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Perspectives on female sexual offending in an Irish context

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Abstract
The issue of child sexual abuse perpetrated by women has received little recognition by researchers and when the subject is addressed it is often dismissed as being a rare event. It is only in the last decade that greater interest has been shown in the area of female-perpetrated sexual abuse of children. This is due to the dramatic increase of research into all types of sexual offending and the decrease in the taboo surrounding victimisation. Current literature in the area has largely looked at the development of typologies and establishing prevalence rates. More recently research has focused on 'barriers' to recognising this type of abuse. The purpose of this paper is to identify Irish perspectives on female sexual abusers and how this relates to the current literature. A questionnaire was distributed to health care professionals and volunteer workers in children's charities. The results indicate that there is confusion about how to manage female sexual abusers and this is similar to other research findings in the area.

Key Words: Female Sex Offenders, Child Sexual Abuse

Introduction

Many commentators have argued that sexual contact between women and children is relatively low when compared with male contacts and this is not disputed (Finkelhor & Russell, 1984; Davin, Hislop & Dunbar, 1999; Bunting, 2005). However this does not suggest that there should be unwillingness to research and understand the issues involved in the area of female perpetrated child sexual abuse (Denov, 2004).

According to a recent report by Bunting (2005, p. 4), there is "evidence of a wide variety of sexual offences known to have been committed by females … these range from voyeurism & inappropriate touching to rape, penetration with objects and ritualistic, sadistic sexual abuse". The purpose of this paper is to establish attitudes and knowledge of female child sexual abuse in Ireland. This was achieved by distributing a questionnaire to social workers, psychologists and counselors investigating perceptions of characteristics of offenders, typologies, prevalence rates and current policies and procedures.

Current literature is focused on two main areas: the development of a typology and investigations of the prevalence of female perpetrated child sexual abuse. One of the most influential researchers in this area has been Matthews as she created one of the first typologies of female sexual offenders and developed a treatment program for female sexual offenders in Minneapolis (Matthews, Matthews & Speltz, 1991). The typology contains three categories. The Teacher/Lover generally becomes involved with prepubescent and adolescent females and views herself as a peer. She is likely to have a recent history of abusive, unfulfilled or failed peer relationships. The Predisposed offender has usually been the victim of severe emotional, physical or sexual abuse as a child. The Male-Coerced adult female acts initially with a male who has previously abused children. She exhibits a pattern of extreme dependency and non-assertive behaviour. A number of other similar typologies have been proposed (for example, Saradjian, 1996; Green & Kaplan, 1994; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004).

Research has also attempted to establish the prevalence of female child sexual offending. In a study of child sex abuse victims, Finkelhor & Russell (1984) stated that female offenders accounted for five per cent of the sexual abuse perpetrated against females and 20% of the abuse against males. Cavanagh Johnson (1989) investigated children who molest other children and found that females committed 21.6% of the abuse. Davis & Leitenberg (1997) state that females perpetrate less than five per cent of sexual abuse while Johnson & Shrier (1987) report that the figure is less than two per cent. Data has also been collected in Irish settings; the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (2005) reported that 3.8 per cent of their clients had reported abuse by either their mother or another female relative. The Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) Report noted that seven per cent of the child abuse in their sample had been perpetrated by a lone female and a further four per cent by a female co-perpetrating with a male (McGee et al., 2002).

However, the prison based research should be viewed with caution as a number of limitations exist. Much of the data collected was from convicted offenders, (for example Faller, 1995; Green & Kaplan, 1994) thus results may have been affected by their parole status, as those hoping for release may minimise their behaviours. In addition, issues such as substance abuse and low levels of education) brings these women to the attention of the authorities and thus they may not be representative of all female sexual abusers. The sample size of female child sexual abusers is small as only a small number of women are convicted. There is a minimization of responsibility in typologies and theories as the abuse perpetrated by women is attributed to their personal problems. A lack of research into deviant arousal patterns and sexual interest in women is of major concern and is required in order to develop our understanding of the area. A common feature of the male sex offender literature is the focus on the link between deviant sexual interest and sexual offending, especially with reference to the management of relapse prevention. However, deviant arousal in women is rarely discussed. A study by Lambert and O'Halloran (2008) of an online forum for women who are sexually attracted to children revealed that women expressed a sexual interest in children

and reported experiencing deviant arousal patterns. In addition, a number of researchers argue that a range of 'recognition barriers' exist which prevent the detection of female sexual abusers such as a perception that women cannot commit sexual abuse (Denov, 2001; Mendel, 1995; Krug, 1989). These will be discussed in more detail below.

