

## **“Behind the Façade: Exposing Female Sex Offenders and Helping Abuse Victims to Heal”**

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**\*\* Female perpetrators rarely abuse children who they do not know. They gain access to their victims through on-going trusted relationships.**

### **Three categories of female sex offenders:** <sup>1</sup> from Matthews, Matthews and Speltz (1989).

- 1) “Predisposed,” acting alone—seek power, control, intimacy; usually abuse young children, often within the family or extended family; may claim to have been sexually abused as a child
- 2) “Co-abusers,” with a partner—usually an adult male; may claim to be victims of domestic violence; dependent, controlled; victims’ ages and gender may vary
- 3) Women who target adolescents—such as the female “teacher-lover”; usually act alone; poor impulse control; immature; seek excitement and attention; often diagnosed with a personality disorder while awaiting trial (bi-polar, narcissistic); victims are usually male

Research has been limited but we have gained *some* additional knowledge of female offenders. Lutfy and Derkzen’s study, “Women who sexually offend: An assessment of the descriptive model of female sexual offending,” published in 2014, <sup>2</sup> supports the three main categories identified by Matthews, Matthews, and Speltz in 1989. It also proposes a fourth category—females who co-abuse for gratification, intimacy and in order to please their partners (as opposed to being forced to participate by a co-abusing partner). Note: the sample size for the study was only 14.

We understand the seduction dynamics—easy access, control, the gradual normalization of adult-child sexual behavior—*how* it happens. It is the *why* that eludes us. This behavior goes against everything we want to believe about females being nurturing and *safe*.

Given the frequency of childhood sexual abuse among females in the general population, (1 in 4 or 25% is the statistic commonly cited in child abuse research and confirmed by “The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study”), <sup>3</sup> it is especially alarming if researchers can trace an identifiable pathway from victim to perpetrator. Is being sexually abused in childhood a precursor for becoming a perpetrator? A 1996 study of 36 admitted female sex offenders (Saradjian & Hanks, UK), examined their own childhood abuse histories (albeit self reported). <sup>4</sup>

### **Summary of perpetrators' self-reported child sexual abuse:**

1) "Predisposed:" Every woman in the "predisposed" category (100% of 14 women) reported being sexually abused in childhood. Each identified at least one familial perpetrator—fathers, brothers, mothers, grandfathers, uncles, grandmothers. Some had additional perpetrators such as babysitters or "various men in the village." Often the familial abuse continued for decades—"From as young as can be remembered" until they left home or the abuser died.

2) "Co-abusers:" Nine of the 12 offenders (75%) in this group reported childhood sexual abuse. For the nine, the perpetrators ranged from familial to mother's boyfriend, a stranger, school "coach" driver, and a neighbor. The abuse began later and lasted a shorter time period than the "predisposed" participants had experienced.

3) "Women who target adolescents." 100% of the 10 women in this category reported being sexually abused before the age of 18. The first incident was typically not until ages 11-14 and the abuse lasted a shorter duration than "predisposed" participants experienced. Only one female offender reported that her offender was a female teacher. All other offenders were identified as male—mothers' boyfriends, uncles, a male teacher, step-fathers, and several much older "boyfriends" (ages 37 to 47 when the girls were 13 or 14).

Saradjian also included a "comparison group" of 36 women who had *never* sexually abused any children. They were matched with offenders based on a number of factors: age, marital status, social class, education, race, sexual orientation, years employed and number of children they had. Within that comparison group of 36, only seven women (19%) reported child sexual abuse in their personal histories. All seven reported having had male perpetrators.

Having a personal history of child sexual abuse is absolutely no excuse for subsequently perpetrating against a child. But it may be a partial explanation of the "why" and therefore it is something we need to more closely examine if we hope to break the cycle of sexual violence.

