Maternal Abusers: Underlying concerns for children

Jackie Turton[*]

Abstract

Child sexual abuse is an emotive topic, which raises public fears and political concerns. Commonly the perpetrators of such abuse are male and their victims female, but evidence suggests that there are a significant number of female perpetrators as well. It is the perceived gendered nature of the crime that creates a stumbling block to the recognition of women who sexually abuse and can silence the child victims. Using data from a wider research project, this paper examines the ways in which female perpetrators rationalise their behaviours and in doing so considers what part these justifications play in silencing the child victims.

1.   Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a crime that incites public outcry. It rocks the foundations of our society and challenges cultural norms and values. When made public by the media, the sexual abuse of a child invariably gives rise to moral panic about the innocence of our children and the fear of predatory paedophiles. The media tends to report what might be considered 'stock images' of sexual abusers that perpetuate 'unhelpful stereotypes which highlight the threat from "psychotic" strangers and obscure the more common form of abuse by known and "well-adjusted" adults.'[1]

As Kitzinger highlights, despite the rhetoric of 'stranger-danger' that surrounds the stories of abuse, the research findings show that the most dangerous place for children is the home.[2] Statistics indicate that perpetrators of sexual abuse against children are male and the most likely victims are female.[3] This is certainly the case, but Bunting suggests that female offenders account for 'up to 5% of all sexual offences against children'.[4] It is the very hidden and

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[*] Dr Jackie Turton is a Lecturer in the Sociology Department at Essex University.

[1] J. Kitzinger, *Framing Abuse: Media influences and public understanding of sexual violence against children* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p.125.

[2] Kitzinger, *Framing Abuse.* See fn.1. See also C. Jenks, *Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1996) and V. Young, 'Women Abusers: A feminist's view' in M. Elliott (ed.), *Female Sexual Abuse of Children: The ultimate taboo* (London: Longman, 1993).

[3] See D. Russell and D. Finkelhor, 'Women as perpetrators' in D. Finkelhor (ed.), *Child Sexual Abuse: New theory and research* (New York: The Free Press, 1984); D. Grubin, *Sex Offending Against Children: Understanding the risk* (London: Police and Reducing Crime Unit, RDS, 1998); P. Cawson, C. Wattam, S. Brooker and G. Kelly, *Child Maltreatment in the UK: A study of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and neglect* (London: NSPCC, 2000); 'Children counselled for sexual abuse by ChildLine reaches a new high', *NSPCC,* Press Release, 9 February 2009. Available at http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/media-centre/press-releases/2009/09-02-09-children-counselled-for-sexual-abuse/09-02-09_children_counselled_for_sexual_abuse_by_ChildLine_reaches_new_high_wdn75019.html. Last access 27 October 2010.

[4] L. Bunting, *Females who Sexually Offend Against Children: Responses of the child protection and criminal justice system* (London: NSPCC, 2005), p.14.

unexpected nature of the crime that has some important implications for the children's rights agenda.

2.   Research summary

The data for this paper has been taken from a larger qualitative investigation into the problems of understanding female sexual abusers, which considers their behaviour from a variety of perspectives.[5] The study required a sociological evaluation of female perpetrators, something made problematic by the fact that it is difficult to gather a significant sample of women who have sexually abused children. Not only are these cases comparatively rare and, as with all child sexual abuse crimes, secretive and hidden, but very few cases – even where male perpetrators have been involved – reach the criminal courts; a convicted population would have at least offered a potential sample group. The data for this study therefore had to be gathered from a number of different sources, including professionals who have worked with child victims and offenders, adults who had been victims of female perpetrators as children, and some female offenders.[6]

The qualitative interviews were thematic, offering respondents the opportunity to tell their stories. Initially these themes were drawn from the limited research regarding female perpetrators and some of the plethora of other child sexual abuse literature. The information gathering took a grounded theory approach,[7] allowing the dimensions of the interviews to grow and develop over the fieldwork period according to the accumulation of knowledge. The resulting data was analysed using the Gerth and Mills[8] concept of vocabularies of motive and the techniques of neutralisation developed by Sykes and Matza.[9] These theories have been used by others to consider how offenders find ways to offer socially acceptable rationales to justify their behaviour.[10] It is important to note that in using this analysis some of the difficulties for victims of female perpetrators were identified.