In recent years a number of studies have looked at attitudes of professionals towards female child sexual offenders and these studies have reported that a gender bias exists. For example, Hetherton and Beardsall (1988) conducted a study in the UK to investigate if the gender of the perpetrator made a difference to child protection professionals. Their results indicated the following five main points. Firstly, professionals viewed abuse by women as less serious. Offending behaviours were classed as inappropriate as opposed to criminal. Imprisonment was considered more appropriate for males than females. Registration of the case as sexual abuse was also considered more appropriate with males than females. Finally, social services involvement was deemed to be more appropriate in cases where the abuser is male rather than female. They argue that attribution processes operate to bring women's deviant behaviour into congruence with traditional sex role expectations, that is, 'the woman as nurturer'. This implies that recognition of female perpetrated sexual abuse is impeded by idealised beliefs about women, which dictate that females, and particularly mothers, are incapable of sexually abusing children. Hetherton (1999, p.161) argued that the "idealisation of women has a role in the minimisation of child sexual abuse by females". She proposes several common beliefs that allow this to occur: child sexual abuse is a problem perpetrated by men, sexual behaviour by women towards children is subtle not serious, these women must be 'mad' or not in control of their behaviours. More recently, Denov (2001) examined professional perspectives on female sexual offending and argued that efforts are made either consciously or unconsciously to realign the offender and her offences with more culturally acceptable notions of female behaviour.

In recent years the research surrounding female child sexual offenders has expanded to include a focus on the victims of these offenders. There are a number of areas of interest to those involved in researching victims of female perpetrated child sexual abuse. The gender and age of the victims and their relationship to the offender have been investigated (Denov, 2004; Rosencran, 1997). In addition, researchers have also looked at the impact on victims and their disclosure to professionals (Denov, 2004; Elliott, 1997). A number of reviews and research studies have concluded that girls are more likely to be the victims of sexual abuse irrespective of the perpetrator's gender (Grayston & De Luca, 1999; Faller, 1987). Rudin, Zalewski and Bodmer-Turner's (1995) comparative study of male and female sex offenders revealed that 62% of the female perpetrators' victims were female. Faller's (1987) study of a clinical sample of women who had sexually abused revealed that over sixty four per cent of the victims were female. However, Faller's (1995) study of an equivalent sample showed that 50% of her sample had abused both male and female children, 40% had abused females only and 10% had abused males only. With regard to age, it has been reported that the victims

of female abusers tend to be younger than those of males and that the abuse tends to last for a longer period of time (Saradjian, 1996; Faller, 1987). Faller (1987) concluded that the average age of a female offender's victim was 6.4 years while for a male offender the average victim age was eight years. In a study of victim's perspectives, Denov (2004) reported that the average age of the onset of abuse by females was five years with ages ranging from three to 16. The average duration of the abuse was a period of seven years ranging from three to eleven years. One of the consistent findings in this area is that females are more likely than males to commit intrafamilial abuse. Allen's (1991) comparative study of male and female offenders found that 70% of the female's victims were immediate family members or close relatives in comparison to 59% of the male offender's victims. This finding has been replicated by many other researchers and it is postulated that this offender victim relationship makes recognition and disclosure much more difficult than for those abused outside of the family setting (Saradjian, 1996; Denov, 2004; Elliott, 1997).

The emotional and psychological impact on the victims of female abusers has also been investigated as has victims' experiences of disclosure to professionals. Victims of female perpetrated abuse display similar symptoms to victims of male abuse such as emotional and behavioural difficulties, low self esteem, anger, self harm and substance abuse problems (Hislop, 2001). However, the literature has also reported that some differences exist between the victims of male and female abusers such as increased stigma and isolation as a result of the taboo surrounding female abusers (Bunting, 2005). Denov (2004) reported that victims had difficulty perceiving the behaviour as abuse as it was often accompanied by great affection and nurturing. Hislop (2001) conducted a review of the literature and concluded that victims of female abusers have greater difficulty disclosing because of the silence that surrounds this type of abuse.

