This paper presents a critical perspective on the debate surrounding the construction of the category 'female sexual abuser' and argues that this concept has arisen from a wider trend that holds women responsible and blameworthy for what happens in families. Meanwhile, attention is deflected from the major social problem of abuse by men. Before we contribute towards the creation of a fresh moral panic that is anti-woman, it is important for policy-makers and practitioners in the field of child protection to take into account the dynamics of gender power relations.

The first National Conference on 'Female Sexual Abusers', organised by Kidscape and held in March 1992, has given official recognition to this newly identified problem. The aim of the Conference was 'to bring female sexual abuse into the open'. Already there has been considerable reportage from the social work press and the media (The Guardian, 25 March) on the controversial phenomenon when a woman is identified as the abuser. The language in which the debate has so far been conducted seems to indicate a fresh moral panic about child sexual abuse, made more chilling and freakish since it is women's sexual deviance that apparently lies at the centre of this 'expose'.

A recent article headlined 'Tip of the Iceberg' (Elliot, 1992) claims that bringing female sexual abuse into the open will 'unleash a flood of stories' and 'change our whole perception of offenders'. Similarly, in Women Abusers: The Last Taboo (Hodgson, 1992), sexual abuse by women is described as 'the most subversive in our society' whereas 'there is somehow more a feeling of normality about being abused by a man'.

The frisson created by the coverage given to 'female sexual abusers' relates to its underlying political message. This is an implicit challenge to feminist claims that abuse, both physical and sexual, is primarily perpetrated by men on those less powerful, women and children, and therefore must be understood in terms of gender inequality, male sexuality and supremacy. On the basis of recent contentious research giving an air of credibility and academic status in support of this challenge, possible responses appear confined within the limitations of the debate to prescribed polarised positions; 'female sexual abusers - true or false?' Sceptics, particularly from a feminist perspective, who are reluctant to accept the legitimacy of current interpretation of the research are, in the terms of the present debate, caricatured as ostrich-like in their denial of uncomfortable truths.

As social workers, our understanding of the issues involved is critical because this debate, as with many others on the subject of children and abuse, threatens to gain momentum and influence conventional wisdom and practice. There are, however, a number of questions that have not yet been explored. How are we to define the category of female sexual abuser? Why is so much attention being paid to female sexual abusers, especially when such instances are rare? Why is this issue so topical now? What is the 'evidence'? Have feminists been wrong all alone.

PROBLEMATIC DEFINITIONS

Constructing an unambiguous definition of behaviours or situations
that constitute abuse is itself problematic. Consider the following situations: penetrative intercourse or oral sex forced on a child by a male perpetrator; a mother sharing her bed with a pre-pubescent son, caressing him or exposing her naked body to him. At present, all of these situations would 'count' statistically as forms of sexual abuse. Yet, for any definition or categorisation of sexual abuse to be meaningful, there is a need to distinguish between different forms of sexual behaviour.

Regardless of the definition used, research studies of sexual abuse record a very low incidence of abuse committed by women. For example, the study by Bentovim et al. of the 274 families referred to their sexual abuse unit between the years 1981 and 1986, 98 per cent were men. Similarly, Home Office statistics from 1975-1984 identify less than one per cent of the perpetrators as women (both cited by Search, 1988). It has however been suggested that the 'sexual victimisation of children by women' may be more frequent than these figures suggest. Various arguments have been put forward in an attempt to substantiate this claim. It has been suggested that sexual abuse by women may be 'masked' through appropriate female contact, in for example the physical care of children at bed-time or bath-time. Or, because sexual abuse by women is considered 'more incestuous', it is under-reported. It has however been argued that if boys are the more frequent target of women's inappropriate sexual behaviour, this too will lead to under-reporting.

