

Women Who Sexually Abuse Children

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This article describes a clinical sample of 40 women who sexually abused 63 children. Sixty percent of the female perpetrators victimized two or more children. Almost three-fourths of these women sexually maltreated children in polyincestuous family situations. More than four-fifths were mothers to at least one of their victims. The most common form of sexual activity was group sex; the next most common was fondling.

The mean age of these women was a little over 26; they were poor and poorly educated. Their victims were also young, having a mean age of 6.4 years at the time the case was identified. About two-thirds of the victims were female and one-third were male.

Female perpetrators evidenced marked difficulties in psychological and social functioning. About half had mental problems, both retardation and psychotic illness. More than half had chemical dependency problems, and close to three-fourths had maltreated their victims in other ways in addition to the sexual abuse.

As our awareness and knowledge of child sexual abuse increases, so does a concern about female perpetrators. Early case studies of sexual victimization suggested that sex offenses by women were extremely rare (Finkelhor & Russell, 1984; Herman, 1981; Lukianowicz, 1972; Meiselman, 1978; Weiner, 1964), and clinical reports described these women as highly disturbed (Herman, 1981; Mayer, 1983), often psychotic (Justice & Justice, 1979; Mathis, 1972; Mayer, 1983). As the number of reported cases of sexual abuse has increased, more situations involving female perpetrators have been identified (Finkelhor & Russell, 1984; McCarty, 1986). Thus far, however, little work has been directed toward understanding women who sexually abuse children. In fact, in a literature search, only one such study could be found. That was the work of McCarty (1986), who examined case records of 26 sexually abusive mothers referred to a treatment program. Those women represented 4% of the offenders in the program.

Nevertheless, the true extent of sexual abuse by women remains an issue of controversy. Groth (1979) has argued that reported cases involving female perpetrators represent only a tip of the iceberg. Because victims of female offenders are more likely to be male and intrafamilial (characteristics assumed to be associated with failure to disclose), Groth contends that they underreport their sexual experiences with women. In addition, Groth asserts that victimization by women may go un-

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reported because the abuse is disguised as child care. Finkelhor and Russell (1984) have recently reexamined these issues, however, and have not found that they result in high rates of undisclosed sexual abuse by female perpetrators.

The current study provides additional information about female perpetrators by reporting findings from a study of a clinical population of women who sexually abused children. In addition, comparisons with a clinical sample of male perpetrators are made.

METHOD

The cases in the present study were seen by staff of the University of Michigan Interdisciplinary Project on Child Abuse and Neglect (IPCAN) between 1978 and 1987. The study population consisted of 40 female perpetrators, and was a subset (13.8%) of a total population of 289 perpetrators. Most of the individuals (82.5%) were residents of Michigan, and 17.5% were residents of Ontario. The vast majority of the female perpetrator cases, 29 (72.5%), were referred by county-based child protection agencies; the remainder came from mental health agencies (4 cases; 10%) and the courts (4 cases; 10%), and three cases (one involving three victims) (7.5%) were self-referrals of adults victimized by women when children.

A "case" consisted of a female perpetrator and her victim(s). The 40 women in the study had allegedly abused a total of 86 children. Sixty-three (73.3%) of these children were evaluated by IPCAN staff, and all were found to have been sexually abused.¹ Twenty-four (60%) of the female perpetrators were assessed. For a case to be included in the study, at least one of the female perpetrator's victims had to be interviewed by IPCAN and found to have been sexually abused.² Table 1 provides information about who was interviewed in the 40 cases.

The fact that findings are based on a clinical sample has both advantages and disadvantages. Clinical studies generally yield a depth of knowledge about the subjects studied not found in surveys. However, there are limitations to the generalizability of the findings. Thus these findings cannot be assumed to be representative of sexual abuse by women as it occurs in the general or nonclinical populations. Moreover, arguably the cases included in this sample are the more severe and complex of those served by mandated agencies responsible for intervention in child sexual abuse, as such cases are probably more likely to be referred to specialized diagnostic and treatment programs.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SEXUALLY ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Four aspects of the sexually abusive relationships will be discussed: multiple victimization, relationships between victims and perpetrators, the contexts in which women are at risk for sexually abusing children, and types of sexual behavior engaged in by women perpetrators.