As stated previously, a number of studies have explored the attitudes of professionals toward female sexual abusers and their victims (Elliot, 1997; Denov, 2004). Denov (2004) specifically investigated victims' experiences of disclosing female perpetrated abuse to professionals and the subsequent impact of those disclosures. Less than half of the victims interviewed had experienced a positive response from the professionals to whom they disclosed. The participants reported the following negative responses: resistance to discussing the abuse, being uncomfortable with the disclosure, expressions of shock, minimisation and disbelief (Denov, 2004). Those victims who received a positive response from the professionals felt reassured and stated that this helped with the healing process. However, for some, the lack of support led them to question and deny the abuse.

Elliott (1997) suggests the rejection felt by survivors of female perpetrated sexual abuse is a result of the unwillingness of child protection services and the therapeutic community to ask questions related to this issue. In Elliott's experience with victims they often report that they are met with disbelief when they disclose the gender of the perpetrator to be female. Victims

can also have sex role expectations, they may see the woman as a caretaker, and thus when abuse does occur it leads to confusion. Consequently these victims often feel even more isolated than those that have been abused by males. This has been supported by many other researchers and it is postulated that the offender victim relationship (characterised by earlier onset, longer duration and more likely than male to be interfamilial) makes recognition and disclosure much more difficult (Saradjian, 1996; Denov, 2004; Elliott, 1997). Hislop (2001) conducted a review of the literature and concluded that victims of female abusers have greater difficulty disclosing because of the silence that surrounds this type of abuse. Bunting (2005) also reported that victims experienced increased stigma and isolation as a result of the taboo surrounding female abusers.

Research on victim issues in this area has identified that there are similarities and differences between the victims of male and female sex offenders. The primary difference is the increased sense of isolation and the reactions of professionals to disclosures. This was also noted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Bunting, 2005) who commissioned a report on the responses of the UK child protection and criminal justice systems to female sexual offenders. Consequently, they recommended that services should routinely ask whether the offender was male or female in order to demonstrate an acceptance of female perpetrated abuse. It has been noted that professionals are viewed as authoritative and knowledgeable in the eyes of victims and a negative response can contribute to the hurt experienced by the victim, therefore professionals need training specifically related to female sexual offending (Bunting, 2005; Denov, 2004).

The overall conclusions of the NSPCC report (Bunting, 2005) prompted the following recommendations. Statistics need to be refined as the gender of the perpetrator is not always recorded. A need for a specific policy to deal with female abusers was identified. A special interest group on female abusers needs to be developed. Training on female abusers for all appropriate individuals is required; this includes training on the attitudes of professionals and training of voluntary services. Finally, the similarities between female and male offenders should be acknowledged. With this in mind it was considered appropriate to examine the Irish context and Irish perspectives of female perpetrated child sexual abuse.

Method

Participants

Three hundred questionnaires were distributed to social workers, counsellors and psychologists working in private, public and voluntary organisations. Eighty six participants (29 per cent) responded. Nineteen counties were represented in the sample, and the male to female ratio was 1:3.

Materials

A questionnaire was designed to elicit information on a number of aspects of attitudes and knowledge about female child abusers. The first section of the questionnaire looked at respondent details (e.g. gender, profession) in order to get a representation of the types of services being provided to both offenders and victims and which services were more likely to be in contact with offenders and their victims. The next two sections asked questions about the characteristics of the victims and the characteristics of sexually abusive females. The final section looked at current policies and procedures in relation to female sexual offending and encouraged respondents to record their views or concerns (additional comments) about the area.

The questionnaire was coded and data was entered into SPSS V12. The questionnaire was anonymous and thus confidentiality was assured. The research design was informed by the Psychological Society of Ireland's Code of Professional Ethics and was approved by University College Cork's Applied Psychology Department's Ethics Committee.

Procedure

A review of the literature illustrated a number of gaps in the knowledge relating to female offenders. As a result a questionnaire was constructed to ascertain Irish perspectives of female sexual abusers and/or their victims. Eighty six questionnaires were completed and returned. It was hoped that the sample would incorporate all of the 26 counties in Ireland. Northern Ireland was excluded as the area had been encompassed in a study of female sexual abusers by the NSPCC in the United Kingdom (Bunting, 2005).

The list of Child Protection Social Work Teams for each county was retrieved from the Irish government's information website[1]. This website also provided contact details for the Senior Psychologist in each area and a copy of the questionnaire was posted to each of these psychologists. The National Counselling Service is a Health Service Executive service providing counselling to adults who have experienced sexual abuse and counsellors working in this service were also contacted. The register for The Irish Council for Psychotherapy[2] and The Psychological Society of Ireland[3] (PSI) was also accessed and questionnaires were forwarded via post and email to all registered as counselling and/or clinical psychologists, and those in the PSI who work in the area of child protection.