Child sexual abuse is very emotive for all individuals concerned, so a number of ethical issues had to be considered. By relating their life stories and sexual experiences the respondents risked exposure and ridicule. Gatekeepers had to be found in each case, and respondents reassured in a number of ways. For instance, for many professionals there were obvious concerns about their clients' well being, as well as the credibility of the researcher and issues of confidentiality. These were resolved by discussions concerning the themes and context of the interviews as well as the 'subject adequacy'[11] of the researcher in her knowledge of the child protection process and child abuse more generally. The sensitive nature of the research was evident throughout the process. It

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[5] See J. Turton, *Child Abuse, Gender and Society* (London: Palgrave, 2008).

[6] All the names of victims and offenders quoted in this paper have been changed to protect their identities.

[7] D. Glaser and A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

[8] H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, *Character and Social Structure* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954).

[9] G. Sykes and D. Matza, 'Techniques of neutralization' in J. Muncie, E. McLaughlin & M. Langan (ed.), *Criminological Perspectives* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1957 and 1996).

[10] See also S. Lyman and M. Scott, *A Sociology of the Absurd* (CA: Goodyear, 1970); L. Taylor, 'The Significance and Interpretation of Replies to Motivational Questions: The case of the sex offender', (1972) *Sociology* 6, pp.23-39; S. Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

[11] S. Bruyn, *The Human Perspective in Sociology* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1966).

was sensitive from the aspect of the professionals who in some instances treated female offenders with disbelief: as one respondent put it 'the social image of motherhood and femininity often masks abusive behaviour for professionals' (probation officer). One clinical psychologist suggested that some social workers found disclosures of maternal incest very difficult to manage:

> [Social services] haven't got the resources to do anything (…) and this is happening over and over again (…) they don't want to identify women sexual offenders: they don't mind identifying male sex offenders because actually what they can say is right we'll work with the non-abusing mum (…) keep the children at home (…).

The research was sensitive from the victims' perspective, most of whom in this study had been sexually abused by their mothers, because they had previously been faced with a sceptical world if they had tried to tell their tales. Responses included '(…) but she's your mother dear, of course she wants a cuddle' (Penny).[12] Worse, they were faced with the loss of the maternal figure if they disclosed. This was expressed by one victim: 'I wanted me mum (…) but not the mum I got' (Louise).[13]

Finally it was sensitive for the female offenders themselves. Socially, their stories are so unacceptable that they needed to use a variety of rationales or vocabularies of motive, telling stories as they 'should' be told, and they were constantly in fear of being 'outed' to the community at large. None of the inmates in Margaret's[14] prison, for instance, knew what she was 'in for': the details of her case were known only to the prison governor and her probation worker. Janet[15] was moved seven times during her nine months in prison because she was assaulted or threatened with assault each time her crime was 'discovered'.

This research was a microcosmic, sociological view of the emotive world of women who sexually abuse children, and it revealed ways in which the complexities of protecting children are inextricably linked to the lack of discursive space for stories to be told. The 'unnarrativizable'[16] nature of these stories has not just silenced perpetrators but also their victims, and is embedded within our social practices and cultural understanding of child sexual abuse.

3.   Background considerations

I will turn now to some of the problems we have in conceptualising female perpetrators. Despite recent media interest and public uproar,[17] there remain some key ideological social structures that inhibit our understanding of women as child sex abusers. For instance, in most western cultures,

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[12] Penny suffered emotional abuse at the hands of her mother from about the age of two. The sexual abuse halted when she reached puberty, but the emotional abuse continued until her mother died.

[13] Louise was sexually and physically abused by her mother from an 'early age' until she was sixteen, when she went to live with her boyfriend and his parents.

[14] Margaret digitally penetrated her granddaughter.

[15] Janet masturbated her partner's son.

