

Child Sexual Abuse by Women

Michele Elliott

In 1968 I was presented with my first case of child sexual abuse. Nothing in my training to become a child psychologist had prepared me for this. Nothing personally had prepared me for this. An 11-year-old girl told me she was being sexually abused by her stepfather, who was my bank manager. The only study which had been mentioned in my university courses was one compiled in 1955 by Weinberg¹ indicating that there might be as many as 'one case of incest per million of the population among English-speaking peoples'. So my initial reactions were that I knew the stepfather (and bank managers couldn't do such things), and why was the one in a million walking into my office? Over the years we were all to learn that child sexual abuse is a much greater problem than anyone had imagined. Susan Brownmiller, Florence Rush, Alice Miller, Eileen Bass, Sandra Butler, Judith Herman, Suzanne Sgroi² and countless others wrote about the problem and women started coming forward to talk about the abuse they had suffered at the hands of men. The statistics indicated that the overwhelming majority of victims of sexual abuse were girls sexually abused by their fathers.

We accepted that because we could

only go on what people told us. The books and articles concentrated on female victims, and male abusers. Then adult men started talking about the abuse they had suffered as children — again from men. Statistics projected a boy to girl ratio of victims variously as 1:6, 1:9 and 1:12. However, Eugene Porter, Flora Colao and Mindy Mitnick, on the basis of their work, concluded that the ratio of girl to boy victims was much closer. They indicated that perhaps 40% to 50% of victims of sexual abuse were boys. It seemed that boys were equally or almost equally at risk from sexual abuse by men. Indeed, in a survey carried out by Mrazek, Lynch and Bentovim in the United Kingdom it was found that 98% of the reported abusers were male.³

There has always been another possibility — and one which causes enormous controversy and distress: women who sexually abuse. It is thought that even raising the possibility of women abusing would detract from the much larger and more pervasive problem of male abuse of children. However, the fact that there are women who sexually abuse children should not be used to diminish the scale of the problem of men who sexually abuse children. What it does mean is that

Michele Elliott is a child psychologist and the Director of the children's charity Kidscape. She is the author of numerous books and is the elderly demented mother of two sons.

perhaps the accepted knowledge about child sexual abuse needs to be re-examined.

Perhaps we should at least give the victims of female sexual abuse permission to talk. I mentioned this on a radio phone-in programme, when discussing sexual abuse. Suddenly, the calls started coming through: 'Finally someone is willing to open up the subject of female sex abusers and really listen to us. This is fabulous — a day I thought I would never see. I am a 58-year-old man who was sexually abused from the age of 4 to 12 by my aunt . . .'

A woman said: 'My mind knows it wasn't my fault — that it was her dirt, her filth, but it's also mine. I grew with it as part of my body, dressed with it, ate with it, cried with it, slept with it. I can't seem to separate myself from her. Yet I felt and feel utterly, utterly alone and evil to the core. Knowing how she used me hurts beyond all physical pain. It means the end of the hope that I was really loved by my mother . . .'

A man in his fifties disagreed that it was abuse: 'Looking back it seemed no great drama. Even though I was only seven years old, I knew how to fondle her and suck her breasts. Oral sex led to full intercourse which my mother and I engaged in until I left home, aged 23 . . .'

We had more calls than we could deal with and by the time I got back to the Kidscape office, it was apparent that this was an issue which would not go away. The letters started arriving the next day: 'During the war, my brother and I were evacuated to a house in the country. The woman who took care of us made us touch her. She had friends over and we

had to engage in all kinds of kinky sex. We were terrified . . .' 'Rubbish — women don't sexually abuse children. It must have been the children misunderstanding motherly love . . .' 'My teenage baby-sitter began sexually abusing me when I was six. It went on for about four years. I actually thought that baby-sitters did that to all the kids until we got another baby-sitter. When I tried to get her to have oral sex, she told my mother and I got into trouble. Believe me, I kept it all a secret until now. It was bad enough being abused, though some of it I liked. What was worse than the abuse was being in trouble for something I didn't even understand and certainly could not control. To this day I hate all forms of physical contact and the thought of sex makes me physically ill.'

The letters and calls went on and on — from men and women who were sexually abused by their mothers, relatives, baby-sitters and other carers. Most had never told or had not been believed. Many had been unable to find anyone willing to talk or listen. One 60-year-old man said: 'I tried to tell my therapist when I was 35. She told me that I was having fantasies about my mother and that I needed more therapy to deal with it. In reality my mother had physically and sexually abused me for as long as I could remember. The abuse was horrific, including beatings and sado-masochistic sex. It took a lot of courage for me to tell. When she (the therapist) didn't respond, I quit therapy and spent the next 15 years in hell. I began to think that maybe I had just imagined it all, but why were the memories so vivid and in such detail? Just hearing that this has happened to others

has helped to restore my sanity. Maybe now I can find someone who will listen and believe me. Sixty years is a long time to wait.'