In addition, a number of head offices for non-governmental agencies were contacted by telephone and permission was sought to distribute the questionnaire to regional branches. These included Barnardos, the Irish Society of Protection of Children (ISPCC), Children at Risk in Ireland (CARI), The National Rape Crisis Network and the One in Four organisation.

[1] http://www.oasis.gov.ie/health/health_services_in_ireland/health_boards.html
[2] http://www.psychotherapy-ireland.com/index.cfm/loc/3/pt/16.htm
[3] http://www.psihq.ie/find_psychologist.asp

The questionnaire was constructed in order to act as a starting point in a wider study of the area. It was hoped that it would identify the current experience of female perpetrated child abuse in Ireland and the results could be compared with findings in female offender literature.

Results

The questionnaire examined five main areas; respondent details, prevalence rates, characteristics of the victims and the characteristics of sexually abusive females, and current policies and procedures in relation to female sexual offending.

Respondent Details

Nineteen counties from a possible twenty six were represented in the sample. The breakdown by profession was as follows; counsellors or therapists (23%), psychologists (38%), and social workers (33%). The respondents identified themselves as employed in a state organisation (76%) and the reminder classified themselves as working in 'private and other', ('other' was documented as voluntary organisations).

Prevalence Rates

Participants were asked to record if they had contact with female sexual abusers and/or their victims. Sixty per cent of those surveyed had contact with the victims of female sexual abuse while forty four per cent had contact with female perpetrators of sexual abuse. The mean number of victims that workers had encountered in this study was 14 while the average number of offenders encountered was one.

Characteristics of Offenders and Victims

This section of the questionnaire sought to gain information on a number of aspects; the gender of victims, relationship of offender to victim, typologies of the offenders, types of abusive behaviours reported and characteristics of offenders.

Victim Gender: Respondents reported that males constituted 49% of the victims while 48% were female victims.

Relationship of the Offender to the Victim: Respondents were asked how they would best describe the relationship an offender had with her victim from a list provided; parent, grandparent, aunt, sibling, teacher, babysitter, neighbour, stranger and other. In the case of 'other', participants were asked to specify. Five participants stated nuns, two listed cousins, a foster sibling, a step-parent, a friend of a parent, daughter of a babysitter and one participant ticked 'other' but did not specify. In total 64 offenders were described.

Figure 1: Relationship of the offender to the victim

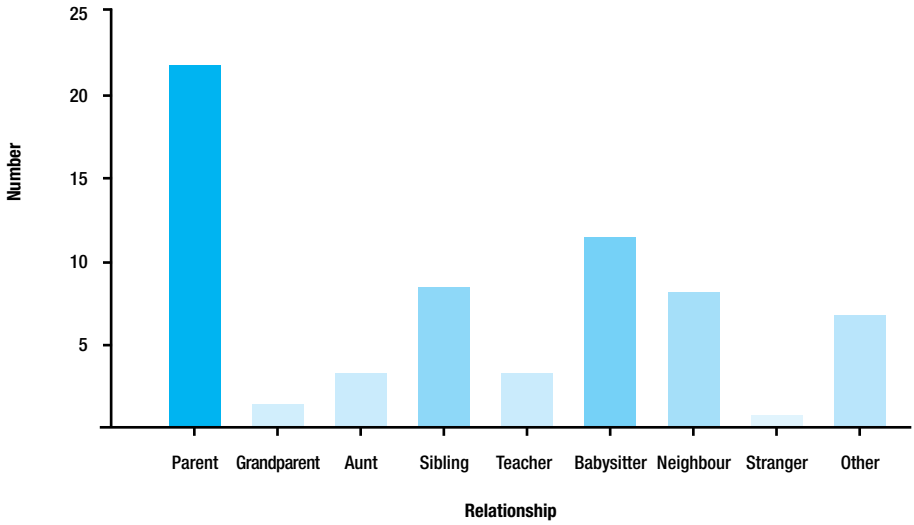


Figure 1 illustrates the extent to which each category was represented. The largest of these is parent followed by babysitter, sibling, neighbour and other.