[16] B. Morissey, *When Women Kill: Questions of agency and subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[17] Nursery worker Vanessa George was convicted of sexually abusing young children in her care in 2009, creating a public outcry and heavy media coverage indicating the disbelief that a woman could be involved with such behaviour.

women, whether mothers or not, are often presumed to be 'naturally nurturing'.[18] Concepts of women are structured in terms of the maternal, and so women share a universal nurturing role, appearing as an 'undifferentiated and unchanging monolith'.[19] They are allowed to have close access to children, and physicality particularly between mother and child is actually expected, applauded and rewarded. The perception of the maternal bond allows the development of an idealised maternity, and in some cases it is the presumption that women have a special and caring relationship with children that works towards disguising abusive behaviour. In reality, the mother-child bond can be much more ambivalent,[20] although it remains difficult to move beyond the Madonna imagery.[21] Another aspect of the mother role is that it rests in a sexual paradox. In other words female sexuality is presumed to be suppressed by maternity, and under this guise mothers are not only perceived as nurturing but also as 'asexual to their children'.[22] The effect of this essentialist approach to understanding maternity is to disallow mothers who may have ambivalent feelings towards their children by failing to account for those who find their relationship with children difficult or different. Thus, despite the evidence, questions remain about the possibility of women, especially mothers, sexually abusing children and, furthermore, whether such women cause any harm to their victims even if they do.

There seems little doubt, either statistically or in terms of research, that men do sexually abuse much more commonly than women, which further encourages questions about the credibility of women as perpetrators of such acts against children. However, considerable evidence has been gathered over the last decade to suggest that a significant minority of child sexual abuse involves female offenders; the research prevalence rates vary from approximately five to fifteen percent of all children who are sexually abused.[23] Probably more pertinently, ChildLine[24] figures for 2001–2002 revealed that '13% of the 8402 children counselled in relation to sexual abuse reported the involvement of a female perpetrator'.[25] This indicates that we are not talking about just a few 'dysfunctional' women, but that the subject is relevant for sociological consideration.

The second question frequently raised is whether female perpetrators afflict any harm on their victims. As early as 1972, Mathis voiced his scepticism about female perpetrators, arguing, 'that she might seduce a child into sex play is unthinkable and even if she did so what harm could she do without a penis?'[26] In reality sexual abuse involves a variety of acts of which penetration by a penis is just one. Nevertheless, what many researchers have suggested in the past is that while all victims may suffer harm at the hands of their perpetrators, child victims of male offenders suffer more harm.[27] However, it is important to recognise that women who sexually abuse children can, and occasionally do, commit sexually sadistic acts: sodomising by penetrating with objects,

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[18] E. Glenn, 'Social Constructions of Mothering' in E. Glenn, G. Chang and L. Forcey (ed.), *Mothering: Ideology, experience and agency* (London: Routledge, 1994).
[19] E. Glenn, 'Social Constructions of Mothering', p.13. See fn.18.
[20] R. Parker, 'The production and purposes of maternal ambivalence' in W. Hollway and B. Featherstone (ed.), *Mothering and Ambivalence* (London: Routledge, 1997).
[21] E. Welldon, *Madonna, Mother, Whore* (New York: Guilford, 1988).
[22] A. Banning, 'Mother-Son Incest: Confronting the prejudice', (1989) *Child Sexual Abuse and Neglect* 13, p.567.
[23] See Russell and Finkelhor, 'Women as perpetrators' and Bunting, *Females who Sexually Offend.* See fn.3 and 4.
[24] ChildLine is a 24-hour counselling helpline for children and young people based in the UK. See http://www.childline.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx. Last access 27 October 2010.
[25] Bunting, *Females who Sexually Offend,* p.12. See fn.4.
[26] J. Mathis, *Clear Thinking about Sexual Deviations* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1972), p.54.
[27] M. Mendel, *The Male Survivor: The impact of sexual abuse* (CA: Sage Focus, 1995).

burning, pinching, and biting breasts and genitals have all been recorded.[28] If we consider the victims' views, then in many instances they have reported that sexual abuse by a female relative is more shameful and damaging. Sgroi and Sargent, for example, identified that

> (…) all seven of [their] adult female victims reported a perception that sexual abuse by a first-degree female relative (mother or sister) was the most shameful and damaging form of childhood victimisation they had suffered (…).[29]

The abuse suffered by victims may be further accentuated by feelings of maternal rejection, as indicated in the cases of Penny and Petra:

> (…) she passed on huge clouds of guilt to me. I remember her blaming me for what went on at times. I remember her being angry with me, and she was very dangerous when she was angry (…) and I remember her looking at me with disgust and contempt. She could also behave in a very hurt way, which made me feel terrible and made me do what she wanted me to do (…). (Penny).