In fact, Finkelhor (1984) in his comprehensive study of sexual abuse argues not only that the above claims are not substantiated by existing evidence, but that the percentage of female abusers, although low, may actually be inflated. This may arise because the category of 'abuse' and 'abuser' is, as we have seen earlier, so ill-defined. Some studies, for example, do not link the perpetrator with the type of maltreatment. If the mother neglects and the father sexually abuses their child, both are listed by some research studies as perpetrator, although it is not possible to distinguish who did what. Other studies include as perpetrator an adult caretaker who provides inadequate or inappropriate supervision of the child's sexual activities. Within such research, women who do not actually engage in sexual contact with the child are listed as perpetrators. Finkelhor has noted that it is not possible in many studies to separate those who commit the abuse from those who merely allow it'.

WOMEN UNDER DURESS

Even when women are recorded as perpetrators of sexual abuse, 'the interest and initiative for sexual abuse' has generally come from a male partner and that 'frequently, the female perpetrator is participating under duress'. As Finkelhor argues, it can hardly be justified to consider the above situations as straight forward instances of sexual abuse of children by women, equivalent to that of men. Similar conclusions are also drawn by Glaser and Frosh (1988) in their review of studies of sexual abuse, who comment that 'in all studies, it is men who appear as the adults in sexual contact with children' and that, in this sense, 'child sexual abuse is a phenomenon connected with the sexuality of men'.

Yet, a category of 'female sexual abuser is increasingly promoted by some researchers and practitioners in this field, and has been justified by claims that women do sometimes participate in 'ritual' or 'cult' sexual abuse, and appear to be tangentially implicated in
their male partner's abuse of a child. These situations, however, clearly arise from men's predominance in initiating and perpetrating abuse on children, and very often, on the women themselves. How has this led to the creation of a separate category of 'female sexual abusers', that disconnects the woman from the behaviour of her male partner and her immediate social environment?

CONTENTIOUS EVIDENCE

If the most recently reported evidence (Matthews et al., 1989; Elliott, 1992; Wolfers, 1992), coming from case studies of woman 'abusers' and survivors, is typical of research in this field, there are serious problems in generalising or drawing any conclusions at all. An initial observation is the very low numbers that form the basis of two of these studies; studies based on ten and sixteen women. In the study of ten 'female sexual abusers', (Wolfers, 1992) eight cases of abuse were 'precipitated by male partners'. The author herself acknowledges, although almost as an aside, that in these circumstances 'it is possible that without male involvement, some women may not have abused'. Unfortunately, the implications and significance of this has been neglected in the discussion. A series of questions have been ignored. How were these cases chosen? What was the relationship between the woman and her male partner? What was the personal history of the women, including those women who did not have a male partner at the time of the abuse? Who instigated the abuse? Finally, one must have reservations about the generalisability of any conclusion drawn from a study of only ten women. If fact, the significant finding of this study appears to refute the notion that there is a separate category of women who abuse in isolation from men.

There are also the personal stories of survivors of abuse. Again, the reported evidence gleaned from a sample of 100 men and women is highly problematic (Elliot, 1992). The sample was based on the researcher's personal contact with survivors and was drawn from a number of sources, including telephone calls during a phone-in and conversations after a conference. Without questioning the survivors' actual experience of abuse, there are a number of important areas that remain unmentioned. For example, how much information was available from the survivor of the circumstances in which the abuse took place? Would survivors of early childhood abuse always know or be able to recall this in later years? How often did the survivor's experience take place in the context of male violence towards the woman? Answers to these questions may or may not be known, but it is misleading to define a category of 'female abusers' without clarifying these issues.

SHIFT OF EMPHASIS

When the overwhelming evidence suggests that it is women and children who are suffering in large numbers from physical and sexual abuse by men, why has a social agenda been constructed that gives such primacy to the topic of 'female sexual abusers'? It will make little sense to practitioners working in the field of child protection to redirect attention and resources to the 'new problem' of female sexual abusers, when research, analysis and resources in relation to the larger social problem of abuse by men, are so inadequate. Whose interests will this shift of emphasis serve? Certainly not women and children.
There is a political dimension related to how research areas and questions are selected and defined. For example, similar criticisms have been directed towards research undertaken in relation to black people's mental health (Sashidharan and Francis, 1992). The argument has been that this research, as well as being methodologically unsound, is also racist in its underlying values and ideology. There seems a curious parallel in the present situation, that now women, also an oppressed group, are targeted for the kind of research spotlight which suggests that the problem lies with them all along; it is women's neglect, collusion, provocation or sacrifice of the child which lies at the heart of child sexual abuse.