TABLE 1. Persons Interviewed by Case

Persons interviewed	Number (of cases)	%
Victims(s) only	10	25
Victims(s) & female perpetrator	6	15
Victims(s), female perpetrator & male perpetrator(s)	10	25
Victim(s), female perpetrator, male perpetrator(s), & others*	8	20
Victims(s) & others*	6	15

*Parents and relatives.

Multiple Victimization

As noted earlier, the 40 female perpetrators were found to have sexually abused 63 victims, on the basis of IPCAN evaluations. Twenty-four women (60%) victimized two or more children interviewed by the project. There were an additional nine women who were alleged to have victimized more than one child but for whom we only evaluated one victim.³ However, lest female perpetrators be regarded as especially deviant in their abuse of multiple victims, it should be noted that 59.8% of the 249 male offenders were known to have victimized more than one child.

Perpetrator-Victim Relationship

Because the women in this sample frequently sexually maltreated more than one child, they could have different relationships with different victims. Thirty-four of the women (85%) were mothers to at least one of their victims. Twenty-two (55%) sexually abused *only* their own children, and the other 12 (30%) abused their own children and others. In three instances, the women also abused nieces and/or nephews. Two abused their children and stepchildren and two their boyfriend's children as well as their own. Two who sexually abused their children also victimized their grandchildren. Three sexually abusive mothers maltreated neighbor children or those of friends as well. One woman who sexually victimized two daughters and two granddaughters also molested a neighbor's child. For the six women who were not mothers to at least one of their victims, the relationships were the following: girlfriend to the father of the victim (2 cases), grandmother (1 case), sister (1 case), babysitter (1 case), and sister and neighbor (1 case).

Caution needs to be exercised in interpreting the finding that more than four-fifths of the female perpetrators were mothers of at least one of their victims.⁴ Since most of these cases were referred by child protection agencies, which are responsible only for sexual victimization where a parental figure is the abuser or fails to protect a child from sexual abuse, intrafamilial cases are overrepresented in the sample. Sexual abuse by nonrelated perpetrators is more commonly handled by the police or the courts. No female perpetrators included in this study came from the police, and only four were referred from courts.

Male perpetrators were also likely to come from within the family, 79% (N.S.) of them being family members, principally fathers, stepfathers, and mothers' live-in boyfriends.

CONTEXTS OF THE SEXUAL ABUSE

The author has developed a typology for classifying sexual abuse cases (Faller, 1988). Female perpetrator cases fall into five (of 11) case types. Four of the women were sexually abusive in more than one context.⁵

Polyincestuous Abuse

Twenty-nine (72.5%) of the women were classified as sexually abusing in polyincestuous family situations.⁶ In such cases, there are at least two perpetrators and generally two or more victims (see Faller, 1988). Such families are characterized by multiple sexually abusive relationships and group sex with children of both sexes. Sexual abuse may be traceable for several generations and is frequently found laterally in the extended families. In these cases, there are often persons outside the household, both abusers and victims, who are also involved. McCarty (1986) describes some of the women in her sample as co-offenders. Although she does not define this term, no doubt there are similarities between women and co-offend and those in polyincestuous situations. However, only about a third of her women were co-offenders.⁷

Based upon the descriptions of the sexual abuse by victims and, to a lesser extent, the confessions of those women who admitted to sexually abusive acts (11 in polyincestuous cases), it appeared that a male rather than the female offender usually instigated the sexual abuse. These men were the victims' fathers, stepfathers, and grandfathers, or were boyfriends of the female perpetrators. This finding is consistent with clinical case studies cited by Finkelhor and Russell (1984) in which there were both male and female perpetrators. In 24 of the polyincestuous cases in our sample, the child's description of the sexual abuse suggested that men, rather than women, played a leadership role in the abuse. In three cases, no determination could be made, and in two it appeared that the female perpetrator took the initiative. The kind of account given by children that suggested the secondary role of women was as follows: The children would typically begin with revelations about a male offender and would attribute extensive sexual abuse to him. Usually, in response to later questions about where their mother was or whether she knew about the sexual abuse, they would reveal her role. In general, mothers were reported to have perpetrated fewer and less intrusive sexual acts than male offenders. In some cases, the victim said the female perpetrator was following the instructions of a male offender.

Additional support for the lesser role of female perpetrators came from some children's assertions that the woman did not want to perpetrate the sexual abuse or did not want it to happen to the children. When women did confess to the perpetration of sexual activities, their statements were consistent with those of the victims, describing coercion from male perpetrators and lesser involvement in sexual activities when compared to the men.