Why has it taken so long to bring out the problem of female sexual abuse?

- Female sexual abuse seems to be more of a taboo because female sexual abuse is more threatening — it undermines feelings about how women should relate to children.
- It has taken years for people to accept that children are sexually abused, but that sexual abuse has been placed in the context of male power and aggression. Women are not supposed to be sexually aggressive and the male power theory eliminates them as possible abusers, unless they are coerced by males. However the stories of many of the survivors show that male coercion was not present in significant numbers of cases.
- People find it difficult to understand exactly how a woman could sexually abuse a child. They are not seen to be capable of this kind of abuse because they do not have penises.
- When adult survivors of female abuse have told their stories, they have often met with the rebuttal that they are fantasising. A child recently told that her mother had sexually abused her, along with the child's father. The therapeutic team took the view that she was clearly projecting and fantasising. The abuse by the father was never in doubt.
- Current statistics indicate that sexual

abuse of children by females is rare. David Finkelhor and Diana Russell in *Child Sexual Abuse*⁴ estimate that 5% of abuse of girls and 20% of abuse of boys is perpetrated by women.⁵ Previous statistics indicated that child sexual abuse was rare, even by males. That has since been shown to be untrue. Statistics are based upon what we are told and may give a false picture if some victims are not telling.

After the Kidscape First National Conference on Female Sexual Abuse, the television programme *This Morning* opened up a hotline for callers to talk about abuse by women. In the course of one day, they had over 1000 telephone calls; 90% of the callers had never told anyone about their abuse before that programme. There is much to say on this subject and a new book was published on June 1, which is sure to spark a heated debate: It is entitled *Female Sexual Abuse of Children: the Ultimate Taboo*, and is a collection of pieces edited by myself. It is possible that books like this and the excellent *When You're Ready* by Kathy Evert,⁵ will unleash a flood of stories and change our perception of the role of women in child sexual abuse, or we may confirm that abuse by women is rare. Whichever happens, the secret carried for so long by so many has a right to be aired. As one man said, 'It feels so good not to be the only one — I thought what happened to me was unique. Just knowing there are others has given me hope'. In 1968 I thought the little girl was one in a million. Let's not make the same mistake again.

1. K. Weinberg, *Incest Behaviour*, Citadel, 1955

2. Suzanne Sgroi, *Handbook of Clinical Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse*, Lexington Books, 1982
3. Patricia Beezley Mrazek, Margaret Lynch and Arnon Bentovim, 'Recognition of Child Sexual Abuse in the United Kingdom' in Patricia Beezley Mrazek and C. Henry Kempe, *Sexually Abused Children and their Families*, Pergamon Press, 1981
4. David Finkelhor and Diana Russell, 'Women as Perpetrators' in David Finkelhor, *Child Sexual Abuse, New Theory and Research*, Free Press, 1984
5. Kathy Evert and Inie Bijkerk, *When You're Ready: A Woman's Healing from Childhood Physical and Sexual Abuse by her Mother*, Launch Press, 1987

Further reading

- Ellen Bass and Louise Thornton (eds) *I Never Told Anyone: Writings by Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, Harper, Colophon Books, 1983
- Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, Penguin Books, 1975
- Sandra Butler, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest*, Bantam Books, 1979
- Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, Harvard University Press, 1981
- Fay Honey Knopp in Eugene Porter, *Treating the Young Male Victim of Sexual Assault*, Safer Society Press, 1986
- Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware, Society's Betrayal of the Child*, Pluto, 1985
- Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children*, Prentice-Hall, 1980

Mother-Touch

Roxanne Clark

Attempting to rest from the Northern Indian heat last summer I chanced to glance through the lattice of my hotel window, and what I saw held me entranced. A young woman, squatting in the speckled shade of her courtyard, was massaging and exercising her infant son, who gurgled with pleasure as his mother swiftly and gently massaged oil into his chest and belly. As she rhythmically and



Roxanne Clark is a massage practitioner, trainer, and writer now living and working in North London. Born in Australia, she has travelled widely and explored the different traditions of touching in various cultures. She has done further training in counselling and is interested in the link between individual growth, community, social change and the environment.