

ON LINE *opinion* - Australia's e-journal of social and political debate

She-wolves in sheeps' clothing

By Elizabeth Willmott Harrop

Posted Thursday, 2 September 2010

Female child abusers are the 21st century equivalent of lesbians in the Victorian age: not legislated against because they do not exist. The nature of woman being incapable of "deviancy", as the bigoted Victorians said. Hence in New Zealand, the Accident Compensation Corporation was unable to accept claims from boys sexually abused by women, until the law changed in 2005. Prior to that the perpetrator of "sexual indecency" had to be male.

However, statistics indicate that female child abusers not only exist, but in numbers approaching those of males. In New Zealand, 48 per cent of child abusers for 2006, where the perpetrator gender was known, were women. In the USA in 2002 63 per cent of all child abuse, from neglect to sexual abuse, was perpetrated by the mother. In 40 per cent of cases the mother acted alone.

The UK's Lucy Faithfull Foundation estimates women are responsible for 10 per cent of all child sexual abuse and that 5-20 per cent of pedophiles are women. Meanwhile in New Zealand, 40 per cent of the 1,200 men helped by the Christchurch-based Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse Trust (MSSAT) in 2010, were sexually abused by women when they were boys.

Ken Clearwater, founder of MSSAT comments: "We live in a culture in which men aren't allowed to be victims and women aren't allowed to be anything other than nurturing. So abuse suffered as a boy at the hands of an adult female can be the hardest abuse of all to come to terms with, let alone to speak out about."

Numerous studies show very young children are at increased risk of abuse. According to the New Zealand Families Commission, in 2006, children under five-years-old made up 49 per cent of all children aged 0-16 years found to have been neglected, 48 per cent of those emotionally abused, and 23 per cent of those physically abused. Infants aged under one-year account for two-thirds of childhood deaths each year and three-quarters of all child deaths in New Zealand 2002-2006 were of children under five.

As the primary caregivers of young children, the New Zealand Ministry of Justice observes that "Mothers do most of the constant and demanding care of pre-schoolers, so it should be no surprise that much of the reported physical and emotional abuse of pre-schoolers is done by mothers".

Culture of silence

However, as a taboo subject, both female perpetrators and their victims are unlikely to speak out, with women unwilling to ask for help in a society which brands them as evil aberrations.

A 2005 study by the New Zealand Department of Corrections says that violent and sexual offending by women "has been avoided or neglected because it challenges fundamental beliefs about women as nurturers, protectors and as victims of violence".

Former New Zealand MP, Marc Alexander, a campaigner for victim's rights and a published author on the criminal justice system, has been criticised when speaking out about female abusers:

"Often when I've talked about this issue in the past I get accused of women-bashing or deflecting

from the vast majority of child abuse cases which *are* perpetrated by men.”

However, Clearwater notes that there has been a significant shift since MSSAT started in 1995. Clearwater comments: “Abuse at the hands of a woman is not the dirty little secret it used to be. I can now sit in a room of women working for Rape Crisis and talk about male victims. I've also noticed that the language has changed. Perpetrators as well as victims are now referred to as *he* in new editions of books about sexual abuse, whereas before there was always the assumption the perpetrator was male and the victim female.”

Part of the reason politicians and society at large may be unwilling to address the issue of female abusers, is their own culpability in the problem. Women who abuse their children are ordinary women for whom factors such as their own history as a victim of abuse, lack of social support networks, poverty and poor educational opportunities have collided to create a parent unable to live up to society's ideals of the all-nurturing, self sacrificing mother.

The late pediatrician Dr Robin Fancourt commented that “The stresses of unemployment, a lack of income, the void of isolation and a lack of social support can push any adult to abuse or neglect.” Fancourt saw child neglect as perpetrated by society as well as by individuals, when she said of the increasing number of New Zealand children who are brought up in poverty “these children are neglected through the many other disadvantages that are imposed on this sector of society as a whole”.

The 2010 report *Learning from Tragedy* concurs, commenting that “Prevention of child maltreatment for the youngest children at risk will involve addressing layers of disadvantage”.

Loving abusers

Female perpetrated abuse is often conducted in the context of an affectionate and loving relationship which children dare not risk losing. Studies into childhood sexual abuse have shown that young children have difficulty recognising the inappropriateness of a request when it is made by a “good” person, and research has shown that children can often feel loved, wanted and cared for by the parents who are abusing them.

This makes it almost impossible for the child to assimilate what is happening to them. As Alexander observes: “Improper sexual behavior by women is grossly under-reported, partly because children are scared of saying anything against the main nurturer in the home but also because it can so easily be hidden in caring activities such as bathing, dressing or consoling the victim.”