> (…) she [mother] used to tell me I was a nobody (…) it's all this feeling and all this pain (…) you don't know what to do with all this pain (…). (Petra).[30]

A final comment about the harm female perpetrators can inflict has been found in at least three pieces of research undertaken with rapists identifying that a significant number record being sexually abused by older women when they were children. For example, Groth's[31] study suggested that 66% of his sample had been victimised by a female perpetrator. Petrovich and Templar's[32] study on rapists showed that over 50% of their respondents disclosed sexual abuse by an older female. Briere & Smiljanich's[33] self-report study found that

> (…) among the sexually abused men who reported sexual aggression against women, 80% had been sexually abused during childhood by a female perpetrator. In other words, sexual activity during childhood with an older female strongly predicted later sexual aggression against adult women and childhood sexual victimisation by females is a particular risk factor for later assault directed at adult female victims (…).[34]

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[28] See C. Lawson, 'Mother-Son Sexual Abuse: Rare or underreported? A critique of the research', (1993) *Theory, Culture and Society* 10, pp.103-126; H. Ramsey-Klawsnik, 'Sexual Abuse by Female Perpetrators: Impact on children', *Proceedings of the National Symposium on Child Victimization*, Family Violence and Sexual Assault Institute, Atlanta, GA, 1990.

[29] S. Sgroi, and N. Sargent, 'Impact and Treatment Issues for Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse by Female Perpetrators', in M. Elliott (ed.), *Female Sexual Abuse of Children: The ultimate taboo* (London: Longman, 1993), p.23.

[30] Petra was abused by her mother and her father. The sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother stopped when she was about fourteen years old.

[31] N. Groth, *Men Who Rape* (New York: Plenum, 1978).

[32] M. Petrovich and D. Templar, 'Heterosexual Molestation of Children Who Later Become Rapists', (1984) *Psychological Reports* 54, p.810.

[33] J. Briere and K. Smilijanich, 'Childhood Sexual Abuse and Subsequent Sexual Aggression against Adult Women' Paper presented at the 101st Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, August, 1993.

[34] Summarised in Mendel, *The Male Survivor*, p.62. See fn.27.

While these research results are important, they need to be considered alongside other factors, such as the ways in which denial, minimisation and justifications are used by those convicted of sexual crimes like rape. Nevertheless, these studies offer an indication of the long-term physical, emotional and psychological harm abusive women can inflict on their child victims.

There does appear to be a social link between the idealisation of the maternal role, which encourages the popular incredulity that women can be sexually aggressive or harmful to children, and the lack of discursive space for the narratives of the female perpetrator and her victim. According to Plummer,[35] there has to be a social and cultural 'right time' for telling new stories, and for narratives to be socially accepted. Currently there is little public tolerance or discursive space for any paedophile, whatever the gender of the offender, in the UK, and as with victim stories of rape[36] and child abuse,[37] any tales that are told by or about perpetrators tend to be consumed into the collective stereotype:

> (…) there are very few stories from identified 'child sex abusers'; once caught their own story goes silent and instead their tale gets incorporated into tales of critics, researchers, analysts. Their own story in their own voice is not heard (…).[38]

Within this quote Plummer was referring to male paedophiles that do experience a negotiated narrative, however limited. There is no space for the female perpetrator's story to emerge, which creates some obvious difficulties for the offenders, and for child protection professionals. The most worrying problem, however, is for the child victims who inevitably find disclosure difficult and who may be silenced by the response to tales of their experiences. Sometimes this response takes the form of total disbelief: '(…) rubbish – women don't sexually abuse children. It must have been the children misunderstanding motherly love (…)'.[39] Sometimes victims cannot find the right words: '(…) I was incapable of expressing myself clearly because the words would simply not come out. I existed emotionally behind a wall of silence (…).'[40]

Sometimes victims do not want to tell adults with whom they feel safe:

> (…) they [aunt and grandmother] were very important to me as a child (…). I never (…) I don't think ever felt like telling (…) I just felt I could behave like a child with them and be quite safe and secure in that and quite safe about what would happen when I was with them. (May).