BLAMING WOMEN

It is not only in the area of sexual abuse that women are currently being identified as the chief perpetrator. A legal precedent was set, in January 1992, when Sally Emery was sentenced to four years imprisonment for failure to protect her baby from the violence of it's father (The Guardian, 15 January 92). Sally's conviction was not for harming her daughter, but for `allowing her to be harmed by her male partner. Her defence was based on evidence that she had also been abused by her partner over a long period of time, and that within this violent relationship she was too frightened to protect her daughter. Despite expert testimony on the paralysing and disempowering effects of long term abuse, the decision of the court was that the death of the child was, effectively, the mother's fault.

It seems as if the expectation of self-sacrifice is built into the construction of motherhood and operates against women's interests in different ways. The connection between this case and the present drive to identify women as sexual abusers suggests a wider trend, actively encouraged by some within a patriarchal society, which holds women as all-responsible for what happens in family life and blameworthy when they fail to control male sexuality and aggression and protect themselves or their children from its violent effects. Within this 'blaming movement' identified some years ago by Ward (1984), any behaviour of women can be interpreted as contributing to or in fact causing the abuse; collusion, neglect, provocation, maintenance, sacrifice, too much or too little protection, being over or under-sexed. In fact, as Glaser and Frosh remind us, there are good reasons why, in our society, it is women who are inappropriately blamed. The pervasive social expectations of mothers to be all-responsible and protect, even to the point of self sacrifice, results in a disproportionate blame of women. This holds true even in those situations, when women do not commit any abuse and are unable rather than unwilling to protect their children:

... the failure of mothers to protect their children is, at least in part, produced by some of the same factors which give rise to the abuse itself. These include the dominance of men in families which is in large part legitimised by an ideological stance that makes women and children into property (Glaser and Frosh, 1988)

The experiences that many women have of male violence and economic dependence on men, shown to be so characteristic of family life, works against women taking effective action against abusive men.

DYNAMICS OF MALE POWER

Even the evidence which purports to delineate the category of 'female
sexual abusers' confirms that nearly all cases of sexual abuse, in which the woman is implicated, occur in the context of a triangular relationship between man, woman and child. In this triangular relationship, a critical determinant appears to be that the woman herself is subordinated within a coercive and often violent relationship with her male partner. The man is therefore instrumental not only in initiating and perpetrating abuse upon the child, but in silencing and enforcing complicity from his partner, who may not be in a position, for a variety of reasons, to challenge his behaviour or leave the relationship. Sandra Horley, Director of Chiswick Family Rescue and one of the expert witnesses who gave evidence in the Sally Emery case, describes the effects of a violent and coercive relationship:

When a woman is abused, she uses all her energy just to survive on a day to day basis. (life becomes) like a roller coaster, completely out of control (The Guardian, 15 February 92).

In situations of physical or sexual abuse of a child, the woman's behaviour can only be understood if it is set in the context of the dynamics of male power over women.

Recent articles, however, have stressed the minority occasions when a woman is identified as sexual abuser outside of an immediate relationship with a man. In doing so, they appear to ignore the wider cultural context in which the sexual abuse of children takes place. An analysis of child sexual abuse must take into account the social environment in which male and female sexuality is defined and expressed. Feminists have argued that the dominance of male phallocentric sexuality and institutionalisation of male pornography normalises notions of sexual conquest over someone who is younger, compliant and accessible, usually a woman. Feminists have identified the pernicious messages relayed by pornography: that sexual violation, humiliation and abuse is erotic; that (young) women are natural sexual prey to men's aggressive sexual appetite (Jeffrys, 1990).