The conflict between loving and abusive, appropriate and inappropriate is reflected in a 2005 study about maternal experiences of childhood of Pacific Island mothers in New Zealand which concluded that “abusive and supportive behaviours co-exist; physical abuse being recalled more strongly than emotional abuse, and mothers seeming both more abusive and more supportive than fathers”.

Women who have intimate relationships with teenage boys often claim they were in a loving partnership. The media glamorises its reporting with headlines such as “Blonde, attractive, successful and having sex with teens”, further fueling a culture in which female perpetrated abuse is not taken seriously.

The fact remains that consensual exchanges, be they emotional or sexual, between a child or young person and an adult are always abusive because the perpetrator has a power imbalance with their victim.

Particularly challenging are subtle but pervasive forms of emotional abuse within an otherwise loving relationship, such as using children as confidants, or as Fancourt says, where behaviour conveys to the child that they are “only acceptable in the context of meeting another’s needs”.

The child remains trapped in a netherworld, potentially only recognising abuse decades later. Fancourt, in her report on neglect and psychological abuse in childhood, makes the point well when she speaks of “the rare ability of children to conceptualise, comprehend, or verbalise what is happening due both to their developmental barriers and as a result of these forms of maltreatment being the expected background of family life”.

Victim as abuser

There is a heated debate about gender parity in family violence. Many studies argue that male and female intimate partner violence is similar in frequency and severity. This is countered by researchers who believe for example that women's violence is exaggerated by bias and selective remembering.

Yet one American study of women's refuge clients showed that 90 per cent of the women displayed aggressive behaviour toward their children. New Zealand government agency Child Youth and Family (CYF) also reports that about half of women who are physically abused by their partners also abuse their children, illustrating a key point which is that you can be a victim of violence and also a perpetrator of abuse.

Ruptured attachment between mother and baby, one cause of which is Postpartum Depression (PPD), is implicated in child abuse. A 2010 study on Pacific Islands families showed that being the victim of physical violence more than doubles the risk of PPD.

These points emphasise the importance of seeing male and female perpetrators and male and female victims, as a holistic problem. Furthermore, female abusers often abuse with a male partner, again making the two genders inseparable.

Child homicide

Women commit a small proportion of family homicides, yet the statistics increase dramatically for child homicides. *Learning from Tragedy*, which looked at family homicides in New Zealand for the period 2002-2006, found that women were responsible for 7 per cent of homicides of “other family members”, 11 per cent of couple related homicides, but 40 per cent of child homicides.

Child homicides, and therefore female perpetrators, may be greatly under-reported due to the way deaths are classified. One study noting for example that given what is known from other countries about deaths resulting from child neglect, the total number of child maltreatment deaths in New Zealand may be much greater, saying “The malnourished baby suffering from failure to thrive who develops pneumonia and dies from lack of medical attention does not appear in homicide statistics”.

The report says infanticide “is the most susceptible to misclassification as a death by some other cause”. It is estimated that 5-10 per cent of children recorded as having died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) may have been misdiagnosed incidents of neglect or abuse. This is especially significant in light of the high prevalence of neglect by females, and New Zealand's historically high SIDS rate.

Research shows that children of young mothers are particularly vulnerable. CYF notes that “Compared to mothers aged over 25 years, mothers were 11 times more likely to kill their children

if aged under 17 years.”

Single mothers are also vulnerable to perpetrating child abuse. In the USA in 2002, single mothers were the highest category of offender in child abuse cases.

Young and single mothers share risk factors with child abuse perpetration, such as economic hardship and being a victim of abuse. For example, a 1998 New Zealand Ministry of Health report notes that women who report being sexually abused as a child “are more likely than nonabused women to become pregnant before age 19”.

For young mothers, 60 per cent of whom according to Australian research do not have a male partner when their baby is born, these factors are compounded by a body which is capable of bearing children without the parallel mental and emotional maturity.

Anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy comments: “Settled living and plentiful food have removed constraints on fertility that for tens of millions of years protected anthropoid primates from giving birth at such young ages ... Being fat enough to ovulate is no longer tied to having a supportive social network who will help rear her child.”

The fact is that poverty, lack of educational opportunities, a history of childhood abuse, family violence and young and single motherhood are some of the many risk factors which indicate a woman may abuse a child.

If we are serious about preventing child abuse, we need to be more open about female perpetrators, so that victims and the women who abuse them can be supported and acknowledged. And we need to take collective responsibility for the social conditions which provide fertile ground for this hidden tragedy.

Elizabeth Willmott Harrop is a freelance writer. She is based in Christchurch, New Zealand, and has a Masters Degree in Human Rights and Social Change.