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WORKING AGAINST VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN



## Is there a correlation between child sexual abuse and domestic violence?

An exploratory study of links between child sexual abuse and domestic  
violence in a sample of intrafamilial child sexual abuse cases

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The interviews with women took place over 1991/'92

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## INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse is not a new problem but it has been given a particularly high profile in the past decade. Adult survivors have helped raise public awareness about the extent and dynamics of sexual abuse by courageously talking about their personal childhood experiences. However, the true extent of child sexual abuse is still not known. Furthermore, we do not know the true 'dynamics' of how children are silenced and distanced from sources of help.

Explanations about child sexual abuse are varied. The two main theoretical perspectives informing literature and practice are a family dysfunction/psychoanalytical model and a feminist perspective. The family dysfunction model tends to place causality as circular. It states that responsibility for the abuse is shared amongst family members and that the abuse has happened because of family dysfunction. A feminist perspective sees the family as dysfunctional because of the abuse and sees abuse as part of a spectrum of male violence and dominance.

Within both perspectives, there is discussion about the role of the mother in child sexual abuse. There has been much debate about this area amongst survivors, helpers, academics and the media. The literature is often critical of mothers and this influences professional practice and responses. The mother blaming in this literature has been well documented in the feminist work of Macleod and Saraga, Nelson, Hooper, Lloyd and Hall (1).

Discovering that your child has been sexually abused by your partner raises many complex issues. Reactions from women are as varied as the many agencies the family has contact with following discovery. However, contrary to the myths existing about mother's reactions, the majority of women support their child, in spite of their lives having been challenged and radically changed (2). It was my contact as a social work practitioner with women whose children had been sexually abused that led to my interest in a study exploring the dynamics of child sexual abuse, with a central focus being the woman's relationship with the abusive man.

This study was therefore undertaken to look further at the dynamics within the family where a child has suffered sexual abuse, to ascertain whether domestic violence was a feature, that is whether the child's

mother was being abused by the man who abused the child. As it emerged that domestic violence was a feature in the lives of all twenty women who were interviewed, I have tried to gain insight into the links and effects on women and children when domestic violence and child sexual abuse co-exist. Before moving on to discuss the findings of the present study, I would like to refer to some previous research studies on which I have drawn.

We have learned from this present study and from child sexual abuse prevalence studies (referred to later) that the abuse of women and children is far greater than recorded incidents (3). Yet, 'prevalence' varies according to definitions within the studies and may minimise the extent of abuse. Another factor which affects statistics is that legal definitions of child sexual abuse and domestic violence do not always reflect the child and woman's experience.

For example, with regard to child sexual abuse, non physical sexual abuse may affect a child's life. An example of this was highlighted in the Women's Support Project's survey on violence against women (4). A woman described that as an adolescent her father told her he wanted to have sex with her. He never ever did, but the fear was always there that he might. This was a betrayal of trust and changed her relationship with him completely.

The most recent study in Britain into the prevalence of sexual abuse in a sample of 16 - 21 year olds found that 1 in 2 girls and 1 in 4 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before their eighteenth birthday. Only 5% of 1,051 incidents were ever reported to any agency and only 10 resulted in any form of prosecution. Additional information highlighted by the research was that 95% of abusers were male in the adult abusers category and 85% in the peer group and that in the majority of cases the abuser was known to the child (5).

By the very definition of domestic violence it is men known to women who are the perpetrators. Another similarity to child sexual abuse is that men abuse women and children across all classes and cultures. Like child sexual abuse, legal definitions of violence often do not reflect women's experience. For example women are emotionally and, or, mentally abused by partners and this could involve constantly being belittled, humiliated,

insulted, and could involve threats. However, such behaviour is often not considered a crime.

Again, the true extent is not known. 'Domestic' violence does not appear as a distinct category in criminal records or statistics. In the Dobashes study into 'Violence Against Wives' they found that 26% of violent crime reported to the police in Scotland, involved violence against women from their partners (6).

The fact is that most women do not report such violence and for the women who do report most do not report the first time that violence is used, nor do they report every time. In many cases, if a charge is made, it does not reflect the reality and terror of the situation. For example shouting, threats, breaking up furniture, incidents that place women in real fear of their lives, may be classified as 'breach of the peace'.

When Scottish Women's Aid carried out a survey of women in refuge they found that only 2% of the assaults which the women had suffered had been recorded by the police (7).

A great deal of the literature on male violence discusses the areas of male violence separately such as domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, child sexual abuse, pornography and sexual harassment. Yet women often experience all of these forms of violence. If they do not actually experience the abuse personally, fear exists as a result of other women's experience. This has a controlling effect on women, curtailing their freedom, adding undue stress to their lives and affecting their confidence.

Dr Liz Kelly makes links between the different forms of violence suffered by women and children in her book 'Surviving Sexual Violence'. She stresses that most women have experienced sexual violence in their lives; that there is a range of male behaviour that women experience as abusive; and that sexual violence occurs in the context of men's power and women's resistance (8) - see also Appendix One).

The study on which this report is based, was funded by the Scottish Office and was carried out as part of the work of the Women's Support Project which is a voluntary organisation based in the East End of Glasgow. The Project aims to raise awareness about the nature and extent of violence suffered by women and children such as domestic

violence, rape and sexual assault, and child sexual abuse, and tries to ensure an improved and consistent service. This is done through information, advice and support, groupwork, development, research and education work, and this is directed at both women and workers (Appendix 2).

The study examines the prevalence of domestic violence in cases of intrafamilial child sexual abuse. Twenty women, from the Strathclyde area of Scotland, whose children had been sexually abused were interviewed. The alleged abuser was the woman's partner. The interviews took place during 1991/92.

The aim was to look at whether the woman had suffered domestic violence from the child's abuser and if this was the case, to explore links between domestic violence and child sexual abuse. This was with a view to understanding more about the dynamics of child sexual abuse, to examine how this affects responses to abused women and children and to look at suggestions for practice.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The study began as a research proposal for a course assignment whilst I was a student on a post qualifying course in Child Protection at the University of Dundee. The proposal was subsequently submitted to Social Work Services Group (Scotland) and resulted in the research proposal becoming an exploratory study funded through Section 8 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. This section funds practitioner research. The hypothesis to the study was: "That mothers of children who have been sexually abused, have themselves often been subjected to physical and/or sexual abuse from the same abuser. Is there a correlation between Child Sexual Abuse and Domestic Violence?"

My interest in such a study grew from two main areas. Firstly, as a statutory social worker, working with children who had been sexually abused, I found that in many cases the mothers had been subjected to domestic violence from the same abuser.

Secondly, working as a co-facilitator with a support group for women whose children had been sexually abused, organised by the Women's

Support Project, out of eight women who came forward for the group, six had experienced domestic violence from the man who had abused their children. The abusers were husbands, ex-husbands, cohabitantes and boyfriends. One other woman whose child had been sexually abused by her father-in-law, stated that he was physically and emotionally abusive to his wife. The remaining woman disclosed no domestic violence (9).

The prevalence therefore of domestic violence in child sexual abuse cases seemed high in my practice experience but also this had been endorsed by other practitioners. For example, work at the Harborview Sexual Assault Centre in Seattle, has also linked domestic violence with child sexual abuse:

*"By downgrading, demeaning and disparaging the mother to his child victims, the offender consciously distances the children from the mother. The children come to see the mother as an ineffective parent who carries no authority in her parenting role..." (10)*

Furthermore, recent studies such as Dietz and Craft, Yvonne Tormes, and Truesdell, McNeill and Deschner have begun to examine the links between domestic violence and child sexual abuse (11).

In the U.K. the Children's Legal Centre has submitted a report to the Home Affairs Select Committee on Children and Domestic Violence (12). It highlights the need for people working in the area of child protection to be made aware of the impact of domestic violence on women and children. The three main areas of correlation between domestic violence and child abuse referred to are:

- (a) that children both witness domestic violence and are themselves subjected to physical violence by their father or mother's partner.
- (b) studies such as Casey's suggest that women in refuge because of domestic violence have concerns about confirmed or suspected sexual abuse of their children.
- (c) children are frequently emotionally abused when violent men use children in an attempt to manipulate and control their partners, both during the relationship and after separation.



Carol Ann Hooper has researched mothers' responses to the sexual abuse of their children. In her book 'Mothers Surviving Child Sexual Abuse' she aims to demonstrate the complexity of mothers' responses and the way they are embedded in the social relations within which child sexual abuse occurs. She points out that by helping and supporting mothers, children will be supported.

