

Female Perpetrators and Male Victims of Sexual Assault: Why They are so Invisible

By Loree Cook-Daniels

In part one of this two-part series, we looked at some of the data on “atypical” sexual assault victims and perpetrators: female perpetrators and male victims. We also looked at the resources available to such victims and to the professionals who serve them. Here in part two, we will examine some of the reasons why this data is not better known and the forces that may be contributing to an undercount of male sexual assault victims and/or female sexual assault perpetrators.

Social Stereotypes

“The weight of evidence cannot tip justice when the weight of prejudice is on the other side.” -- Patricia Pearson (1997)

Long before someone becomes an adult protective services worker, law enforcement officer, or judge, he or she has had years of exposure to a whole range of stereotypes about men and women. The stereotypes that even trained abuse professionals bring to their work on sexual assault cases include:

Violence is a male problem.
Women are only violent in self-defense.
Men always want sex; they can't be raped.
Women are hurt more by sexual assault than men are.

The effects of these stereotypes can be seen in a wide variety of statistics and research. First, women are far less likely to be arrested and prosecuted for sexual abuse. “When probable cause exists to charge a juvenile with a sex offense, the offender is 46.5 times more likely to be arrested and charged with a crime if he is male than if she is female,” reports Thomas B. James, J.D., in his 2003 book, *Domestic Violence: The 12 Things You Aren't Supposed to Know*. A 1994 article by Lisa Lipshires, “Female Perpetration of Child Sexual Abuse: An Overview of the Problem,” relates many stories of district attorneys and judges dismissing cases against women because “women don't do things like this” or “public sentiment would not allow for such charges to be brought....” Lipshires also reports that a psychologist who trains district attorneys about sexual abuse has found that often, “there will be a female attorney on staff who is trying to prosecute a female perpetrator [of a male victim], and the male attorneys will say, ‘Look, we're not going to waste the taxpayers' dollars on this. This is every man's fantasy.’”

In a study reported in Guy R. Holmes and colleagues' 1997 article, “See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: Why Do Relatively Few Male Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse Receive Help for Abuse-Related Issues in Adulthood?,” psychologists were given identical case histories, with only the gender of the patient changed. “Significantly more clinicians” hypothesized a possible history of sexual abuse when they were told the client was female. Holmes and colleagues also quoted a study of British nurses, health visitors, and medical students

in which 33% felt that females would be more damaged by sexual abuse than males. The 2007 report by The Center for Sex Offender Management, "Female Sex Offenders," plays out some of the practical implications of these myths: research on law enforcement officers has found they, "reacted with disbelief to allegations involving women, minimized the seriousness of the reports, viewed the female suspects as less dangerous and harmful, and were prone toward labeling the cases as 'unfounded.'"

Elder Abuse Stereotypes

The elder abuse field itself contributes to gender stereotypes that then influence how we view the situations in which we're asked to intervene. Google "typical elder abuse victim," and there she is:

"...female/single/widowed; socially isolated; physically and/or cognitively impaired; denies, or is reluctant to report...."

"...a white woman over 80 years of age who has multiple physical and cognitive problems...."

"...a woman, who is probably over 80 and dependent for care on the abuser."

Some go on to describe the typical abuser:

"...the typical elder abuse victim is a 72-year-old female. The typical perpetrator is the victim's son...."

Even though male elders are victimized roughly as often as women (particularly when one considers that abuse rates rise with age, when the pool of possible victims becomes increasingly female), our field has a tendency to paint a visual picture of elder abuse that is distinctly female. Imagine the typical elder abuse victim described above. Do you see a man? Chances are you don't. Using gendered language, even in a context where it is clear that exceptions abound, tends to push our minds down a particular gender track. This well-known phenomenon is why 60s' and 70s' feminists demanded changes to words like "spaceman," "postman," and "chairman": it's a lot harder to imagine a female "policeman" than it is to imagine a female "police officer."