Typologies of Offenders: a large portion of the literature on female sexual abusers has been focused on the development of typologies. In this study the respondents were presented with a list of words that have been used as categories in typologies and asked to indicate which of these best represented their experiences of women who sexually abuse children. The list was as follows; teacher/lover, male coerced, predisposed, psychologically impaired, experimenter, maternal molestation, sexually deviant and other (please specify). The categories were not clearly defined as the researcher sought to ascertain the respondent's perceptions of each category and what labels they would gravitate to. The results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Typologies of female sexual abusers

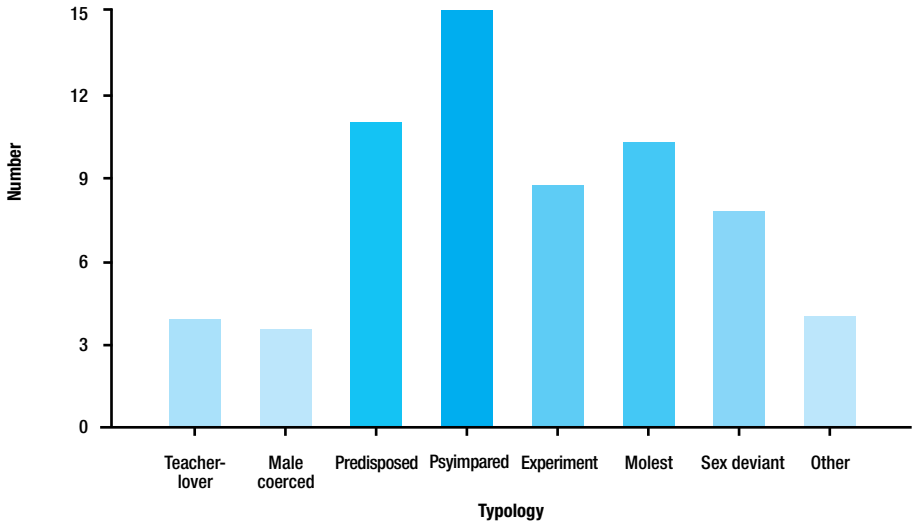
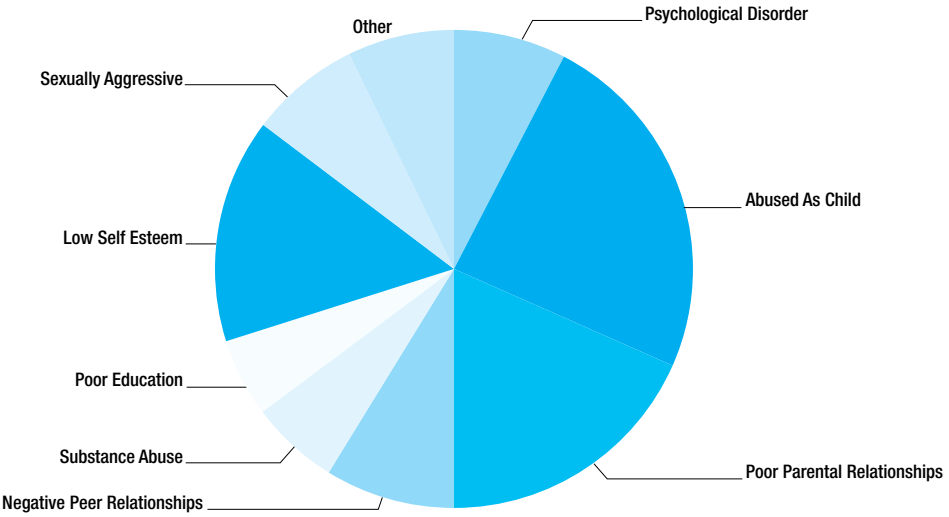


Figure 2 indicates that the female abusers were most likely to be categorised as psychologically impaired. This is a difficult category to decipher as one would need to know if respondents were talking about specific psychological disorders (for example, depression, personality disorders) or if they were alluding to something more general like poor problem solving skills. The next highest category is that of 'predisposed' as a result of the offender being the victim of abuse in her past. It has been argued by many that it is problematic to use this as a typology. The majority of those who are the victims of sexual abuse do not go on to become abusers. A study of the survivors of female sexual abuse reported that less than 15 per cent went on to commit sexual abuse and the majority of this occurred while they themselves were still children (Rosencrans, 1997). Thus, a typology that considers prior victimisation as a causal factor for offending behaviour should be viewed with caution. The third highest category was that of maternal molestation.

Types of abusive behaviours reported: There has been a tendency to view women who sexually abuse children as less dangerous than their male counterparts. The behaviours are sometimes classed as 'over-mothering' rather than sexually abusive. This section of the questionnaire sought to identify what types of abusive behaviours had been reported to the professionals. A list of options were provided and respondents were asked to tick those that applied. Again, a section for 'other (please specify)' was included.