References in her book to links between child sexual abuse and domestic violence are also noted in respect of women's responses. She states that in situations where women are abused by men there is considerable potential for confusion and manipulation of reality:

*"Even without the secrecy surrounding child sexual abuse, women abused themselves by partners are not always aware of it at the time, since the emotional abuse underlying all forms of violence involves a distortion of subjective reality which undermines their faith in their own perceptions (Kirkwood 1991)" (13)*

The basis of my interest in carrying out an exploratory study into examining links between child sexual abuse and domestic violence has been described above. The purpose of the study was to examine in a wider context the prevalence of domestic violence with a sample of women whose children had been sexually abused. I also proposed to explore the links between child sexual abuse and domestic violence and the meaning and impact of this for women and children.

In all twenty cases the woman and child(ren) had been through the child protection system. The children's experience of sexual abuse corresponded to the definition at Appendix 4. The extent of domestic violence became known following interviews with the women using the definition of domestic violence also at Appendix 4.

The study does not tell us about sexual abuse by other men, other than the mother's partner. It did, however, show that wife abuse was a feature in a sample of child sexual abuse cases. Whilst the sample was small and findings should be considered tentatively they are similar to findings of studies in the USA and Canada (14).

Gender was quite specific in the study. The non-abusing parent was the mother, the alleged abusers were men, and the survivors were both girls and boys although most were girls.

The findings do indicate the importance of professionals concerned with child protection being aware of the interactions of different kinds of violence and abuse in women's and children's lives. The intention of the report is to raise debate and discussion about the links and to make recommendations for practice

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The findings of this study and others, already mentioned, suggest that where children are being sexually abused their mother may also be suffering from domestic violence. This is not to suggest that the two will not also exist separately or that children will always be abused by men who abuse their partners. However, the proportion is significant to highlight the need to explore the possibilities in order to help the woman and child in respect of short and long term therapeutic work. For example some men may use the domestic violence to facilitate and hide the sexual abuse.

In particular, the findings highlight three areas to consider for social workers and other workers who work in the field of child sexual abuse:

- consideration that domestic violence may be a feature of child sexual abuse cases.
- understanding the links between different forms of violence and how the abuse of the child's mother affects the child telling and the mother's 'discovery'.
- empowering women - having knowledge of services available to help women, making use of these services and informing women of their existence - offering support to women and positively reinforcing their strengths.

In addition the findings could contribute to work with offenders in respect of victim awareness and offenders taking responsibility for how they 'groom' situations.

The women were interviewed because their children had been sexually abused by their partner. It was not known at the point of contact whether the woman had suffered domestic violence. An interview guide of question prompts was used. (Appendix 3).

During interviews all of the women disclosed that they had suffered domestic violence and their experiences varied between mental, sexual and physical abuse. Domestic violence was defined by a checklist of abusive behaviour which included: being told you are useless/stupid/lazy/ugly etc., being humiliated in front of the children, being forced to have sex, slapped, punched etc. (Appendix 4). In only three cases was physical violence not an aspect of the abuse.

Similar to discussions in literature about male violence, I found that women had difficulty naming their experiences. The majority of women (14 of them) were discussing and naming their experiences for the first time, only after going through the domestic violence checklist. Not only did women have difficulty in naming their experience, but also 'professionals' occasionally failed to recognise and name domestic violence which became apparent from their responses to women. Over one third of the women described situations where they were forced to take part in sex or sexual activities that they otherwise did not want. Seven out of the twenty women named what they had suffered as rape.

Of the alleged abusers, seventeen were natural fathers, one a stepfather, one an adoptive father, and one a co-habitee. One natural father also abused his step children. Only two men were convicted. All cases had statutory social work involvement.

The links between domestic violence and child sexual abuse have been drawn from the conversations with the women and in some cases with the children. The following points were noted.

Overwhelmingly domestic violence and child sexual abuse are crimes of violence committed by men against women and children and more girls are sexually abused than boys.

The same process is applied to both, that is, the woman and child experiencing isolation, being put down, fear, dependency and the abuser having power and control over them.

There seemed to be deliberate conscious attempts by the men in abusing the child's mother to separate the child from the mother as a source of help. Sometimes this was in a physical way, sometimes emotional or both.

If a woman is being abused by her partner, this may delay her from voicing suspicions of sexual abuse to helping agencies.

Where a child is showing disturbed behaviour and it is recognised that her mother is being abused, it is likely that no other explanation will be considered.

When a child is being sexually abused and the mother is being abused by the same man, instead of being taught to look to adult women for support, the children learn that women are there for exploiting by men, that women are powerless and/or complicit in fulfilling men's sexual demands.

Children also, in seeing their mother being hurt, by their father could not bring themselves to hurt her more by telling her about their own abuse.

Twelve women were separated from their partners when they discovered the sexual abuse of their child/ren and eight women were with their partners.

Several issues arose around access during the study. Given the low conviction rates in respect of child sexual abuse, women are sometimes in the situation where they are legally required to send their children on unsupervised access visits to an 'alleged' abuser.

Some women said that when they personally made allegations of sexual abuse, whether living with their partners or not, this would often be seen as vindictive and labelled as "marital conflict". How, therefore, can a woman talk about her relationship with her partner and voice her suspicions of child sexual abuse without being judged in respect of his behaviour towards her?

Finally, in general, women were given very few details about the extent of the sexual abuse of their children. They thought it would be helpful to have more information in order to be prepared to respond to questions and behaviour or to understand certain behaviours. Thus being better able to help and support the child in the long term. Furthermore women need assistance to enable them to speak with their children in ways that do not jeopardise court evidence.

## **SAMPLE**

My initial intention was to examine case files of families where the child/ren had been sexually abused by the mother's partner, meet with the social workers and meet with women themselves. This was with a view to comparing and contrasting experiences and establishing to what extent social workers considered, or recorded domestic violence as relevant. Unfortunately not enough social workers responded to my requests and time was becoming crucial. Therefore my initial plan had to be changed and I interviewed the women only.

Women volunteered to be interviewed and the final sample came from a variety of sources. Eight from Social Work Department, one from a Schools Project, one from RSSPCC - Overnewton Centre, one from NCH (National Children's Homes), one from CASA (Counselling Adults on Sexual Abuse) and eight from the Women's Support Project. All of the women had social work involvement due to the sexual abuse of their children.

The women in the sample were from differing social and educational backgrounds. Some lived in private sector housing and some lived in public sector housing. All lived in the Strathclyde area.

Twenty women were seen because their children had been sexually abused by the woman's partner. It was not known at the point of contact if the women were experiencing domestic violence. The extent of domestic violence in their lives was only revealed during interviews and was based on the checklist and definition of domestic violence used for the purpose of research (see Appendix 4). Also during interviews six women recalled having suffered a sexually abusive experience as a child.

\*In many of the cases, work was still being done by the mother or social worker to ascertain if siblings had been sexually abused. Given that survivors of sexual abuse can take years to talk about their experiences, it should be borne in mind that disclosures from siblings may be forthcoming in future months or years (16).

Work with offenders has highlighted that men who sexually abuse children may well be abusing more than one child, therefore it is possible that siblings could have been abused (17). This may be the case if the abuser has access to all of the children. As child sexual abuse has to take place in secrecy and privacy the abuser has to 'target' and 'groom' a child to create an access situation. It may be difficult therefore for the abuser to create this situation in respect of all of the children within the family.

### **The Alleged Abusers.**

The ages of the alleged abusers are at the time of interview and details were given by the women. The age range was: 29 - 56 years. Seventeen men were natural fathers of the children they abused. The sample in respect of relationship to child is similar to findings such as Forward and Buck, who suggest that seventy five percent of reported abuse cases involve fathers and daughter (18). Harriet Dempster's study highlighted that the ratio of intrafamilial abusers to extra-familial abusers was 3:2 (19). In Diana Russell's study, however, step-father - daughter incest was far greater than biological father - daughter incest (20)

Child sexual abuse is a betrayal of trust and an abuse of power regardless of whether the abuser is biological father or step-father. The important point in considering the man's relationship to the child is to note that it does appear that children are most at risk from someone they know, as the aforementioned studies suggest. This was also found in the PNL study into the Prevalence Of Child Sexual Abuse In A Sample Of 16 - 21 Year Olds (21). Therefore, awareness programmes about children's safety should very much include this possibility.