Combine the "typical elder abuse victim" vision of a woman with the social stereotype of the "typical rape victim," and it's almost impossible to conjure up an older man.

Training and Assessment Tools

Stated simply, if we do not go looking for male victims, we will not find them. – Health Canada (1996)

Formal training efforts for those who are asked to evaluate and help male sexual assault survivors and/or those who were sexually assaulted by women do little to counter the stereotypes new professionals bring to their work. For instance, James (2003) reports that a Department of Justice training manual for child protective workers gives only male examples of possible sexual abusers: "father, stepfather, uncle, or family friend." The tendency to overlook female sexual assault perpetrators permeates assessment tools. One well-used scale for measuring children's reactions to being sexually abused (CITES-Revised) inquires if the child "dislike[s] or feel[s] uncomfortable spending time alone with older boys or men," but has no comparable question about girls and women, suggesting either that abuse by women doesn't exist, or that children may become reactive against all

males if abused by a male, but would never become so reactive against women, even if abused by one. Hanrahan and colleagues, in their 2006 article, "Core Data Elements Tracking Elder Sexual Abuse," report that when the Comprehensive Sexual Assault Assessment Tool was revised in 2002 to make it useful in evaluating elder sexual abuse, the expert panel used 125 case descriptions to guide the changes. Unfortunately, *none* of those case studies was of an abused man. Given that, "unfounded" results when the assessment tool is used with male alleged victims must be suspect; we don't know if that answer means there was no abuse, or that a tool designed for female victims doesn't ask the right questions to uncover abuse of men.

Not *specifically* asking males if they've been sexually assaulted or not *specifically* asking people if they were sexually assaulted by a woman can skew the data tremendously. Evidence of this comes from a web-based article by Jim Hopper. He reports that in a 1989 study of women (only) presenting at a psychiatric emergency room, researchers reviewed 50 random charts before and after intake staff were instructed to question clients about previous sexual victimization. The first 50 charts showed 6% of the women had been previously sexually victimized; the second 50 charts documented that 70% of the women were sexual assault survivors.

Research Literature

Throughout their careers, most professionals who work with confirmed, alleged, or potential sexual abuse victims are expected to keep up with their field's new literature. Unfortunately, this literature all too often reinforces the blinding biases that new professionals bring to their work. Search "sexual abuse" in the Clearinghouse of Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly, and at least 150 items will be identified. All three of the videos and at least 33 of the articles *only* discuss female victims, foregoing any mention of male victims at all (many others may also exclude males; it was not possible to tell from many of the titles and abstracts). Only two articles focus on male victims.

Allied fields' literature is no better. It is very common for abuse data to be collected on both men and women, although the resulting publications discuss only women's data. For instance, James (2003) reports that a widely-read American Association of University Women study found that 85% of girls experienced sexual harassment at school. *Not* reported from that study was the finding that 76% of the *boys* had also been sexually harassed at school. A follow-up study found that 53% of *both* boys and girls said they had been both victim and perpetrator of sexual harassment.

Even researchers who are working on underserved victims may (perhaps unconsciously) undermine the data. Sandy Cook and Judith Bressant (1997), the authors of "Mother-daughter rape: a challenge for feminism," take pains to point out in their very first paragraph that "97 to 98% of perpetrators of sexual assault are men," despite plenty of data indicating that figure is not true. Teaster and colleagues' 2008 meta-review of elder sexual abuse studies concludes "that this is a problem involving primarily female victims and male perpetrators with few identified male victims and female perpetrators," even though some of the same researchers participated in a study that found that fully 40% of alleged sexual abuse victims were male, and 26% of the alleged perpetrators were female.

A more subtle erasure takes place when data are reported in a way that simply omits male victims and/or female perpetrators. Here are two actual examples: "Females comprised 59% of the alleged victims," and, "The majority (74%) of the alleged perpetrators was male." Although both of these statements are true and *imply* that the balance are of the other gender, their literal silence about male victims and female perpetrators contribute to a cognitive erasure of the fact that both victims and perpetrators come in both genders.