> (…) but you see I never tell her [grandmother] about the abuse. She asked me; she asked me lots of times (…) but I never tell her (…). I don't know why but I guess it's (…) I was afraid of losing her. (Petra).

Sometimes victims do not disclose until well into their adult lives:

> (…) I was thirty years old when I talked [disclosed abuse] (…) before that you know for

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[35] K. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, change and social worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995).
[36] See K. Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, fear and feminism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994).
[37] See J. Woodiwiss, *Contesting Stories of Child Sexual Abuse* (Basingstoke, PalgraveMacmillan, 2009).
[38] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p.118. See fn.35.
[39] Cited in Elliott, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, p.7. See fn.2.
[40] Jane's story can be found in Elliott, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, p.140. See fn.2.

the first sixteen years there was sexual abuse, with no hugging going on (…) that was my model (Petra).

As these examples suggest, while we fail to develop discursive opportunities for paedophiles to be heard we also continue to silence their child victims.

The silencing of narratives from both victims and offenders has, to some extent, been exacerbated by the feminist discourse surrounding child sexual abuse.[41] Feminist approaches to child sexual abuse evolved in the wake of the second phase of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, the radical feminist hypothesis concerning patriarchy, masculinity and male power has been highly influential within policy and practice, and in considering underlying causes of child sexual abuse. It was this critique which raised the profile of concern about rape, domestic violence, and child abuse, identifying the asymmetrical gendered power relations within the family structure. This focus has done much to publicly expose the everyday violence faced by many women and children.

However, there are concerns about the essentialist nature of this discourse – which emphasises the aggressiveness of men and the victimisation of women – as within this context it is difficult to recognise women as perpetrators.[42] Furthermore, reducing the explanation of child sexual abuse to masculinity and male power is too simplistic.[43] Child sexual abuse requires a broader framework to account for not just 'the differences between genders but also for different masculinities and femininities'.[44] A number of feminists have cautiously critiqued the original thesis,[45] despite the understandable concern that these challenges might undermine theories of male violence, particularly male violence against women.[46] In the meantime the popularity of feminist discourse among child protection workers remains and can lead to female perpetrators being 'missed'.[47]

Therefore, while highly influential, the difficulty the feminist discourse presents concerning female perpetrators is three-fold. Firstly, the approach essentialises the masculinisation of aggression and the feminisation of victimhood.[48] Secondly, by doing so it suggests that

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[41] See C. Allen, **'**Women as Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse: Recognition barriers', in A. Horton, B. Johnson, L. Roundy and D. Williams (ed.), *Incest Perpetrators: A family member no-one wants to treat* (CA: Sage Focus, 1990); Mendel, *The Male Survivor*, p.62. See fn.27.

[42] See Allen, **'**Women as Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse'. See fn.41. Mendel, *The Male Survivor*, p.62. See fn.27.

[43] S. Walklate, *Gender, Crime and Criminal Justice* (Devon: Willan, 2001).

[44] Turton, *Child Abuse, Gender and Society,* p.35. See fn.5.

[45] See C. Smart, *Law, Crime and Sexuality* (London: Sage, 1995); C. Renzetti, **'**The Challenge to Feminism Posed by Women's Use of Violence in Intimate Relationships' in S. Lamb (ed.), *New Version of Victims: Feminists struggle with the concept* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); A. Cossins, *Masculinities, Sexualities and Child Sexual Abuse* (Cambridge, USA: Kluwer Law International, 2000); Walklate, *Gender, Crime and Criminal Justice.* See fn.43; A. Worrall, **'**Rendering Women Punishable: The making of a penal crisis' in P. Carlen (ed.), *Women and Punishment* (Devon, UK: Willan, 2002); P. Carlen, *Women and Punishment* (Devon, UK: Willan, 2002); K. Carrington, 'Feminism and Critical Criminology: Confronting genealogies' in K. Carrington and R. Hogg (ed.), *Critical Criminology: Issues, debates, challenges* (Devon, UK: Willan, 2002).

[46] See Renzetti, **'**The Challenge to Feminism'. See fn.45.

[47] See Turton, *Child Abuse, Gender and Society*. See fn.5.; M. Denov, *Perspectives on Female Sexual Offending: A culture of denial* (London, UK: Ashgate, 2004); Mendel, *The Male Survivor,* see fn.27.