Furthermore it is important to raise awareness amongst adults that biological fathers can and do abuse their children. In contrast to these findings, Government statements tend to highlight that children are at risk within single parent families and from step-fathers. Therefore they portray that children are at least risk from their biological father as the following quote suggests:

*"...child abuse is largely a consequence of the decline of the traditional family. To be effective in stemming child abuse, we must end policies which encourage the one parent family and design policies which bolster the traditional family...(Equally) welcome would be a re-examination of local authorities policies towards unmarried mothers on council house waiting lists. The tide has turned against the permissive society and the Conservative Party must show its commitment to the family in legislative action, rather than merely indulging in Party Conference rhetoric." (22)*

As a result women are blamed and their morals are questioned. The message being that if the patriarchal, nuclear family stayed together everything would be fine.

### **Ethnicity.**

All of the families in the sample were white. Projects for ethnic minority women were contacted but no women came forward. This is not to say that the problem of sexual abuse does not exist in ethnic minority families but it may be even more difficult for children to tell or for women to ask for support. As Droisen states:

*"Children are taught not to tell family secrets in public. How much more do they feel this pressure when they know their communities are despised*

*and they are telling someone who belongs to the group that is doing the despising..." (23)*

## **METHOD**

The method of collecting data was carried out by interviewing women in a conversational approach using a question guide to ensure all areas were covered. Women volunteered to be interviewed and the place we met was their choice. All interviews were recorded on cassette tape.

Given the topic of discussion it was impossible to remain detached and not enter into dialogue with the women. There was informal discussion before and after the recordings and meetings lasted on average about two hours.

Some of the women were naturally upset recounting their own experiences and those of their children. Many of the women commented that it was the first time they had been able to talk about their own feelings and their relationship with the abuser in such depth. It was unusual for them to be offered assistance in their own right. They stated a reluctance to talk to social workers about certain things for fear of being 'judged'. The women were keen to take part in the study with a view to helping other women and children in similar situations.

At the end of each interview I shared information about the Women's Support Project and other organisations available to assist women. I was surprised at how many women were not aware of Women's Aid and refuge accommodation. I gave women a copy of the Glasgow Women's Directory, leaflets on Domestic Violence and Child Sexual Abuse and Criminal Injuries Compensation forms. The offer was made for women to maintain contact with the Women's Support Project and some have maintained this contact and have also been put in touch with each other for mutual support when this was requested and agreed by the women.

I believe that recording interviews was the best method for this particular study. However, I did not anticipate that transcribing would be quite so time consuming and harrowing. In addition it is difficult to transcribe the spoken word to the written. Gestures cannot be included which are very much part of conversation. A word misheard could change the meaning of the content or the tone of voice may affect the meaning. I therefore



sent women a copy of their typed transcript so that they could make changes, additions and comments. I also felt that it was important for them to have an account of our meeting.

It was distressing for the women who typed the transcripts. I think that this conveys the difficulties encountered by administrative staff and the need to support those who are attending meetings, discussions and typing notes about child sexual abuse.

The preparation before the interview, involved sending out a letter of introduction and information about the Women's Support Project. In some cases I also spoke to the referring organisation's worker and spoke to women on the telephone. The woman was assured that what was discussed in the interview would not be discussed with her statutory worker but that information from interviews would be used to inform the study report, without identifying women directly.

The main themes covered in the interviews were, how the woman discovered the abuse of her children; her relationship with the man; defining domestic violence; how the couple's behaviour affected the children; and whether or not 'domestic violence' had been raised as a possibility by statutory workers. (See interview guide Appendix Three).

In addition, it was important at the beginning of the interview to share information about myself and at the end of the interview, given the nature of the discussions, I offered ongoing support.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Prevalence of Domestic Violence.**

The prevalence of domestic violence and links between child sexual abuse and domestic violence will be discussed later in this report. However, the following information is a summary of the extent of domestic violence in the sample.

In all twenty cases domestic violence had been a feature of the woman's life. This was defined by a checklist of abusive behaviour which was read out to the women. All of the women answered 'yes' to several questions on the checklist and in only three cases did the women experience

emotional and mental abuse without physical abuse. This was more difficult to define by the women but was just as abusive as physical abuse.

Fourteen out of the twenty women were naming their experiences of abuse for the first time during interviews. It was only after going through the checklist that women described their experience as domestic violence.

Women were caught up in their child(ren)'s experience which was also the focus of external agencies. This meant that women did not have a chance to look at their own relationship with the abuser. This was rarely a feature of work with women. That is, working with them in their own right - empowering them.

\*

### **Rape In Marriage.**

One of the questions on the checklist was 'Were you forced to have sex or take part in sexual activities that you did not want or went beyond what you wanted?'. Two women described their experience as forced sex and seven women described their experience as rape. In Scotland, rape within marriage has always been a crime and one woman called out the police on one occasion after her husband raped her.

*"...I asked the Police that night to charge him, and they said nothing would come out of it because I didn't have a witness..."*

It was extremely unhelpful and unsupportive to say that it would not be proven and there was no point in taking it any further, even although the woman was distressed and injured. This is in keeping with Kate Painter's research. She found that women were reluctant to report rape within marriage to the police for fear of this reaction. Also women did not often regard themselves as having been raped at the time it happened. She surveyed 1,007 married women in the United Kingdom and found that 1 in 7 women had been raped by their husbands (24).

## **Pornography.**

Five abusers used pornographic materials - videos and magazines. In one case a woman did link this to the sexual abuse of her child, because her husband showed the child pornography as part of the abuse.

## **Convictions**

Analysing and checking out convictions was not expected to be part of the study. However, in discussions with women, several issues arose around convictions, some of which I will examine here.

In the majority of cases the alleged abusers were not proceeded against. At the time of the study only two men were convicted.

Whether men are proceeded against, or not, in alleged child sex abuse situations has an effect on the children, the mothers and the professionals. I would like to discuss some of the points that the legal proceedings highlight.

A question often asked by professionals during investigation is 'Did the mother know or not?' Dr. Carol-Ann Hooper has researched the process of discovery that women go through when a child of theirs is sexually abused, how they find out about it and come to believe it (or not). Dr. Hooper says that this is an oversimplified model of responding. She states that discovery and believing is not a straightforward linear process but often goes backwards and forwards. The time span of discovery can vary from minutes to several years whether you are a mother or a professional (25).

In the sample, the children had support from their mothers and professionals and yet these children are still not really protected. Because the sexual abuse has not been proven in Court, women are faced with access rights of fathers, where the law requires them to give over their children to a man who is alleged to have abused them.

This clearly has an effect on the relationship between mother and child. One woman was not believed by professionals that her child had been abused by her husband. She was told that she had to give her husband access.

*"...I kept saying (my daughter) doesn't want to go...(they said) you have to make her...she's getting bad vibes from you...Don't ask her any questions when she comes back from her access visits, because it would go against you in court. I was terrified to ask my child anything and that's the point I should have been asking her because she was abused in access, my two children were abused in access and we have proof of that, and they were badly abused from what we found out..."*

Although this woman was reluctant to send her children on access she thought they would be safe, as the visits took place at her husband's parents' house. It transpired that the abuse continued and both children were abused by their father and grandfather. Children may therefore think their mother is 'sending' them to be abused.

Another woman felt that her loyalties should be divided between husband and daughter. She was told by social workers that she had to believe her daughter, which she did. Her daughter was given supervised access to her father and on return from an access visit, she told her mother that he had touched her bottom when she was with him alone in the garden. When the mother reported this incident to the authorities she was told that her daughter was not telling the truth.

*"...it was investigated and what came out of it was that (the child) must have been confused...I said well you took my child away from me for five months because (she) had said she'd been sexually abused, you told me that everything the child said had to be believed and you're now saying that while she was in your care she's making statements to me and the police that this is happening, and you're saying to me that the child must be confused?"*

These examples highlight the difficulties women face when they voice their concerns and where there is no conviction. They can be seen as vindictive if they voice suspicions of abuse, or seen as having failed to protect their child if they have not known, or have not discussed suspicions about the abuse.

It would appear that the missing factor in prosecutions is corroborative evidence.

The child's word alone is not enough, even when there is medical evidence, the identity of the abuser cannot necessarily be proven.

Plea bargaining is another area women face. In order to protect the child from court appearances, or to establish some grounds for involvement of the Children's Panel system, charges may be reduced to something very minor.