From a feminist perspective, women are seen to be denied autonomy in developing and expressing their own sexuality. If a woman is identified as sexually abusing a child outside of a current male relationship, one might expect the woman's personal history to reveal past experiences connected with male relationships which have been abusive and corrupting of her sexuality. Any discussion of women as sexual abusers must also include the woman's particular history and the general social conditions in which female sexuality develops and is expressed.

THE SEARCH FOR EQUIVALENCE

What is of particular interest are the social processes which underlie and generate the current discourse of female sexual abusers. The identification of female abusers appears to be part of a contemporary search for equivalence, in which abuse by men is equated with abuse by women. Today's focus on female sexual abusers is a reassertion of a 'gender free' analysis of child sexual abuse. Catharine MacKinnon has similarly described the process which has followed discoveries by feminists of male violence or abuse:

... what is striking is that when each discovery is made, and somehow made real in the world, the response has been: it happens to men too.
If women are hurt, men are hurt. If women are raped, men are raped. If women are battered, men are ‘battered. Symmetry must be reasserted. Neutrality must be reclaimed. Equality must be re-established (MacKinnon, 1987.)

Perhaps readers will remember the sexual frisson created by the story from America, but widely reported by the press in this country, of a man who had allegedly been kidnapped, held prisoner and raped by a woman. This was later taken up by Playboy for whom it became yet another pornographic story. More recently, a woman in the north of England was sentenced to six years imprisonment for ‘masquerading as a man’ and ‘seducing two young girls’. Again, the case narrative was constructed from the apparent ‘mirroring’ of gender behaviour. The extensive coverage of this case in the tabloid press was also explicitly voyeuristic and bordered on the pornographic (Sun, 19 September 91).

We can see what Catharine MacKinnon has described as ‘all this men too’ stuff now being applied to the identification of offenders as well as victims. If men abuse, women abuse. Past explanations of male abuse have often been based on an ‘instinctual’ model of male behaviour - men are biologically or otherwise programmed to be aggressive and sexual predators, all the more so if untamed or sexually neglected by their female partner. The reductionism of the biological or instinctual model of explanation has found favour, more recently, in the ‘social model’, which views abusive behaviour as part of the general human conditions, the consequences of external forces impinging on adults. The ‘discovery’ of a separate category of female sexual abusers appears to fit reassuringly into the social model by demonstrating that the over-representation of men as abusers was, after all, an incomplete and false picture. According to this model, it has taken the uncovering of child sexual abuse by men to unearth the more awful, shameful and stigmatising version of the same thing - abuse by women. As the headline of one recent article put it, ‘Same abuse, different parent’ (Wolfers, 1992).

What these explanations ignore is the dynamics of male power and sexuality in the context of gender inequality. The latest ‘discovery’ of female abusers is actively deflecting attention from and displacing the centrality of male oppression in physical and sexual abuse. Not only are the numbers of cases of child sexual abuse which involve women extremely small, but in the majority of these cases the woman’s ‘participation’ or ‘collusion’ has to be understood as the product of an unequal coercive relationship, in which the man is dominant. Current discussions about female abusers that ignore gender power relations will only further pathologise and blame women who are already victims and survivors of violent and corrupting relationships. At present, within this debate, there appears to be only two available responses to so-called female abusers. Either women are once again held responsible for the behaviour of male abusers; they did not control the sexual aggression of their male partners. Alternatively, women’s behaviour is understood as a form of sexual deviance which is intrinsically more evil than any male version.

IDEOLOGICAL RETREAT

The assertion that women are equally involved in sexual abuse of children may well offer an ideological retreat for some professionals and policy makers. Feminist analysis of the unequal relations between
the sexes, built upon a critique of male power and sexuality, demands a radical appraisal of policy and practice in relation to male abuse of children and women. Feminists propose that it is not accidental that children and women are abused by men. Sexual abuse, along with rape, sexual harassment and discrimination of women in society more generally, are understood as built-in mechanisms of male oppression.