[48] See Mendel, *The Male Survivor*, p.62. See fn.27

[p]aternal incest is considered exaggerated naturalism because socially, masculinity and paternity require the attributes of protection, power, possession and passion. So male sex offenders can be rationalised in terms of their sexuality.[49]

Finally, as a consequence, this notion, alongside the 'victim status' of women, removes the concept of female perpetrators beyond the continuum of expected female sexuality.

4.   Findings

As suggested above, a number of social stumbling blocks to understanding female sexual abusers are embedded in our social and cultural constructions of women. Furthermore the success of the feminist discourse has in some ways inhibited the discursive space for such narratives of child abuse by women. Now I want to turn the discussion to some of the findings from the offenders' perspectives in order to link these with potential problems for protecting children and their rights.

While denial may seem an obvious excuse for committing acts of sexual abuse against children, in the case of female perpetrators it is the ways in which they deny or minimise their behaviour that is interesting. As Plummer suggested, the vocabularies of motive available for some topics are restricted, so there is a limit to the justifications that can be used to rationalise the behaviour.[50] Taylor also identified these restrictions for excuses in his research about men who sexually abuse.[51] Any denial, rationalisation or justification for deviance is usually constructed within generalised societal discourses, so the justification used is taken from the stock of acceptable social narratives.[52] In the examples below we can begin to see how these women rationalised their behaviour, sometimes altering the rationale depending on the response or audience, all the time attempting to make the behaviour appear acceptable not just to those around them but to themselves as well.

4.1   Lapses in mental or physical functioning

For example, a momentary lapse in mental or physical functioning 'rather than a lifetime of erotic focus'[53] may be used as an excuse, as it is more likely to be accepted. Margaret therefore suggested 'I was drunk' and 'it only happened once'. We understand that reactions and responses may drift outside of the norm if the offender is drunk and, while we may abhor the behaviour, to a certain extent the justification may appear acceptable.[54] Taylor has suggested that for male offenders, once any rationale has been vocalised and aligned with social norms in some way, it

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[49] Turton, *Child Abuse, Gender and Society,* p.36. See fn.5.
[50] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories.* See fn.35
[51] Taylor, 'The Significance and Interpretation'. See fn.10.
[52] See Cohen, *States of Denial.* See fn.10; E. Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and denial in everyday life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[53] D. Howitt, *Paedophiles and Sexual Offences against Children* (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 1995), p.159.
[54] For instance, Cohen suggested that 'the greater the suffering inflicted the more radical are the denials of responsibility […] thus sex offenders typically offer (and judges prefer) fully non-responsible accounts: cortical breakdown ('can't remember a thing'), inner impulse (a sudden urge, the animal theory of sexuality) and under-socialisation (misreading the cues)'. Cohen, *States of Denial,* p.60. See fn.10.

means that offenders may assume the behaviour is acceptable and that they have been given consent to continue.[55] Therefore as 'outsiders', in accepting the excuse and minimising the behaviour, professionals may inadvertently collude with the perpetrator and encourage or condone further abuse.

4.2   Blaming the victim

The same offender, Margaret, later admitted to abusing her granddaughter on more than one occasion and is likely to have abused her own two daughters. In a further interview she used another excuse, placing blame on the victim. This time Margaret suggested that her granddaughter was already sexually promiscuous, that 'she wanted it'. Margaret went on to say that her granddaughter had sexually encouraged her, that 'she was acting in a sexualised way', and that after all 'she could have left at any time'. She also blamed the child's mother, her own daughter, for poor mothering, lack of care and encouraging her daughter's promiscuous behaviour. Suggesting the victim is at fault is not new, and in the case of child sexual abuse this excuse attaches to the binary notions of either the good, innocent child or the sexualised, evil child. These binary depictions of childhood can easily be consumed in the paradoxical regimes offered to young people – welfare and protection on the one side and punishment and control on the other. As Smart explains

> [s]uch attitudes persist, transforming the abused child into a problem that needs regulation. (…) [T]his often creates a situation of blaming the child for her abuse since, by being abused, she forfeits the protection of innocence. (…) It would therefore seem that bound up with the very motivation to protect are the doubts that all children deserve this protection (…).[56]

Such a justification for offending behaviour draws on these constructed binary concepts of children,[57] and by doing so the attention is moved away from the offender to the child, raising questions around culpability.