The two convictions in the sample arose because the men admitted the abuse - one was imprisoned and the other was placed on probation. Is it therefore only when men admit to the abuse that they are prosecuted? This also influences the response of the family and professionals. In one family where the man received a probation order, the family is working towards rehabilitation. The woman feels that because her husband is being open about the abuse that he will not abuse their daughter again:

*"...Did he admit to it? Not straight away. He has done. He got out (from custody) and I seen him and we spoke about it and hopefully the way things are going we're heading towards getting back together, with the social workers helping."*

Cases are pending due to different factors. One abuser has disappeared and there is a warrant out for his arrest. In another situation the case has just not been to Court.

This focuses on the problems faced by women and their children who sometimes have to wait two years before the case goes to Court. They have to try to keep the memories fresh, they are frustrated about the abuser walking about free and the fact that they are tormented by the effects of his abusive behaviour. In other circumstances women are encouraged by lawyers to have the prosecution outstanding because they will have a stronger case for Civil Proceedings about access, that is, keeping the case 'not proven'.

Current work in respect of making links between domestic violence and child abuse by the Children's Legal Centre was outlined earlier. This may have some impact in the future on Court officials when considering access arrangements to men who have abused their woman partner and where the suspected child sexual abuse cannot be proven.

Linked to convictions and discovery is who children talk to about the abuse and this is discussed in the next section.

### **Who do children tell.**

Keeping in mind that telling about abuse or discovering abuse is a process rather than a one off event, the following information was ascertained from the sample.

- Ten women were 'told' by their children.
- Three children told a relative.
- One told her mother's friend.
- Another child told his friend's mother.
- One told hospital staff.
- One told a psychologist.
- One told nursery staff.
- Two told social workers.

(Please note that the above numbers are taken with regard to families rather than individual children.)

Children who talked to professionals about their abuse were receiving a service because of concern about their behaviour.

Twelve women were separated at time of disclosure, eight women were with their partners. Of the ten women who were told by their children, four were living apart from the abuser at the time, that is the mother had separated from the abuser. All of these women reported the abuse after they were told. However, the length of time in reporting varied. In some cases the women took time to report the abuse to an outside agency. During this time, however, the women acted to protect the child, that is by separating the child from the abuser whilst she tried to confirm her suspicions. In situations where the woman was suffering more severe forms of domestic violence, women, on the whole took longer to report the abuse. For example one woman was very frightened of her husband who had physically, emotionally and sexually abused her. This led to her being very isolated and unable to get help for herself or to voice suspicions about the sexual abuse of her child. She also doubted her own thoughts:

*"It's just strange wee things that was happening and I could see that she was all tensed up, when he was in a bad mood she would try to please him, but he wasn't interested, he was always reading the paper and things like that, apart from, "come and sit on my knee," when he felt like it and her clothes was always down, this is the bit that was always annoying me...when I checked him he would say "I cannae get touching my own child.."."*

This man always had a plausible explanation for anything his wife questioned him about. In addition he rarely allowed his wife out of sight:

*"If you had a conversation with anyone, even the neighbours,...he would come out...he'd take over the conversation."*

This woman finally found out about Women's Aid through a Citizen's Advice Office and whilst in the safety of refuge accommodation the child talked about her father sexually abusing her.

Another woman, whose daughter was visiting her stepfather through access arrangements, was concerned about her daughter's behaviour. Finally her son told her that their stepfather had been abusing them. She stated:

*"We talked it out and I had her tears until 3 o'clock in the morning so it was left like that...L's behaviour calmed down because she believed that I believed her."*

This woman had experienced violence from her husband and thought it necessary to move away from the house, before disclosing the sexual abuse, even although he was not living there. Three months later she spoke to her GP who contacted the social work department.

A child in the study told a friend's mother, because she was the only one her father had not mentioned in his threats. He was also abusive to her mother.

In some cases it took the social work department some time to believe that sexual abuse had taken place. One woman who was living with her husband at the point of discovery of the sexual abuse had, prior to this knowledge, continually taken her daughter to the GP with urinary tract

infections. The cause was put down to soap powders, diet etc. Finally when her son said, "Daddy bites (sister's) pee pee", along with other words and actions she sought help from a local children's hospital.

The outcome of this contact was a statement from the hospital social worker:

*"We find no evidence of sexual abuse and we can't have this hanging over your head (to husband) so therefore you're innocent and (turning to the woman) I'm sorry I mean I can't tell you it didn't happen..."*

This woman continued to stay away from her husband because of her strong suspicions and hindsight incidents. The social work department remained involved and were treating her case as a marital breakdown. She had told the social worker during interviews, that prior to discovering the sexual abuse of her children, her feelings had changed towards her husband. She feels that they somehow interpreted this as using the sexual abuse to be vindictive. She was told she must send the children on access to their father and later discovered that the sexual abuse had continued.

The responses to women whose children had been sexually abused varied, regardless of whether the woman reported or not. Some women were given immediate help and support from statutory agencies, others were not believed or made to feel as though they were somehow responsible for the abuse. In all cases the woman separated the child from the abuser. In spite of this, social work departments placed children on the child abuse register, or took children into care (five cases) or referred to children's panels or all of these.

Obviously one explanation for this would be that they felt the woman could not keep the abuser away from the household, which could be true particularly if domestic violence was a feature. However, this implied to women that they were not valued and had no control over their circumstances. Alternatives were also not often considered such as Women's Aid refuge, homeless accommodation etc.

One woman suggested that the social work response replicated the abuse. She felt that the children were separated from the mother during investigation in a similar way to how the abuser had separated the child



and mother. Furthermore, the children viewed her as powerless to stop them being received into care.

In considering the links between domestic violence and child sexual abuse, it is possible that the abuser distanced the child from her source of help, that is the mother, through abusing her also. It is not surprising therefore that the majority of children in the sample did not initially tell their mother. Furthermore, when a woman suffers domestic violence it is not uncommon for her to identify with the abuser's view of the world in order to ensure survival. In the meantime faith in her own perceptions becomes undermined.

In the second half of this report I will consider in more depth the links between child sexual abuse and domestic violence. This will be based on the women's experiences and in some cases, discussions with the children, previous studies and literature.

## DISCUSSION: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE - THE LINKS

### Introduction.

Previous studies mentioned such as Truesdell, McNeil and Deschner, Dietz and Craft, and Tormes (26) have examined links between domestic violence and child sexual abuse. In the majority of child sexual abuse cases examined, the child's abuser also abused the mother. They also noted that this victimisation affected 'discovery' and reporting of the sexual abuse of the child.

In the present study the prevalence of domestic violence was found to be higher. All twenty women interviewed had suffered domestic violence to varying degrees. In three out of nine cases where the women themselves discovered the sexual abuse or suspected abuse, the women did not report the abuse immediately for fear of the abuser, but they did take actions to protect the child.

In the remainder of the sample the women reported soon after discovery, or the sexual abuse of the children was discovered and reported by others and the women had no prior knowledge of the abuse. After discovery, children said that their mother's abuse had been a factor in preventing them talking about their own abuse.

Therefore, how domestic violence affects reporting and discovery of child sexual abuse is an important consideration in the dynamics of child sexual abuse, from both the mother and child's viewpoints.

In this section of the report, I will discuss the areas of reporting and discovery in more depth. In addition I will examine the difficulties women have in naming violence and how the abuser of a child, through abusing the child's mother, maintains secrecy and distances the child from her source of help.

### *Naming Violence.*

The hypothesis for this study was "Is there a correlation between child sexual abuse and domestic violence?" My aim was to look at the

prevalence of domestic violence in families where children suffered sexual abuse. If it was a feature, then I would also examine the links and effects. I therefore did not know prior to interviewing the women whether they had suffered domestic violence from the man who had abused their children.

As already stated, all of the women had in fact suffered domestic violence of different forms. Only three women out of the twenty said that they had never experienced physical violence. Their experiences included emotional and mental abuse, for example, partners belittled and humiliated them in front of their children or others; opinions were not valued; they were put down and made to feel worthless.

Through interviewing the women, the difficulties women have in naming abusive experiences emerged. When asked if they had suffered domestic violence, fourteen out of the twenty women answered "no". It was only after being asked to describe the relationship with partners and going through the checklist (Appendix 4) that women could name the abuse they had suffered. This was particularly significant for women who were describing and naming marital rape for the first time.

Women being unable to name abuse is not unusual or surprising and merits further discussion in order to assist workers to intervene appropriately with children who have been sexually abused. For centuries women and children have remained silent about the abuse they have suffered. This can be due to a variety of reasons.

