mothers, clearly hold the power over children in the domestic sphere. Women's power in the home can be

<sup>78</sup> C. Allen, *Women and Men Who Sexually Abuse Children: A Comparative Analysis*, The Safer Society Press, Brandon, VT, 1991.

<sup>79</sup> M. Glasser, L., Kolvin, D. Campbell, A. Glasser, I. Leitch, & S. Farrelly, 'Cycle of child sexual abuse; links between being a victim and becoming a perpetrator', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 179, 2001, pp 482-494.

<sup>80</sup> P. Cross, personal communication, 1<sup>st</sup> Global Conference, Evil, Women and The Feminine, Budapest, Hungary, May, 2009.

Legitimate, Referential, Informational, Coercive, and Expert. Women own all those sources of power over children and are able to exploit those powers to meet their own needs, including their sexual needs.<sup>81</sup> It is a mistake to equate political weakness with moral innocence. “Social and economical arrangements do not, in themselves, erase a woman’s will to power. What they do is shape her concept of empowerment and redirect her efforts”.<sup>82</sup>

For many years society refused to admit that women were capable of any form of abuse or violence. There has been an assumption that violence is a male province. Women, or “womenandchildren” as the commonly used term goes, were thought to be victims of male violence but never perpetrators. In archaic times, this may have been true; the average woman is smaller and physically weaker than the average man. Women made do with indirect aggression; ostracizing, shaming, manipulating. In modern times, however, anyone can wield a weapon and modern handguns easily fit into a woman’s hand. Further, violence is not a cross-gender problem and women assault and kill children and other women as well as men. Research by experts in domestic violence, homicide, infanticide, and bullying all indicate that violent behaviour by women in western societies has increased over the last 30 years. We now know that in the U.S., women commit an equal portion of child homicides<sup>83</sup>, more than 80 percent of neonaticides/infanticides;<sup>84</sup> an equal or greater share of severe physical child abuse, w/ sons being more frequent targets than daughters;<sup>85</sup> an equal rate of spousal assault;<sup>86</sup> and a large proportion of elder abuse. A 1999 US Department of Justice Study concluded that between 1976 and 1997, mothers were responsible for the highest share of children killed during

<sup>81</sup> J. French & B. Raven, ‘The bases of social power’, in *Studies In Social Power*, J. French, B. Raven & D. Cartwright (eds.), University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1959.

<sup>82</sup> P. Pearson, *When She Was Bad: How and Why Women Get Away With Murder*, Penguin Books, New York, 1998.

<sup>83</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, ‘*Sex Offenses and Offenders: An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault*’, U. S. Dept of Justice, Washington, DC, 1997.

<sup>84</sup> S. Friedman & P. Resnick, ‘Child murder by mothers: patterns and prevention’, *World Psychiatry*6(3), 2007, pp 134-141.

<sup>85</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, ‘*Murder In Families*’, U. S. Dept of Justice, Washington, DC, 1994.

<sup>86</sup> M. Straus, R. Gelles & S. Steinmetz, *Behind Closed Doors, Violence In The American Family*, Transaction Publishers, Edison, NJ, 2006.

infancy in the United States<sup>87</sup>. The rate at which infants are murdered by women in the U.S. is higher than the rate at which women are murdered by men. The issue of violence by women isn't a problem only for the US; with Pauline Nyiramasuhuko's reportedly ordering of the rape and slaughter of women during the Rwanda genocide in the 1990's<sup>88</sup>, the Agibu village women of Papua New Guinea smothering all male infants born in the last 10 years as a way of allegedly preventing inter-tribal war<sup>89</sup>, and the "Woman Without A Face" serial murderer stalking throughout Europe for the last 15 years<sup>90</sup>, violence by women is clearly a problem internationally.

Just as we once believed women were not physically aggressive, we also thought women were not capable of being sexually aggressive. In her 1979 book *Against Our Will*,<sup>91</sup> Brownmiller, viewing violence as a self explanatory first cause claimed that "sexual assault is nothing more than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a constant state of fear"; in other words, sexual assault was what men do to women. An Indian court recently overturned a lesser court's prosecution of a woman for her involvement in a gang rape, saying that "As a woman cannot commit "rape", she cannot certainly be convicted of commission of "gang rape".<sup>92</sup> Yet after Struckman-Johnson's 1988 study that showed 16% of the college men she interviewed had been the victim of

<sup>87</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *'Murder In Families'*, U. S. Dept of Justice, Washington, DC, 1994.

<sup>88</sup> D. Harman, 'A woman on trial for Rwanda's massacre', *The Christian Science Monitor*, last updated 3/7/03, viewed 4/3/09, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0307/p09s01-woaf.html>.

<sup>89</sup> R. Shears, 'The two villages where mothers killed EVERY baby born a boy for ten years', *Mail Online*, last updated 11/28/08, retrieved 4/3/09. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1090131/The-villages-mothers-killed-EVERY-baby-born-boy-years.html>.