4.3   Mothering and childcare

Unlike Margaret, Janet found alternative more 'natural' justifications to her behaviour. She used narratives around mothering and childcare to rationalise the abuse. She suggested that she was not 'cut out' to be a mother but she did 'her best': 'Once I had Richard I knew I wasn't capable of looking after children. (…) [B]asically no mothering instincts' (Janet). As far as she was concerned, her behaviour was not sexually abusive: 'I had to get them clean'. In reality, Janet's behaviour was sexually sadistic, but because it occurred when the children were being bathed, she minimised the abusive by linking it to the normalised and routine nature of the mothering role.

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[55] Taylor, 'The Significance and Interpretation'. See fn.10.
[56] C. Smart, *Feminism and the Power of the Law* (London: Routledge, 1989).
[57] See Jenks, *Childhood,* above, fn.2.

4.4   Maternal attachments

Other 'natural' notions around the mothering role such as maternal attachment and the mother-child bond are highly valued within the family setting, but on occasion some mothers remain so closely linked to their children that they fail to recognise them as separate. In Banning's research, for example, one mother who sexually abused her son said: 'I felt his body was mine'.[58] May, a victim respondent, suggested that her mother reacted in a sexual way to her vulnerability when she was young and treated her as an extension of herself. May felt she became her mother's sex object. There are some difficult dilemmas concerning this sense of attachment for those children sexually abused by their mothers, and these are considered briefly below.

4.5   Falling in love

Linked in some ways to the maternal attachment is the more extreme version of Brenda's abusive behaviour with one of her sons whom she just 'loved (…) too much'. She said her relationship with Charles was special, beautiful and loving. 'It was like everyone's vision of what they want out of life – it's the warm tingly feelings inside'. She saw Charles as her knight in shining armour. Brenda's justification for the sexual abuse of Charles was embedded in her notions of maternal love, but the boundaries between maternity and sexuality had become blurred.

These are just some examples of the struggles female perpetrators have in their attempts to align their narratives with societal norms and, in order to do this, to select a series of more socially acceptable motives and rationales to account for their behaviour. If there are any true motives they may never become apparent: they may be too deeply hidden within the subconscious, and are certainly too difficult to voice in the current social climate. These vocabularies of motive reveal some of the social structures and stereotypes that provide windows of opportunity to justify abusive behaviour.

5.   Understanding the underlying issues for children

There are three main areas of concern for children that I want to highlight in relation to the findings discussed above.

5.1   The idealised notion of mothering

Motz has suggested that in order to understand female sexual offenders we need to rethink the concept of maternity; we need to listen to what offenders have to say about their experiences of mothering and being mothered.[59] In general, the sexual abuse of children by women falls outside of the child abuse framework. Unlike male offenders whose behaviour, as suggested, may be rationalised as an extension of masculinity,[60] women who sexually abuse children need to revert

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[58] Banning, 'Mother-Son Incest'. See fn.22.
[59] A. Motz, *The Psychology of Female Violence: Crimes against the body* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001).
[60] See Cossins, *Masculinities*. See fn.45.

to other discourses such as maternity and childcare lest they be considered doubly deviant,[61] as both offenders and in terms of their female sexuality. They have to realign their behaviours with the social norms and formulate explanations to deliver what is 'acceptable' or justifiable, as Lyman & Scott suggest,[62] in terms of an excuse. As seen above, Janet adopts a mothering skills approach: 'I had to get them clean'. Margaret suggests that hers was a one-off mistake while under the influence of alcohol, pathologising and yet at the same time somehow normalising the behaviour. Brenda extends the attributes of mothering which are so admired, invoking a rather idealised bond between mother and child: 'I wanted to show I loved him'.

Not only do we have a social role stereotype for women that presumes a naturally nurturing demeanour therefore, but we also make no real allowance for any alternative emotional responses to infants and children. Rather than accepting any maternal ambivalence, it is much easier to assume that all mothers will love their children, or can be persuaded to do so.[63] This leaves vulnerable children with fewer opportunities to disclose as there is an assumption of maternal protection.