In her Home Office Study into literature and research on domestic violence (27), Lorna Smith discusses the historic aspects of women's silence. She refers to the Dobashes' study (1981), which states that for centuries husbands have used violence, both systematically and severely to dominate, punish and control their wives simply as a husband's prerogative. Therefore women and children learn that abuse becomes a part of their existence and both domestic violence and child sexual abuse is 'kept in the family'.

Furthermore, historically men had rights to beat women and children whereas women had no rights to beat their husbands. Smith quotes Blackstone (1765 and reprinted in 1966) who described these rights as

being based on husband and wife being "one person in the law" thus requiring the suspension of the wife's legal existence.

Within this context, women find it very difficult to name what they are experiencing, and if they do, they are often faced with a disbelieving or uncaring audience. They are made to feel that they have somehow done something to deserve abuse and rather than being exposed as 'bad' women they stay silent. Smith also quotes Stanko (1985) who explains that :

*"Women grow up in a male dominated world in which they learn that women's definitions, perceptions and assessments are at odds with men's and it is the latter that count in public assessments."*

Liz Kelly discusses naming violence suffered by women in her book 'Surviving Sexual Violence'. She states that:

*"...Naming involves making visible what was invisible, defining as unacceptable what was acceptable and insisting that what was naturalised is problematic." (28)*

It is important that women name their experience for their own development. They sometimes need help to do this as their own needs are usually secondary to that of their children's. Women are expected to put their children and indeed their husband first. They are caught between two socially prescribed roles: supporter of their husband and supporter/protector of their daughter. As one woman's experience illustrates:

*"I was trying to support my daughter, be there for my husband, just in case all this was a big mistake, I felt I just couldn't turn my back on him, what if he hasn't done this. Although I was staying away from him I felt I've got to be there to show support for both. You feel as if you've got to be the tower of strength for everyone."*

This woman separated from her husband on discovery of the sexual abuse of her child. She had suffered physical, sexual and emotional violence from her partner but could only begin to name what she had suffered once removed from the situation.

Women, as mothers and wives, are expected to be strong for everyone, but they deserve help for themselves as women to deal with what they have suffered personally or through their child's pain. If the child is the priority of work of a particular organisation, then it should be recognised that giving women assistance in their own right and empowering them will undoubtedly have a beneficial effect on the child.

Only two women stated that they had been given specific help with regard to them as individuals and with regard to their relationship with the abuser and domestic violence.

Nine women described the social work department as being helpful following the discovery of the sexual abuse of their child. They felt, however, that the social work department priority was child protection and that their own needs as individuals were often ignored. Two women had been given ongoing counselling and support from voluntary organisations which they found helpful. Only four women had contact with Women's Aid and they had been advised of the service by friends or Citizen's Advice Centres.

As already stated, a woman needs to be given the opportunity to describe the relationship she has with her partner for her own development, however, it is also important in respect of the child. If a woman is not given the opportunity to discuss her experience of domestic violence and the relationship with her partner, this does affect the woman's understanding of the dynamics of sexual abuse. It also affects the child's understanding of their mother's position. Similarly, women require information about the sexual abuse in order to be prepared to assist their child with regard to questions they may ask or behaviour they may present.

### **The Links - Reporting, 'Discovery' and Distancing.**

When women were asked directly if they saw any connection between the domestic violence and the sexual abuse of the child they usually replied "no". However, throughout the interviews, women in fact were making links. The following discussion is based on interviews with women and current literature.

Both domestic violence and child sexual abuse are overwhelmingly crimes committed by men against women and children and current statistics suggest that still more girls are sexually abused than boys (29). Largely the abuse is carried out in secret and is under-reported. Both women and children find it difficult to name their experiences and can be led to believe, from the abuser, that the abuse is somehow their fault. Often this is reinforced by outside reactions of disbelief and blame. For example, with regard to child sexual abuse, the orthodox approach of family dysfunction theorists suggests that causation is equally distributed between family members (30). Whilst this theory has stressed the importance of traumatic childhood events, it has failed to make any links between powerlessness, violence and sexuality. It requires the mother to take responsibility for her part in the sexual abuse. As a result the woman may interpret this as her having to take the blame for her own abuse also.

Feminist research into violence against women and children does make links. Evidence is strong from feminist research that male control and domination over women and children leads to domestic violence and child sexual abuse as discussed by Stark and Flitcraft (31). They state that control over children is also an end in itself to which the control of women is a means.

Both domestic violence and child sexual abuse relate to the historical context of the man's right to power and control over his family using whatever means available. Whilst the law, in theory, no longer upholds this belief, responses from the helping professionals are often loaded with attitudes that 'accept' male violence as the norm.

This is highlighted by the Dobashes in their study into 'Violence Against Wives' which states that the belief of the helping professions that domestic violence is normal and acceptable to women, may lead the worker to treat the case in an unproductive way, thus failing to eliminate the violence or help the woman escape from it (32).

In respect of child sexual abuse, similar attitudes have been pointed out by Lena Dominelli in her paper 'Betrayal Of Trust'. She states that Freud's theory of women's imagination and fantasies about sexual abuse and their seduction of the abuser has been adopted by the helping professionals, such as Arnon Bentovim of Great Ormond Street Hospital,

who adopt the theory of family dysfunction. Again this approach silences the voices of those who have been abused (33).

Assumptions that victims don't mind and have shared responsibility in the abuse continue to be made. Examples from the study, of professionals' responses which encapsulate these 'assumptions' are as follows. When one woman told a health worker about the abuse she was experiencing she was told "it's none of my business". Another woman voicing her fears about the sexual abuse of her child was told by a health worker:

*"Come on, do you really think that happened...well, if you weren't sleeping together what do you expect?"*

A policewoman said to a woman during the investigation of child sexual abuse :

*"It seems your husband's a really nice guy"*

and later a social worker remarked on how good looking he was.

Women described how questions that were asked of them made them feel guilty and put negative ideas into their heads. For example, police tended to ask questions about the woman's sex life with the abuser. There could be good reasons for this questioning but it may result in women thinking that this means they were somehow to blame if their sexual relationship with their partner was 'poor'.

Fortunately, women are not faced with these comments and attitudes in every situation and the professionals around can be very supportive and understanding. Information from the women in this respect has been included in the recommendations, however, I think the above reactions illustrate two points.

Firstly professionals have to recognise and name abuse. Whilst there is more awareness about child sexual abuse, people (including professionals) are still very reluctant to believe that a 'nice', 'plausible', 'respectable' man, particularly one that they know, is a sex offender.

Secondly, faced with a disbelieving response or no opportunity to discuss domestic violence, women and children are being placed at risk. For example, in one woman's situation her children continued to be abused during access to their father. In another situation in spite of being separated from her husband, the woman was still living in fear due to his threats and visits to her home.

The process and dynamics of child sexual abuse and domestic violence are also very similar. In the process of abusing women and children, the abuser has to make the abuse become part of his victim's experience. In both cases, the abused woman or child has been led to believe that the abuse is only happening to them. In view of the historical context of man's role within the family and 'society's' views as expressed in the examples above, this is not too surprising.

Isolation is part of this process. Isolating victims can stop women and children reaching out for help. One woman had to leave her husband before she was able to voice her suspicions about child sexual abuse and before her daughter could talk about it because both were frightened of him. She describes her isolation as stopping her from getting help and finding out about what was available:

*"...I know people don't seem to understand that, (why you do not seek help) he was so violent that you're frightened, and I never knew there was such a thing as Women's Aid, I didn't until, just that last few months. I don't know who told me, oh no, I went down to Citizen's Advice Bureau and they put me on to it. I didn't know there was such a thing. It's funny that. When you're not out working and things like that...you don't hear, unless you hear off somebody."*

This woman's husband, who was a police officer, stopped going to work so that she was hardly from his sight, therefore it is not surprising that she was unaware of her options.

Similarly, with regard to children, they are isolated in order to facilitate the abuse and to stop them from telling. The abuser creates this situation whilst putting his partner down making her feel worthless and undervalued at a personal level but also in the eyes of the child. This in turn makes it difficult for the child to disclose the abuse to the obvious source of help, the mother.



It may also have repercussions in terms of the child/mother's relationship. As some of the women stated, when they discovered the abuse of their child when the child was older it became more difficult to narrow the gulf created by the abuser. These issues will be discussed in the next section.