To me, the most striking information in Saradjian's work is found in the cited Appendix tables and the auxiliary discussion. The numbers leap off of the charts. Adding the three categories of female perpetrators together, 33 out of 36 female perpetrators (92%) had been sexually abused during their own childhoods compared to only 7 of the 36 women in the "comparison group" (19%) of non-offenders.

If being a victim of child sexual abuse *is* a significant precursor to becoming a perpetrator, why aren't there more adult female sex offenders? If 1 in 4 females experience sexual abuse or assault before the age of 18, what prevents the majority of female victims from ever offending? *What or who makes the difference?* Those are questions that we need to be asking to aid in prevention and in earlier intervention.

We have come a long way in recognizing that females can be perpetrators. Female offenders *are* being detected and reported and arrested and successfully prosecuted. Yet male victims of female perpetrators face some extra challenges based on gender. In the ACE study, 40% of the males who reported sexual abuse or assault before the age of 18 said their perpetrator was female. <sup>4</sup>

**Myth: If the perpetrator is a woman, the boy should just feel “lucky.”**

Through the media and mixed messaging, society asserts the harmlessness of sexual relations between older females and younger males. This attitude implies that boys *can't* be abused by females. For boys and men, *any* sexual experience with any female must be good—boys can't be exploited or molested by a mother or step-mom or aunt or cousin or older sister or grandmother or a neighbor or a teacher in a position of power. <sup>5</sup>

The overwhelming majority of sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child, pre-teen, or teenager knows and feels that he can trust. They have an emotional bond, of varying degrees, with that perpetrator. Therefore, it is not just the sexual acts—which may be non-violent and even pleasurable—but the emotional *betrayal* that is so confusing and hurtful to the victim.

Victims don't know what to do. They want the abuse to stop but are *afraid* of what will happen if they tell. They are trapped. The perpetrator may tell them that no one will believe them or that it's *their* fault—that they went along with it so *they* will be punished. The offender may threaten suicide. Fear can keep victims mute while the abuse is going on. *Fear and shame can keep them silent for years, long after the abuse has stopped.*

**The path to recovery:**

Tell someone!

\*\* Get professional counseling, “trauma informed therapy.”

Through therapy, victims can gain a clear understanding of the trauma that they experienced and call the abuse by name. (“She molested me, time after time.”)

They can grieve their losses and the betrayal. They can learn an authentic, balanced sense of responsibility, forgiving themselves for being used and deceived. If you could have done anything different at the time, of course you would have. It wasn't your fault. “If you coulda, you woulda!”

Victims become survivors by following a path to healing. Through recovery, they gain resiliency and a “survivors' perspective.”

*“We are defined not by what happens to us in life but by what we choose to do with it.” –*  
(anon)

Through healing, not only do victims re-claim their rights to healthy, productive lives, they may well prevent perpetuating the cycle of sexual violence against others.

Choosing to get therapy and to heal are unselfish choices for victims to make.

### **Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Matthews, R., Matthews, J.K., & Speltz, K. (1989). *Female sexual offenders: An exploratory study*. Orwell, VT: safer Society Press.

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<sup>2</sup> Lutfy, M. & Derkzen, D. (2014) "Women who sexually offend: An assessment of the descriptive model of female sexual offending" (Research Report R-334). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada <https://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/research/005008-0334-eng.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> "Long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse by gender of victim." Am J Prev Med. 2005 June 28(5):430-8. Dube SR<sup>1</sup>, Anda RF, Whitfield CL, Brown DW, Felitti VJ, Dong M, Giles WH. National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia 30341-3724, USA (ACE: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study.)<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15894146>

<sup>4</sup> Saradjian, J., & Hanks, H. (1996). *Women Who Sexually Abuse Children: From Research to Clinical Practice*. Chichester, West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons. Appendix 2: "The Women's Own Experience of Sexual Abuse," pp. 249-251.

<sup>5</sup> <https://1in6.org/>

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### **Resources:**

Brand, Julie, M.S. (2007) *A Mother's Touch: Surviving Mother-Daughter Sexual Abuse*. Trafford Publishing.

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