<sup>90</sup> N. Temko, 'Germany's hunt for the murderer known as 'the woman without a face'', *Guardian.co.uk*, last updated 11/9.08, retrieved 4/3/09. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/nov/09/germany-serial-killer>.

<sup>91</sup> S. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1971.

<sup>92</sup> The Times of India, *Woman can't be prosecuted for gang rape: SC*, last updated 7/13/06, viewed 4/3/09, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1748238.cms>.

forced sex<sup>93</sup>, and Muehlenhard and Cook's 1988 study that basically replicated this,<sup>94</sup> society began to admit that women could be sexually aggressive. These statistics, however, don't seem to make their way into the media and what the press doesn't say can have just as powerful an impact on public perceptions as what it does say. Male perpetrated sex crimes are daily occurrences in all major newspapers; female perpetrated sex crimes are rarely reported and when they do make the press, have a prurient style to them.

What society perceives about violence has less to do with a fixed reality than the lens we are given through which to see. How do we come to perceive what women do? Wight and Myers said that "When a woman commits an act of criminal violence, her sex is the lens through which all her actions are seen and understood".<sup>95</sup> The sole explanation regarding violence by women is that it is involuntary, a rare result of provocation or mental illness, "as if half the population of the globe consists of saintly stoics who never succumbed to fury, frustration or greed".<sup>96</sup> If a woman was involved in the perpetration of violence, the media focused on "what made her do it," not on the damage she did. Social science researchers tend to be as guilty of this as the mass media. This is partly due to the fact that researchers must focus on gender differences rather than similarities because they can't publish studies that don't show gender differences.<sup>97 98</sup> This further increases our perception that women and men are opposites rather than focusing on variations within the gender or within the species.

## 8. Myths of Womanhood

If we can admit that men and women both kill, that men and women both rape, why are we unable to admit that women sexually molest children, just as men

<sup>93</sup> C. Struckman-Johnson, 'Forced sex on dates; It happens to men too', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 24, 1998, pp 234-241.

<sup>94</sup> D. Muehlenhard & S. Cook, 'Men's self-reports of unwanted sexual activity', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 24, 1988, pp 58-72.

<sup>95</sup> S. Wight & A. Myers, 'Introduction', *No Angels, Women Who Commit Violence*, S. Wight & A. Myers (Eds.), Pandora Press, San Francisco, CA, 1996, pp xi-xvi.

<sup>96</sup> P. Pearson, *When She Was Bad: How and Why Women Get Away With Murder*, Penguin Books, New York, 1998.

<sup>97</sup> K. Deaux & B. Major, 'A social-psychological model of gender', *The Gendered Society Reader*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.

<sup>98</sup> R. Hare-Mustin & J. Marecek, 'On making a difference', in *On Making a Difference*, R. Hare-Mustin & J. Marecek (eds.), Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1992, pp 1-22.

do? Because admitting this would mean that we would have to give up several beloved myths that are important to our culture, myths that describe what women must be and what they must not be, myths such as Bad things are caused by “Strangers Out There” (rather than by family, here at home), “Mothers are non-sexual (unlike Fathers)” and “Women protect children (unlike Men)”.

Because men and women are considered to be opposites, the myths we make about women are in reaction to those we have about men; women are the Other, the Anti-Man. Men are viewed as active agents who can make choices on how to act. Women, as men’s opposite, are viewed as being without agency. Since society admits that men can be Evil and are dangerous to children, then we need women to be Not-Evil, to be “safe”, especially around children. When we do admit that women molest children, we view it as less damaging, since women, being men’s opposite, can’t be dangerous.

Part of this mythos is due to current western culture’s sexual scripts. In traditional sexual scripts, men are perceived to be highly sexually aggressive, and once a man's sexual response has been set in motion, he is thought to have difficulty controlling it.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, women are expected to influence men not to have sex, to be the sexual gate keepers.<sup>100</sup> Sexual scripts also exclude the images of women as Sexual aggressors due to lack of sexual desire.<sup>101</sup> Sexual aggression seems to make a man more masculine but makes a woman less feminine in the current sexual scripts.

How did we come to be in this position of requiring women to be the non-sexual, non-aggressive, Non-Evil caregivers of children? Cultures have grappled with the concepts of women as “Other” intermittently, switching back and forth on extremes over the centuries. The result has been a dual construction of women; all bad or all good, Villain or Victim, without consistent recognition of the gray area in which most women live. Women were viewed as sexually good during the Sumerian and Babylonian times when they were temple whores working in the service of a bountiful harvest. Women were viewed as sexually bad and to be guarded against, in the eyes of early Church fathers such as Tertullian, Origen,

<sup>99</sup> S. Jackson, ‘Social Context of Rape; Sexual Scripts and Motivation’, *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, Vol 1(1), 1978, pp 22-78.