Most people find it difficult to imagine that incest could occur in a family without the mother knowing. In her paper on the 'Non Abusing Parent', Kathleen Kennelly discusses three techniques to hide incest: Secrecy, Manipulation, and Distancing (34). I will discuss these techniques within the context of the findings from the study.

### **Secrecy.**

An abuser will go to great lengths to hide the abuse. He may use threats, bribes or rewards to coerce the child into a secretive relationship with him. Depending on the age of the child she may be unable in any case to describe her experience. If the child's abuser is abusing the mother this also maintains the secrecy.

Where children see their mother being abused they see her in the same powerless position as themselves. The children are influenced by the patriarchal family structure. Yvonne Tormes in a 1968 study found that thirteen out of twenty incestuous fathers were physically violent to their wives. Tormes suggests that the daughter imitates the behaviour in response to the father's domination and abuse (35).

One child who witnessed his mother being abused by his father believed his father capable of murdering his mother. The threats his father made to him in order to conceal the sexual abuse were therefore very real. His mother left her husband due to domestic violence but thought it was a good thing for the children to maintain contact with their father who had access. Her son was sexually abused during access and the threats were that if he told he would never see his mother again as she would be stabbed to death by the abuser:

*"...If you ever tell I'll get your ma. He actually told (son) that he would stab me..."*

Later she described that the children on occasions saw her being abused:

*"...he wouldnae care if they were there, he would slap you or whatever."*

Whilst the threat would be very real in itself it was intensified due to what he had witnessed between his parents. Another recurring theme where women and children are being abused is that children do not want to upset their mother or add to her pain. One woman said:

*"...the disclosures came after we separated...They protect the mother, they protect the mother's feelings, because she's going to be upset."*

Another woman's children explained to her that when they saw her suffering physical and mental violence from her husband they could not bring themselves to upset her any more by telling her what they were suffering. During quieter, more settled phases, where the father was less abusive to his wife, the children still did not want to tell their mother, this time because they did not want to upset her when she was slightly happier.

Liz Kelly also found this in her study into sexual violence:

*"For five women, either the threats about upsetting their mothers or an awareness that their mothers were unhappy and that if they knew, they would feel guilty and responsible, silenced them." (36)*

In the aforementioned family the woman also recalled that when watching or reading anything about child sexual abuse, her husband would be very vocal about what he would do to these abusers and how he could not understand why they did this:

*"...something came on the telly (about sexual abuse), he would say, that B...done that to that wean...I know what I would do with him..."*

In hindsight, she thinks this was a way of diverting any suspicions she may have had then or in the future.

Furthermore, women spoke of being put down in front of the children. Some children were told that their mother was stupid and were made to participate in the ridiculing of her. This separation from the mother as a source of help can often lead to a poor relationship between mother and

child. This can be the result of the abuser manipulating situations and creating distance between mother and child to have access to abuse.

## Manipulation

In order to cover his tracks, the abuser has to set up situations which appear normal to his partner. He can control and manipulate his family in a number of ways.

Women who have been abused think they have protected their children by taking the brunt of the violence from their partner. If they have managed to separate from the abuser, they therefore see it as not unusual for the children to continue to see their father. What more ideal situation for abusers? Freedom to be alone with their children for long periods of time.

Access seems to be the ideal situation for abusers to continue or begin to abuse their children - a situation of separation created by the abuser's behaviour. Ten of the women in the study who had separated from partners due to their violence towards them, reported that their children were sexually abused during access. The abuser may also see this as a way of continuing to abuse the mother.

I had the opportunity to meet children of three of the women. They were all over 16 and one girl described how her mother's co-habitee was manipulative. He would tell her mum she had been bad and her mum would think that she deserved to be punished. She said she started to admit to what he was saying:

*"...If I had said to my mum I never done it, it would have caused arguments but I just said fair enough, I done it. I started to admit to what he was saying, it was the easiest way to stop everything."*

She felt that he had so much control over her mother that if she had carried on saying 'no' her mother may go against her:

*"...she would have eventually had to say, she's telling me this and he's telling me that, so she would have had to pick one of us to believe and I was feart (scared) in case she picked him..."*

It is often only in hindsight that women and children see the manipulative techniques adopted to hide the abuse.

### **Distancing**

Distancing can be part of the process of isolation, secrecy and manipulation. It can be created in a physical way and also in an emotional sense, from the mother and, or, from siblings.

One woman described how her husband dominated the whole household, they all had to please him and he kept the children away from their mother:

*"...Even if the kids tried to sit next to me, especially S. he'd call him a 'poof' for sitting with his mother. The kids couldn't even talk to me. I think (now) he thought they were going to try to tell me something, to whisper to me..."*

Her children were never 'allowed' to be alone with her.

Another child was distanced from his mother and his siblings. His father created a situation where he was his father's favourite and was given special presents and treats and more time on access visits.

Playing one child off against another was also a common theme in the situations described by the women. The men created situations where the child was competing for attention and was made to feel special when any attention was given. Thus a child had been 'groomed' for the sexual abuse to take place.

Pornography can be used to distance the child from the mother. The women were asked on the domestic violence checklist whether they were made to watch or read pornography. Five women said their partners did use pornography. One woman's experience of pornography illustrates how effective it can be in its portrayal of women being submissive, sexual objects and unable to help their children.

She discovered that her husband showed the children magazines and videos when she was going out, suggesting to the children that their mother behaved in this way and that she was going out to do this. The

verbal and visual images that this man impressed upon the children can only have compounded the confusion and shame they associated with sex and sexuality. Instead of being taught to look to adult women for support, the children were taught that women were there for exploiting by men, that women were powerless and/or complicit in fulfilling men's sexual demands.

Pornography as a form of violence against women and children has been well documented such as in the work of Andrea Dworkin (37). In a recent study in Canada on child sexual abuse, mothers interviewed said that the men who had sexually abused their children were consumers of pornography (38).

Taking into account the dynamics described above, it is important to consider the effects on the relationship between mother and child. As a result of domestic violence incorporating physical violence, emotional and mental abuse and distancing techniques, a child may see her mother as an ineffective or weak parent and one who is not capable of giving support to the child. It can have lasting effects on a mother's relationship with her child.

In one case where the daughter is now twenty one, she still has difficulty relating to her mother, due to the distancing and manipulation which was linked to domestic violence and created by the abuser. As an adult this young woman can see her mother's position but still finds it hard to deal with the fact that she did not know she was being abused. It is possible that where women discover the abuse of their child at an earlier age, the relationship will not be so adversely affected. This would require another research project!

The women in this study did not collude with the sexual abuse of their children. They did not know it was happening. Where women discovered the abuse themselves, in the majority of cases the women acted promptly to seek outside help whether living with their partner or not. Where women did not seek outside help immediately, they acted themselves to protect the child.

Domestic violence added to the difficulty of discovery and reporting at an earlier stage in respect of both woman and child. In three cases, so severe was the domestic violence, that the women and children had to

separate themselves from the abuser in order to seek help in respect of the sexual abuse.

Another woman thought that the reason for her daughter 'acting out' was because of her husband's abuse towards her. When she sought outside help this was confirmed:

*"...I asked to speak to the welfare worker in the hospital and I explained to her what was happening and she said, obviously it's because of the way you've been living and pressure's telling on your daughter, but I said...we've not had a big fight, we weren't really getting on but the violence had stopped a lot and I couldn't understand why, there hadn't been any big disruptions to upset her."*

At this point the child was 7 years old and had tried to run away from home on several occasions, even trying to climb out of a bedroom window on the top floor.

This example stresses how difficult it is to equate a child's behaviour as resulting from sexual abuse, when there are other reasonable explanations, even for professionals. Yet women frequently blame themselves in pursuing the question "why did I not see it?" They see the 'red flags' only in hindsight and think they should have known at the time.

Women feel bad that their child could not tell them sooner. They think that they somehow failed as a wife and mother, it was something they did wrong. So strong are our expectations of mothers. Mothers really are expected to know everything that is happening in their child's life. A report in the Guardian newspaper about a mother of a sexually abused child stated that she:

*"...believed him (her son) straight away which has been crucial to him. There are still moments when he veers between love and absolute hatred. After all, I was there when he fell over and cut his knee, there when he was afraid of the bogeyman in the dark, why couldn't I have protected him?" (39)*

Outside reactions of mother blaming will reinforce those feelings of self blame already experienced by the woman. It is therefore important in work with women and children to establish the child's understanding

about the mother's role. They may need help to see that the mother did not know about the abuse. The child may have been led to believe by the abuser that the mother knew and this can be reinforced by professionals. The literature on child sexual abuse abounds with mother blaming. One medical journal reports:

*"...we see mothers only too happy to turn over the burdensome sexual role to the daughters, and to this end mothers take jobs that require them to be absent from home in the late afternoon and evening hours."*  
(40)

It should not be assumed that mothers working outside the home are escaping their duties as wives and mothers. Instead it should be understood that for most working women as for most men, work is fulfilling and the income derived from working is needed. However, this kind of literature does have an effect on how professionals respond to women whose children have been sexually abused by their partner.