5.2   *Professional denial and minimisation*

Some of the difficulties professionals have when dealing with female perpetrators is linked to these stereotypical ideas of motherhood and the mothering role, especially when abusive behaviour, like Janet's, is hidden under the guise of childcare. Hetherton and Beardsall found that female abusers are much more likely than male abusers to have their behaviour reframed to fit feminine role models:

> [T]he practical implication is (…) that where professionals are confronted with an alleged female perpetrator who cannot be reframed as masculine, it may be harder for them to sustain the belief that child sexual abuse has occurred.[64]

This finding has been replicated elsewhere,[65] indicating that some professionals minimise and excuse the behaviour of female perpetrators in ways not applied to their male counterparts.

There are a number of implications here for protecting children. Failure to recognise the abuse in the first instance obviously leaves the child victim very vulnerable. Second, the consequence of inaction is that the protective codes embedded within the new Sexual Offences Act of 2003 and the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 are not activated, and so whatever is offered in terms of protection and children's rights may be lost to this group of victims. Finally, while we have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and incorporated it into our

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[61] See A. Lloyd, *Doubly Deviant, Doubly Damned* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

[62] Lyman and Scott, *A Sociology of the Absurd.* See fn.10.

[63] B. Featherstone, 'Introduction: Crisis in the Western family' in W. Hollway and B. Featherstone (ed.), *Mothering and Ambivalence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

[64] J. Hetherton and L. Beardsall, 'Decisions and Attitudes Concerning Child Sexual Abuse: Does the gender of the perpetrator make a difference to child protection professionals?', (1998) *Child Abuse and Neglect* 22(12), pp.1265–1283.

[65] See Turton, *Child Abuse, Gender and Society.* See fn.5; Denov, *Perspectives on Female Sexual Offending.* See fn.47.

legal system,[66] we need to offer a discursive space for the narratives of abuse to be heard before we can debate individual human rights concerns.

5.3   Silencing child victims

As I have suggested, some victims do not disclose until adulthood and many may never 'tell', partly because of the denial and minimisation of the behaviour by female offenders. For instance, Penny found that when she tried to talk to someone as a child, responses like 'but she's your mother dear, of course she wants a cuddle' were not conducive to disclosing the abuse she suffered.

For other victims, disclosure to an outsider would mean that they had to abandon the maternal attachment, which Louise found proved to be too difficult to forego, suggesting 'I want me mum…but not the mum I got'. Rosencrans encapsulated the problem very aptly by stating that

> [m]others have enormous power to validate the lovableness and value of children. This child within us as adults seems to believe that, more than any other person, mother can convince the world that we are worthwhile human beings. Mothers can convince us of that (…) abused children want it.[67]

Survivors may hate the abuse but they want to be loved by their mothers, and it is this need that adds to the conflict for victims considering disclosure.[68]

When opportunities do occur for the child, some victims are scared of spoiling or losing the good relationships they have found. Therefore, like Petra, they make the calculated choice not to disclose, by saying, 'I thought I would tell her (…) but how could I?' The risks were too high; the safety within the relationship was too important. Despite wanting the abuse to stop, these examples show some of the dilemmas that silence child victims even if they are ready to tell their stories.

6.   Conclusion

Female offenders tend to deny abuse or intent of harm, especially when the victims are children. However, the ways in which they deny – their rationales – offer an opportunity to see the effects of the social expectations of mothering on these women and by default on their child victims. There are no ideal ways of suggesting how child victims might find a voice. However, perhaps we do need to consider the idealisation of the mother role and how best we can challenge this

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[66] Specifically, Article 34 safeguards concerning the protection of children against sexual abuse have been incorporated into the Sexual Offences Act of 2003. More generally, both of the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 cover the welfare of the child, children's rights and parental responsibility. These two Acts, and several child protection enquiries such as Laming 2003, have lead to a series of guidance policies for child protection agencies such as Every Child Matters (2004) and, more recently, Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (2009).

[67] B. Rosencrans, *The Last Secret: Daughters sexually abused by their mothers* (Brandon, VT: Safer Society Press, 1997), p.33.

[68] Turton, *Child Abuse, Gender and Society*. See fn.5. Elliott, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children*. See fn.2.

construct both to help those women who struggle with ambivalence and to find ways to support child victims of sexual abuse.