Problems with Data Collection

“Female abusers must do something severe and obvious before they will be held accountable as perpetrators. Males must be abused in more severe and obvious ways before we will take them seriously as victims.” -- Health Canada (1996)

In order to be “counted” as the victim of sexual assault, some authority – a law enforcement officer, abuse professional, researcher, etc. – must hear your story, believe you, and report on it in somehow. There are a myriad of ways in which this sequence fails male sexual assault survivors and/or those who were sexually assaulted by a woman.

It is widely asserted that male sexual assault victims are far less likely than female sexual assault victims to report the crime against them. A 1996 Health Canada study, “The Invisible Boy: Revisioning the Victimization of Male Children and Teens,” found that “female [childhood sexual assault] victims were twice as likely to report their sexual abuse experiences.” In addition to the typical reasons female sexual assault survivors may not report (shame, fear of not being believed, not wanting to have to testify against the rapist, etc.) men may have additional reasons to stay silent. These include: failure to identify what happened to them as sexual assault, because sexual assault is widely viewed as something men do to women, not something that can even happen to a man; fear of being disbelieved; fear that because of the widely-known “intergenerational cycle of violence,” being identified as a sexual assault survivor may mean being also seen as a (at least potential) perpetrator; and fear that since men aren’t supposed to be sexual assault victims, admitting to such will tarnish others’ view of their masculinity. Men who were assaulted by other men may fear they will be viewed as “gay” if they report. Men may even withhold their victimization history from their therapists: Lipshirs (1994) reports that one study of male sexual assault survivors found that 81% of them were in therapy, but only 3% had told their therapists they’d been sexually abused.

Even when men do understand what happened to them was a crime and wrong and even when they seek help, they may not be believed, leading to their cases remaining uncounted by *anyone*. The supervisor of a leading Milwaukee sexual assault program states publicly that 50% of the men who call her agency reporting being sexually assaulted are lying; she says the rate of “false calls” from women is only 2-3%. The statistics that agency publishes, of course, demonstrate that there are very few male sexual assault survivors who need services. A recent study reported in VED of male sexual assault survivors living in care facilities gives inadvertent evidence of this phenomenon of disbelieving men. The researchers wrote: “The rate of substantiation for allegations of sexual abuse of women was much higher than that for allegations of abuse of men (22% vs. 12%). This could indicate that more erroneous reports of alleged sexual abuse were made concerning men than women.” Since 61% of all the reports were made by the residents themselves, these statements subtly imply the men were lying or, at best, mistaken about having been assaulted.

Victims of female perpetrators – whether male or female – are also not believed. The website of the Canadian Children’s Rights Council quotes the statistic that 86% of victims of female sexual predators aren’t believed. The study of sexual abuse in care facilities mentioned above also suggests that the victims of female sexual abusers may have a harder time gaining credence: although 22% of the alleged male perpetrators were ultimately listed as “confirmed” perpetrators, only 9% of the female perpetrators were confirmed.

An intriguing article by Susan Wachob and Rick Nizzardini, "Male Survivors," published by the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (n.d.) suggests that men's socialization may lead male survivors to talk in ways that differ from female survivors, thereby possibly leading to legitimate calls being classified as crank. Not only "is [it] easy to misinterpret the early anger expressed by the male survivor as a sign that he is less traumatized," but "it should be recognized that many men talk about sex in graphic ways. When they call a rape crisis center, this presentation fits well with the stereotype of men as the perpetrators and women as the victims and can be mistaken for someone making crank calls for his own sexual gratification or to harass the person taking the call."

Given the many forces working *against* seeing and confirming sexual abuse of men and/or sexual abuse by women, making our systems acknowledge and appropriately respond to these sexual abuse cases is going to be a tall order.

A version of this article originally appeared in Victimization of the Elderly and Disabled, Vol. 11, No. 5, January/February 2009.