In this section of the report I have examined further how the secrecy of child sexual abuse can be maintained by the abuser abusing the child's mother.

The importance of enabling women to talk about their relationship with the abuser has to be emphasised. This is essential so that the woman is given support for herself. It will also give her some understanding about the dynamics of sexual abuse and the techniques employed by the abuser.

As already mentioned, however, women do not often readily name what they have suffered. They need time and support to be able to talk about their relationship with the abuser without being judged. Both in the long and the short term this will enable the woman to give a strong and supportive response to her own child. For practitioners it is important to establish whether domestic violence is a feature in cases of child sexual abuse in order to offer appropriate intervention to the child and the mother.

This study was intended to inform practitioners both within the voluntary and statutory sectors who deal with women and children who have been abused. The recommendations therefore at the end of the report have largely been informed by the experiences of the women who took part in the study.

## CONCLUSION

The women interviewed for this study had all experienced domestic violence as well as coping with the sexual abuse of their children. It could in fact be argued that the sexual abuse of one's child IS domestic violence. They were at different stages in coping with the effects of the sexual abuse and in the majority of cases had not been given the opportunity to deal with their own abuse or even name their experience.

The prevalence of domestic violence in this sample is surprisingly high but then perhaps the definition is wider than other studies. I have stated already that in only three cases was physical abuse not used although mental and emotional abuse was described. Even without including these three cases, the figure is still very high. Therefore does child sexual abuse and domestic violence coexist and if so are they part of the same process? In Dietz and Craft's study (1980) workers in the child protection field were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the relationship between incest and other forms of familial abuse and the role of the mother in the incestuous relationship:

*"A large majority of workers were found to suspect that wife abuse is coexistent with incest. At the very least, suspicion of wife abuse should suggest to a worker that a mother may have legitimate fears for her physical safety...which make it unlikely that she is able to protect her daughter from incest, either by reporting the incident, if she is aware of it, or by seeking professional help. It certainly does not automatically imply that she would push her daughter into an incestuous relationship, or give her consent to such a relationship" (41).*

Undoubtedly, the possibility of domestic violence and child sexual abuse coexisting is very high. Results from this study and others suggest that we cannot dismiss this possibility, but what effect will this have on women and children? Will it mean that women will again be blamed, this



time for staying with abusive men as they may have, or will at some point, sexually abuse their children? This is not the intention of the study. Both will always exist separately.

Recommendations have been made on how the findings could be used to inform practice. However, it requires reminding that sensitivity must be exercised in raising discussion about a woman's relationship with her partner. If we are encouraging a woman to name her experience with her child's abuser, only with a view to helping the child, we are leaving that woman very exposed. We must therefore find ways of exploring these issues with women in non-judgemental ways and offering them continuing support in their own right as women, not just as mothers and wives.

Where women were given real support and positive reinforcement of their strengths this led to their empowerment. They made positive moves, for example, separated from abuser, moved house, secured employment, changed careers, continued education etc. They considered it important not to be treated as the abuser treated them, particularly in view of the effect this has on how the children in turn perceived them. Two women sum up what 'support' meant for them:

*"She (social worker) really got involved after that with the court case coming up and the way the family was coping with it,...emotional support for me and she says to me every time I see her, just phone me if I need her, (she's) there to give counselling to myself and the kids...She's really been very good, very realistic, she just gets down to the nitty, gritty, but she's nice with it, she seems to cope with it really well."*

*"...they've (social workers) been awfully good to her (abused child), counselling the boys and all that, and me, explaining, trying to pick up my own life, learning how to get on..."*

Changing the image of mothers from that of individuals who are in collusion with the incest to that of individuals who are victims of abuse themselves is a significant shift. Empathy towards women will generate more positive attitudes towards them from neighbours, family members and figures of authority, which will help to empower women and enable them to support their children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. DIRECT WORK WITH WOMEN.

Workers have to learn how to approach areas of a woman's life in sensitive, empowering ways whilst assessing the situation. Mothers of sexually abused children may be fearful of workers and an individual's attitudes can influence how they respond. For example, some of the women in the study were wary about discussing domestic violence or their own childhood sexual abuse for fear of this being seen in a negative way.

In cases of child sexual abuse there may be a conflict of interest between mother and child, both are in need of support. In the vast majority of cases, if the mother's needs are addressed, this will also improve the situation for the child. Therefore two workers should be considered - one to support the child and one to support the mother - not necessarily from the same agency.

Advice and information should be made available to women about voluntary confidential organisations who would be able to offer support e.g. Rape Crisis Centres, Women's Aid, Incest Survivors Groups and Helplines.

Women whose children have been sexually abused should be given details about the extent of the sexual abuse. Sensitivity should be used in this respect e.g. age of the child - whether social worker discusses with the mother, or child is helped to talk about the abuse to her/his mother. This will assist in future responses to child's questions and behaviour.

Women whose children have been sexually abused should be given resource material such as books and videos for them personally, but also to help them work with their children.

Networking of women in similar situations at crisis point in particular. Women suggested in every interview that they would have found it helpful to speak to another woman who had come through a similar situation and survived.

Ongoing support groups for women whose children have been sexually abused. There could be crisis support groups and longer term support groups.

## **B. TRAINING.**

Voluntary organisations and statutory organisations to share expertise and knowledge e.g. through training.

Training should include learning about the dynamics and effects of different forms of violence suffered by women and children such as rape and sexual assault, child sexual abuse and incest and domestic violence, how to respond and what organisations can help.

All professional groups whose work involves them in child sexual abuse or in responding to domestic violence should receive training about the nature of domestic violence, its effects on children and the ways in which domestic violence may be linked to the physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children.

## **C. POLICIES AND RESOURCES.**

Short term accommodation for women and children in the absence of being able to remove the alleged abuser. In this respect women could also be informed about the use of the Matrimonial Homes Act and the Homeless Persons Act, as well as approaching a Women's Aid refuge.

More confidential voluntary organisations should be available for counselling and groupwork. This would require commitment and funding from the Government and Local Authorities.

## **D. PRACTICE.**

Changing the legal system was highlighted by the women as a priority.

Some of the areas they discussed were:

- that the alleged abuser should be made to leave the family home.
- that Courts have to take more notice of what children are saying rather than relying on physical evidence, which rarely identifies the actual abuser.
- reconsidering access arrangements to alleged child sex abusers or 'wife' abusers. For example, opportunities for supervised access.
- looking at the length of time children have to wait before going to court.

When a woman has been assessed as being able to protect her child following allegations of sexual abuse, she is often left to pick up the pieces of this devastating situation. This leaves the woman and child in a very vulnerable situation. It should be recognised that as well as assessing risk, long term support should be offered to the child and mother.

Explanations should be given to women about why certain questions are being asked of them, particularly by Police. For example, police officers may be asking a woman about her sexual relationship with the abuser for corroborative evidence, but she may interpret this as putting responsibility for the abuse on to her.

## **E. CAMPAIGNING AND RESEARCH.**

Publicity. Many women said that they were more aware of the existence of child sexual abuse because of recent media coverage, although they had not considered themselves in that situation. When they did discover the sexual abuse of their child(ren), they believed it had happened, in spite of how they felt about their partner at that particular point, although they needed time to assimilate the information. However, extended family and neighbours refused to believe that the man they knew was a sex offender. Furthermore, the women did not know where they could go for help or even where to report the abuse.

More publicity is needed, therefore, about the extent of male violence to inform that it could be someone in your family, a friend or a neighbour. This could be funded by the Government as with many other crime related campaigns such as alcohol and driving.

The message has to be put across to men and women that women and children should not be abused, that they are at risk from a man they know as well as strangers and that child sexual abuse and incest, rape and sexual assault and domestic violence are crimes.

Research. Follow up research could be carried out from this exploratory study. More in depth interviews with some of the women from the sample to look closer at the links between the domestic violence and the child sexual abuse. In addition it would be very worthwhile to interview the children in years to come to hear what they had to say about intervention at an earlier age.