<sup>100</sup> R. Clark & E. Hatfield, ‘Gender Differences in Receptivity to Sexual Offers’, *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, vol 1 (2), 1989, pp 39-55.

<sup>101</sup> E. Byers & L. O’Sullivan, ‘Similar but different: Men's and women's experiences of sexual coercion’, *Sexually Aggressive Women*, P. Anderson & C. Struckman-Johnson, (eds.), The Guilford Press, New York, 1998, pp 144-169.

Ambrose and Augustine. Women were aggressive and violent, as seen in myths about the Amazons. Women were the guardians of the Cult of Domesticity, after the advent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Industrial Revolution. In Ancient Greece, Aristotle considered women to be overly passionate. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic church fostered a cult of Virginité, but women's seductive influence was feared. By Victorian times, the view had flipped again and women, previously considered sexually voracious and morally weak, had become viewed as virtuous and asexual.<sup>102</sup> So severe was this belief in women's asexuality that Victorian Physician W. Acton wrote "the majority of women are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind".<sup>103</sup>

These repeated cultural reversals bring us to the current status of women; Equal but somehow Better, sexually non-aggressive, despite grudging recognition that women can be physically aggressive and even murderous. While views of women's sexuality have fluctuated over the centuries, one myth about women appears static; the Maternal Instinct. We maintain the myth that women are inherently loving towards children by virtue of the fact that we carried them in our wombs, which also appears to make children into mere extensions of women. Women are defined by their relationship with motherhood (mother, maiden, matron, old maid) and are presumed to have a special, desexualized relationship with children.<sup>104</sup> Estella Wheldon says that "Women can't have perversions because they can have babies. It is extremely difficult to differentiate femininity from the function of motherhood".<sup>105</sup>

As a society, we view sexual behaviour by women through a romantic or maternal lens and seen as motivated by intimacy. The same acts by a man would be viewed as aggressive and motivated by power and control. In reality, it isn't a question of whether female child molesters are less dangerous than male child molesters. It's a question of how society is making molestation possible by viewing gender, sex and childhood in specific ways. Society needs to be able to talk about child molesters, not female child molesters; this divides child molesters into two groups, child molesters and women who would be labeled child molesters except

<sup>102</sup> S. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, Penguin Books, 1994.

<sup>103</sup> W. Acton, *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations*, P. Blakiston & Son, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1888.

<sup>104</sup> J. Turnton, *Child Abuse, Gender and Society*, Routledge, New York, 2007.

<sup>105</sup> E. Welddon, *Mother, Madonna, Whore; The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*, Karnac, London, 1988.

for their gender. “Ultimately, it is important to view women as multidimensional human beings rather than monsters or saints”.<sup>106</sup>

However, the image of the sexually abusive woman is so frightening that it is buried deeply in our psyches and splintered into pieces. Even folk or fairy tales, which appear rife with symbols of male sexual aggression, keep the idea of female sexual aggression hidden in plain site. For example, when Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother suggests that the child undress and join the old woman in bed, we are told that it is a wolf in Granny’s nightgown,<sup>107</sup> because real grandmothers couldn’t be dangerous to naked little girls. Goldilocks declares that she wishes to sleep in a child’s bed rather than either the Father or Mother “bear’s” beds. Evil step-mothers, perhaps symbolizing the lack of the incest prohibition, populate many fairy tales, leaving one to ask why so many children felt them to be evil.

## 9. Conclusion

Because it is so threatening to society to view women, especially mothers, as sexually dangerous to children, we split our conceptions of women in half, resulting in views of women as either Womanly/Good or Other/Bad. This polarized view, like all dichotomies of groups, is oversimplified and misleading. If a woman steps outside the prescribed sexual scripts, society translates her behaviour into less threatening terms. She must be mentally ill or a man made her do it, or it wasn’t really sexual abuse. It’s a way of maintaining the boundaries of “womanhood”. Although we would view resistance to viewing women as capable of engaging in the traditionally male fields of Medicine, Politics or Academics as sexist and archaic, we still resist viewing women as capable of engaging in this particular activity.

Sexual abuse of children is a disturbing topic and female sexual abusers appear to be highly disturbing given current cultural myths about women. We want to believe the Stranger Danger myth, that the heterosexual two parent family can somehow protect children from the boogey man. We don’t want to know that most sexual abuse of children is done by the child’s own relatives and some times that relative is the child’s own mother. However, we can’t end a problem if we don’t look at it clearly. If every act of female sexual aggression must be explained first and foremost by looking at gender, then adequate solutions will never be possible. We need to create a cultural change in order to view women’s sexual violence for what

<sup>106</sup> H. Ford, *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 2006.

<sup>107</sup> C. Orenstein, *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*, Basic Books, Jackson, Tennessee, 2003.

it is. We need to view women as people, not just mythical mothers but as full persons with the agency to exhibit a vast variety of behaviors. And some of those behaviors are monstrous.

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