All of the behaviours listed were recorded as having being reported, these include; kissing/ fondling, oral sex, sexual violence, genital stimulation, sexual intercourse and group sex. In terms of the 'other' option the following were listed: encouraging child to watch pornography or adults having sex, penetration with objects.
Commonly reported characteristics of female offenders from the research literature were presented and respondents were asked to tick all those that applied to the female child sex offenders they had encountered in their work.

Figure 3: Characteristics of female abusers



As we can see from Figure 3 the characteristics that are commonly associated with male sex offenders, such as low esteem and negative relationships, are the most represented for the female sexual abusers in this sample. Conversely, poor education and substance abusers represent a smaller proportion; this was an interesting finding as the literature has regularly cited these two factors as ranking highly in the biographies of women who sexually abuse children.

Current Policies and Procedures
Respondents were asked a number of questions regarding policies and procedures:

Q: Have you received training specifically related to female sexual abusers or their victims?

Only eight per cent of the 86 respondents had received training specifically related to female sexual abusers.

Q: In your opinion, is the process of managing females who sexually abuse, or their victims, different than the processes for males who abuse?

Seventy one per cent stated that the management of females was different than that for male abusers. While this is a surprising result it is also alarming as it indicates that females are indeed processed differently than male offenders. A number of the respondents provided qualitative feedback on why this was the case.

P9: "Attitudes are different, females are not easily suspected of being abusers".

P53: "Very difficult to answer. Less frequently detected and reluctance to be perceived as a crime, these issues implicitly affect management".

The above responses are a sample of those provided and it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide all of the responses submitted. One can surmise that professionals in this study are aware of many issues such as attitudes, beliefs and a gender bias when dealing with female abusers. However, despite this awareness, the management of this type of offender seems to be problematic for the sample in this research. This demonstrates that a clear policy and training is required to guide professionals.

Q: Do you think that female sexual abusers; should be risk assessed; should attend a sex offender treatment programme; should appear on the sex offenders register; are less dangerous than male offenders?

All of the above questions required a yes or no response. Ninety per cent stated that female abusers should be risk assessed but many acknowledged no such tool exists. Eighty nine per cent felt female abusers should attend treatment, 83% stated that female abusers should appear on the sex offenders register. Seventy four per cent felt that female abusers were not less dangerous than males.

Additional Feedback

The questionnaire concluded with a section that asked participants to report any additional comments they may have. A thematic analysis of this feedback reveals that the comments fall into four categories; victim issues, policy, recognition barriers and rationalisation of behaviours.

Victim Issues: Participants took the opportunity to discuss the effect that female perpetrated abuse can have on victims:

P1: "Yes the impact on the victims was certainly different for those abused by males. Especially for the male victims, the sense of shame, guilt and helplessness seemed to be very much increased. In the case of the female victims, I think the full impact has not been fully comprehended. In some ways they seem to feel that it was less sexual violence because it was carried out by a woman".

P22: "A lot of similarities but also some differences - victims of female abuse may have greater sense of shame and stigma as female abuse occurs less frequently".

Policy: The category of policy refers to instances when respondents described issues relating to procedural aspects, such as education, management and resources. Participant number 2 identifies a need for training on the issue.

P2: "I would agree that this area is a far greyer area which deserves much more consideration and research, along with a more detailed explanation and education into it".

A number of participants acknowledge the lack of clarity surrounding the issue, describing it as 'a grey area'.

P36: "Yes it is my belief that society holds the opinion that females cannot sexually abuse, thus I feel that there is no process in place to manage female abusers".

P39: "Yes all of the scarce resources are directed towards male offenders".

P68: "Yes, as very little attention is given to females so the trend is to focus on male abusers".

P53: "Females should be risk assessed but no baseline available".

Recognition Barriers: The thematic analysis revealed a category titled 'recognition barriers', this refers to barriers that specifically prevent females being detected as child sexual abusers. Examples of these include, abuse by females is less serious than abuse commtted by males, female child abusers are always victims themselves.

P32: "Yes I think that society in a sense expects males to abuse, it seems to go against the grain when the abuser is female".

P38: "Yes broad opinion (social) that abuse perpetrated by a female is less serious, yardstick should be victim impact".