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**Appendix 1**

Sexual violence and feminist theory

**TABLE 2.1** Common myths and stereotypes about sexual violence.

<u>Myth</u>	<u>Rape</u>	<u>Incest/Sexual abuse</u>	<u>Domestic Violence</u>
1.They enjoy/want it.	It wasn't rape only 'rough sex'. Women say no when they mean yes. Some women enjoy rape.	Girls get pleasure from it. They don't object so the must like it. If it happens more than once they must want it to.	Some women are masochistic, seeking out violent men. Women don't leave so it can't be that bad.
2. They ask for/deserve it.	Women provoke by the way they dress, by leading men on. They take risks by going out alone, accepting lifts.	Girls are seductive or precocious.	Women provoke men by nagging, not fulfilling household duties, refusing sex.
3. It only happens to certain types of women/in certain kinds of families	Women who live in poor areas; women who are sexually active; women who take risks; women who have been previously abused.	Girls who come from problem families; large families; isolated rural families; girls who are precocious; whose mothers were abused.	Working-class women; women who are 'bad' housewives; women who saw or experienced violence as children.
4. They tell lies/exaggerate.	Women make false reports for revenge, to protect their 'reputation'.	Girls fantasize about incest, accuse men of sexual abuse to get attention.	It wasn't violence only a fight. Women exaggerate to get a quick divorce.
5. If they had resisted they could have prevented it.	An unwilling woman can't be raped. If there are no bruises she must have consented.	They should/could have told someone.	If they had fought back it would stop the man, they are abused because they are weak & passive. They should have reported it.
6. The men who do it are sick, ill, under stress, out of control	Abuse of alcohol/drugs, mental instability, childhood experiences cause men to act violently. Hostility to women. Psychosexual dysfunction.	Wife not sexually available. Deviant sexual arousal. Abused as a child	Witnessed or experienced abuse as a child. Pressure of work/ unemployment.

## Appendix 2

### women's support project

31 stockwell street, glasgow G1 4RZ

WORKING AGAINST VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN



The Women's Support Project is a voluntary organisation and is recognised as a Scottish charity. We work on a range of issues, including domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, child sexual abuse and incest.

Our work is informed by a feminist analysis of male violence and an understanding of the links and overlaps between different forms of violence, discrimination and oppression.

We aim to raise awareness of the extent and effects of violence against women and children, and work towards improved and positive services for women who have experienced violence, through:

- women centred work practice
- promotion of support services to women and children who have been abused
- developing understanding of links between different forms of male violence
- promoting interagency working and encouraging links between voluntary and statutory services

#### **Support and Information Service**

We provide an accessible, confidential source of information and support in relation to violence and abuse. Our service is aimed principally at women who have experienced violence and abuse, but we also have resources and information relating to men and boys affected by sexual abuse. The main users are survivors, their families, friends and supports. This service is available by phone and by appointment.

We are unable to provide ongoing support (other than for women whose children have been sexually abused) but can offer short term support for women in crisis and one off appointments to enable people to identify appropriate, specialist or long term support or counselling.

Our service to women whose children have been sexually abused includes ongoing support, occasional support events and through our network of women we can put women in touch with another mother who has been through a similar situation.

The Project acts as a resource for front line workers who are working with individual survivors, offering groupwork, or engaged in campaigning, policy, development or research.

#### **Training**

We offer training programmes on a range of issues for example :

- Domestic violence basic awareness
- Child Sexual Abuse basic awareness
- Towards a better understanding of self harm
- Increasing women's confidence
- Our training provides:

**KNOWLEDGE** - increases workers' confidence in identifying and responding to violence and sexual abuse

**RESOURCES** - participants have access to our lending library and a chance to discuss recommended resources

**INFORMATION** - up to date, relevant information on the extent of the problem and organisations available to help

We also provide **in-house training** to suit the needs of an organisation. For details of costs, please write stating your requirements or phone to discuss.

#### **Resource Library**

Our resource library plays a central role in our work by providing material to survivors, their supporters, community groups, professionals and researchers. The collection includes resources related to violence against women and children such as;

Child sexual abuse  
Domestic Violence  
Self harm  
Prostitution and Pornography

#### **Multi Agency Working and Networking**

This is a significant feature of our work and we are involved in the following initiatives :

Glasgow Multi Agency Partnership  
Routes out of Prostitution  
Glasgow Women's Voluntary Sector Network  
Standing Group on Violence Against Women  
September Month of Action Forum  
Scottish Parliament Cross Party Working Group on Men's Violence Against Women and Children  
City Council Equality Network Forum

#### **How to contact the Women's Support Project:**

Our telephone lines are normally open from 10.00 am - 4.30 pm, on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, and from 2.00 pm - 4.30pm on Wednesday. Our qwertyphone (0141-552-9979) allows deaf people to access our information service.

We are not able to offer a drop in service but if you would like to visit the Project, please write or phone to make an appointment. Our office at 31 Stockwell Street is wheelchair accessible by lift. If required an interpreter can be arranged.

### Appendix 3

Outline of guideline questions to be used in interviewing women whose children have been sexually abused by a father or father figure.

1. Age of self (mother)
2. Age of perpetrator
3. Ages of children – tick those sexually abused
4. Area they live – how long
5. Abuser's relationship to mother and to children
6. How did you discover the sexual abuse of your children
7. What form did the sexual abuse take/circumstances/children's feelings towards mother
8. What happened after discovery
9. Could you describe your relationship with the abuser
10. (To establish if domestic violence involved) – did you experience any of the following (use definition list attached – did he ...)
11. If, so how long did this behaviour persist
12. Is it still going on?
13. Did he abuse you in front of the child/ren or encourage child/ren to join in?
14. Are you aware of the threats if any he used on the children to keep sexual abuse a secret?
- 14.a Did he say things to child/ren to make them believe mother knew/didn't care/didn't seem to like them?
15. Do you think that his violence towards you was in any way connected with the sexual abuse of the children?
16. Do you feel that the violence you suffered prevented you from protecting the child or the children telling you?
17. Did you discuss domestic violence with your social worker?

### **Appendix 3 continued**

If appropriate ask ....

18. As a child did you experience sexual abuse?
19. What about the relationship between your parents. How would you describe this.
20. Do you know if the abuser experienced sexual abuse as a child?
21. do you know anything about his parent's relationship?

Wind down with...

22. What have you been given – most helpful/least helpful?
23. What would you recommend should be offered to other women in your position at time of discovery and after?
24. have you thought about contacting any voluntary organisations, for help?

Feedback on Interview

Give out materials for assistance: leaflets, information pack, criminal injuries compensation, women's directory (free)

## Appendix 4

### **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE – DEFINITION AND CHECKLIST**

‘Domestic violence is the loss of dignity, control and safety as well as the felling of powerlessness and entrapment experienced by women who are the direct victims of ongoing or repeated physical, psychological, economic sexual and /or verbal violence or who are subjected to persistent threats or the witnessing of such violence against their children, other relatives, friends, pets and/or cherished possessions by their boyfriends, husbands, live in lovers, ex husbands or ex lovers....’ (Battered Not Beaten, Linda Macleod)

Have you ever suffered any of the following within your home?

Slapping

Shoving

Punching

Kicking

Hitting with objects/things thrown at you

Being told you are stupid/lazy/ugly/useless etc

Not being given any money

Not being allowed out

Not being allowed to speak to people you wanted to

Being accused of having affairs

Being threatened

Being locked in the house

Having outdoor clothes taken away from you

Being made to read/watch pornography

Being put down/humiliated in front of your children

Being put down/humiliated in front of other people

Being forced to have sex/take part in sexual activities

Having restrictions put on contact with friends/family

Being beaten in front of your children

Being sexually abused in front of your children

Being ridiculed because of your beliefs or opinions

Had your past cast up to you.

## **Appendix 4 continued**

### **DEFINITION – CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

“Any child below the age of consent may be deemed to have been sexually abused when a sexually mature person has, by design or by neglect of their usual societal or specific responsibilities in relation to the child, engaged or permitted the engagement of that child in any activity of a sexual nature which is intended to lead to the sexual gratification of the sexually mature person. This definition pertains whether or not this activity involves explicit coercion by any means, whether or not it involves genital or physical contact, whether or not initiated by the child and whether or not there is discernible harmful outcome in the short term.” (SCOSAC – in Glaser and Frosh’s Book, child Sexual Abuse).