From a feminist perspective, preferred professional models of analysis and practice based on individual pathology, dysfunctional families, or incestuous sub-cultures are seen as inadequate and misleading. The current vogue that highlights female abusers may serve to protect professional expertise and practices which stem from an understanding of individual and family pathology that ignores gender power relations. The 'search for equivalence' is being used to rebuild conventional theory and practices that do not differentiate between experiences or the unequal positions of the sexes. The following excerpt comes from a recent article in the social work press, that stresses the similarities between male and female abusers in their use of planning, objectification and denial, and concludes:

... women abusers do not differ greatly from their male counterparts... women perpetrators... tend to following the same pattern... so methods of treatment probably need to be very similar to those devised for man (Wolfers, 1992).

The message appears to be that professionals can get back to the business of understanding and treating (ungendered) individual deviant behaviour. The misogyny that seems to underlie much conventional theory and practice of child protection, which sees mothers as at best 'inadequate', 'immature' or 'colluding, at worst as downright failures, is reflected in the ease with which this latest theory of women has been taken up by the caring professions and the media.

IMPLICATIONS

For managers and practitioners working in the area of child sexual abuse, there are important implications. The underlying analysis used by social workers responding to child sexual abuse will critically inform their assessment and intervention in complex situations of child sexual abuse, where the woman is more likely to be abused than abuser. Allegations or evidence involving a woman in the sexual abuse of a child should be placed in a context which makes explicity the nature of her past or present relationships with men. Practitioners need to identify any coercion or abuse of the woman herself, and place in this particular context the woman's actions relating to her child... This kind of information will only be accessible through time and within a relationship where the woman feels she is not automatically blamed by the worker but listened to as a person in her own right. Assessment should also recognise that a woman's personal history develops within a wider cultural context in which female sexuality is often corrupted and brutalised.

Setting individual women's behaviour within both a personal history and wider social structures generates a critical analysis which is fundamentally challenging. The problem is, however, that within institutional social work practice in the 1990s there is no room for such a critical analysis. Besieged by contradictory public and political expectations and constrained by financial cuts, contemporary social work practice has become increasingly equated
with a tightly managed, procedure-led service, operating within an authoritarian and regulated climate. In situations of child sexual abuse, the focus is firmly on the abused child and identification of abusers. Within this model of social work, assessment becomes investigation, and intervention merely the application of agency guide-lines. In this way, the social worker’s role is limited to that of the ‘Agency worker’ who must demonstrate a commitment to follow the required procedures. Yet, as this paper has argued, it is only within the social context of gender power relations that particular meanings of women's 'involvement' in child sexual abuse become available. If practitioners engage in the full context of child sexual abuse, they immediately move outside the closely monitored world of implementing statutory requirements and enforcing rules. By doing so, they are stepping outside current practice wisdom.

CHALLENGE FOR WORKERS

Within the gendered hierarchy of social services organisations, where women are still under-represented in policy and managerial decision making positions, there is a responsibility to articulate an analysis of women's oppression and strategies of survival and resistance. By introducing this analysis, women workers will inevitably challenge oppressive policies and practice in relation to female clients. The challenge facing workers is to recognise and respond to women's oppression and their struggles of resistance. In the contested arena of child sexual abuse, mothers, as well as their children, need workers as advocates who will articulate their rights and needs as women, not just in relation to the welfare of their children.

In conclusion, any practice that seeks to help survivors of sexual abuse or treat 'offenders', must take into account the dynamics of gender inequality and male power over women and children. Before we contribute towards the creation of a new moral panic which is thoroughly anti-woman, we need to look carefully at the evidence that is presented and the adequacy of analyses that are offered. For feminists in research, teaching or practice, it seems more important than ever to reject the lie of gender equivalence and male-female equality.

References


Sun, (1991)'Blonde dressed as boy seduces 2 girls', 19 September.