P66: "Yes, society tends to react differently, therefore abusive females can view themselves as being victims also rather than abusers. Also the abuse tends to be of a less 'violent' nature".

P75: "Yes I think there is somewhat a greater degree of leniency in managing females who sexually abuse".

P50: "My clinical intuition suggests that I have got clients who have been sexually abused by their mothers but they have not disclosed".

Rationalisation of Behaviours: It has been noted in the literature that professionals often seek to minimise the abusive behaviours perpetrated by females and that women who sexually abuse children are viewed as less bad than males or not in control of their behaviour. This attitude was also reflected in this questionnaire as a number of people sought to offer explanations as to why women would sexually abuse children.

P10: "often poor parenting skills, substance abuse, in abusive relationships, victims of abuse themselves, need therapy".

P68: "It is more common in my experience that females involved in sexual abuse take part in coercive behaviour with a child who is being abused by a male or set the scene allowing males to have access to children, including their own children".

The purpose of this study was to research the professionals' perspectives of women who sexually abuse children in an Irish context. There were two main aims. Firstly, to compare the findings with the current literature and secondly to compare the Irish experience with a recent study conducted in the UK by the NSPCC (2005). A range of issues was investigated and the study supported the findings of many other researchers in the area but also raised issues about current typologies and prevalence rates. Typologies have failed to include the full range of motivations (for example, deviant sexual interest) for female offending behaviour and have tended to minimise responsibility for such behaviours. The questionnaire has also indicated that recent recommendations issued in the UK by the NSPCC should also be applied to the Irish setting.

Discussion

The intention of this questionnaire was to establish an understanding of perspectives of female sexual offending in an Irish context. A questionnaire was designed based on a review of the current literature which identified a number of areas of interest; respondent details, prevalence rates, characteristics of female abusers and their victims and, finally, current policies and procedures in place to deal with female sexual abusers.

A number of key findings emerged. With reference to the prevalence rates of female perpetrated child sexual abuse in Ireland it was surprising that such a large number of respondents reported having contact with the victims of female sexual abuse as this is not reflected in statistics of organisations such as those that fall under the Criminal Justice System. These were interesting findings as it illustrates that Ireland does have women who sexually abuse children and that a large number of victims have disclosed this abuse. The NSPCC (Bunting, 2005) noted that in their study many organisations did not record the gender of the perpetrator and that professionals did not ask if the abuser was male or female. They also recommended that professionals should routinely ask about the gender of the perpetrator in order to demonstrate acceptance as these factors may have an influence on the discrepancies between official statistics and other studies.

The findings from the section exploring the characteristics of female sexual abusers and their victims revealed that boys and girls are equally likely to be the victims and the abuse tends to be interfamilial. There are large discrepancies between studies. Many argue that in general girls are more likely to be the victims of female perpetuated sexual abuse. Rudin et al.'s (1995) comparative study of male and female sex offenders revealed that 62% of the female perpetrators' victims were female. Faller's (1987) study revealed that over 64% of the victims of female perpetrators were female. However, Faller's (1995) study showed that 50% of her sample of female perpetrators had abused both male and female children, 40% had abused females only and 10% had abused males only.

Participants also supplied information regarding the relationship of the abuser to their victim. The current findings that the abuser was more likely to be related to the victim supports the current literature (Saradjian, 1996; Denov, 2004; Elliott, 1997). Allen's (1991) comparative study of male and female offenders found that 70% of the female's victims were immediate family members or close relatives, in comparison to 59% of the male offender's victims. The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (2005) reported that where a caller identified their offender as a female it was always a parent or other female relative.

The most significant finding in this section was the rating of typologies. Previous studies of professionals conclude that female abusers are more likely than male abusers to be classed as 'mad' or not in control of their behaviours (Hetherton, 1999). Others have argued that training of professionals about the issue would reduce this misconception (Bunting, 2005).

Interestingly, current typologies do not make reference to 'sexual deviance' in females but here it was rated higher than the labels of 'teacher/lover' and 'male coerced', two categories that dominate the typology literature. The category of 'experimenter' was also ranked quite highly. It is a problematic category for a number of reasons. If the abuser is labelled an 'experimenter' does it have an effect on how the seriousness of the behaviour is perceived and does this have implications for how the abuser is dealt with? In their study of professionals, Hetherton & Beardsall (1988) noted that female offending behaviours were classed as inappropriate as opposed to criminal and argue that this is due to an unwillingness to view female abusers as analogous to male abusers. These findings illustrate the need for debate and development of a new typology that incorporates the full scope of the different kinds of female abusers.

A common area of discussion in the academic literature is the attempt to describe characteristics that are common among female child sexual abusers such as low socio-economic status, poor education and substance abusers (Travin, Cullen and Protter, 1990; Faller 1995; Grayston & De Luca, 1999). This is an interesting approach since the male sexual offender literature clearly states that males who commit sexual offences are a heterogeneous group (Marshall, Laws & Barbaree, 1990; Canter, Hughes & Kirby, 1998). The findings in this study support those of other studies. However, as with other studies in this area, there are a number of caveats to consider. In this study many of the opinions are based on professionals who work in social services and it is argued that the nature of the referral sources may be more likely to include poor families with a limited education and thus bias the findings (Grayston & DeLuca, 1999). Women with a history of substance abuse are also more likely to come to the attention of the authorities. Thus, it is inappropriate to draw conclusions about the demographic characteristics of female sex offenders without further research that incorporates a more diverse sample. The literature on male sexual offending indicates that male offenders are a heterogeneous group. Hislop (2001) argues that as research in the area expands and female perpetrated abuse is more recognised that a more heterogeneous sample will also emerge.

The key findings on current policies and procedures indicate a need for major advances in the field as only eight per cent of those sampled had received training specifically related to female abusers. The majority also stated that female abusers are managed differently than males and 90% felt that these offenders should be risk assessed but many noted that no such tool exists. It can be concluded that a clear policy and management system is currently required in Ireland to deal with this type of offender. The NSPCC (Bunting, 2005) report also concluded that the lack of training and understanding about the issue of female abusers prevents the recognition of this form of abuse and perpetuates the gender bias, where females are seen as less harmful.

The final aspect of the questionnaire was a qualitative section where participants could record some other comments on the issue. The feedback was analysed and categorised into four themes, victim issues, policy, recognition barriers and rationalisation of behaviours. The responses provided on victim issues primarily revealed that victims can feel more isolated. Denov (2004) reported that victims had difficulty perceiving the behaviour as abuse as it was often accompanied with great affection and nurturing.

The category of 'recognition barriers' presented a range of responses from participants that support other findings in the area. A number of researchers have argued that it is almost impossible to formulate any conclusions regarding female sexual offenders due to a range of issues such as attitudes and a gender bias. Hetherton (1999) proposes several common beliefs that prevent the recognition of female perpetrated abuse: child sexual abuse is a problem perpetrated by men, sexual behaviour by women towards children is subtle not serious, these women must be 'mad' or not in control of their behaviours.

The participants in the current study have reflected Hetherton's (1999) findings that abuse by females is perceived as less serious and thus difficult to detect. This has implications for current understandings of typologies and prevalence rates as the evidence suggests that this is a significantly under-reported and under-recognised problem. Other researchers have argued that attitudes of professionals also contribute to the lack of disclosures and under-recognition (Denov, 2001). A number of researchers have argued that victims of female sexual abusers have more difficulty disclosing, men are assumed to be the perpetrators and thus they feel a greater sense of stigma and isolation (Elliott, 1997; Denov, 2004).

It has been argued in the introduction that adopting an approach where the abuser is primarily viewed as a victim, is harmful to both the offenders and the victims. The minimisation of responsibility may have an effect on the type of treatment an offender may receive. In respect of the victim, minimisation in these cases makes them feel more isolated as the abuse they suffered is viewed as being not as serious as abuse perpetrated by males. The effects of this have been discussed in a study conducted by Denov (2004) who investigated victim's experiences of disclosing female perpetrated abuse to professionals. Participants reported a number of negative responses including minimisation and disbelief.

Findings from this study suggest that it can be concluded that a protocol for managing female sexual offenders is urgently required in Ireland and a number of areas require action. A clear procedure needs to be established on how to manage female abusers from the moment an allegation is made, investigating the case, risk assessment and right through to treatment. The similarities between male and female offenders should be recognised and analogous management systems should be in place. Child protection workers should receive training specifically related to female perpetrated sexual abuse in order to reduce recognition barriers

and improve confidence in how to manage the allegations. A risk assessment tool should be developed and this should inform how the offender is managed.

Finally, treatment programmes are required that address offending behaviour while not minimising the responsibility of the offender's abusive acts. However, there is also a sense of optimism about the future development of this much neglected area. The majority of participants sampled in this survey recognise the problems they face and communicate a desire for change.

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