However, the conclusion about the leadership role of the male offender must be accepted with some caution. Children evidenced more emotional distress in recounting instances when women sexually abused them. Further, for 75.6% (N=37) of victims in polyincestuous cases, the woman was the child's mother. Possibly it was

more threatening to admit that a mother and/or a nurturing female was an exploiter than to report that for a man.

More men (46) than women (29) sexually abused children in polyincestuous situations.⁸ However, these polyincestuous men constitute only 18.5% of the male perpetrators, while the polyincestuous women comprise 72.5% of the sample of female perpetrators (chi square = 49.6; $p < .0000$). Thus, women seem vulnerable to becoming sexually abusive in polyincestuous situations.

Single-Parent Abuse

Six (15%) of the women who sexually abused were single parents.⁹ The finding that some female perpetrators are single parents is consistent with observations of Justice and Justice (1979), Mayer (1983), and McCarty (1986). In our sample, these mothers did not have ongoing relationships with men. In only two cases was the mother once married to the father of her children, and if there was more than one child, they usually had different fathers. Victims of single-parent abuse were both males and females. The oldest child in a family was always victimized although sometimes other children were also molested. The oldest child seemed to serve as a surrogate partner for the mother, often having adult role responsibilities.¹⁰

In the total sample, there were only 12 persons who sexually abused as single parents, 6 of them male.¹¹ Thus only 2.5% of males victimized as single parents (as compared to 15% of female perpetrators; chi square = 10.8; $p = .001$). However, this difference is more likely a reflection of the fact that the overwhelming majority of single parents are women, rather than of any particular propensity of women to sexually abuse in that context. Moreover, single-parent abusers are a small percentage of the total sample (4.2%), a factor that limits the formation of conclusions from the findings.

Psychotic Abusers

Three (7.5%) women were classified as psychotic perpetrators. When the offender is psychotic, she suffers from out-of-control libidinal impulses. In an effort to organize them she develops a delusional system that also provides justification for the sexually abusive behavior. In two cases, the women sexually abused their daughters and in the third, her daughter and a niece. Four other female perpetrators had had psychotic episodes but were not psychotic at the time of their sexual abuse. Thus our findings do not support earlier clinical assertions that most female perpetrators are highly disturbed and often psychotic at the time of sexual abuse. In fact, psychotic abusers in general were few in number, there being only five psychotic male offenders (2%; N.S.). Nevertheless, psychosis does seem to play an important role in a small number of cases.

Adolescent Perpetrators

Three (7.5%) of the female offenders were classified as adolescent perpetrators. These adolescent girls had difficulty with peer relationships and lacked alternative sexual outlets. They had access to children or sought out such access by, for example,

choosing younger children as playmates or volunteering to babysit. Generally, the sexual behavior was meant to gratify the perpetrator rather than pleasure the victim. There were 23 male adolescent perpetrators, constituting 9.2% of male perpetrators (N.S.).¹²

Noncustodial Abusers

There was one woman who was the noncustodial mother of her victims and sexually abused them during visitation. The clinical characteristics of this case appear to be the same as those in which noncustodial fathers sexually abuse their children. In such cases the noncustodial parent has usually resisted the marital break-up and is both devastated by the loss of the spouse and angry at her or him. The children become both the source for emotional gratification and an outlet for the expression of anger. The lack of structure and unsupervised access to the child afforded by visitation play a precipitating role in the sexual abuse. However, usually there are indications during the marriage that the parent is sexually attracted to children.

As might be expected, the percentage of males (15.3%; $n = 38$) who sexually abused as noncustodial parents is much greater than that for females (2.5%) [chi square = 3.8; $p = .05$]. However, most noncustodial parents are men. Therefore, the differences between male and female perpetrators should not be taken to indicate that women are less at risk for sexual abuse when noncustodial parents than men, but rather that women are less likely to be in the role of noncustodial parent.

TYPES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Information on the types of sexually abusive behavior was collected using data from victim interviews, supplemented by statements the children made to others, medical evidence, and admissions of the women perpetrators. The unit of analysis was each

TABLE 2. Types of Sexual Abuse Engaged in by Female Perpetrators

Type	Number ($N = 154$)	% of victims involved ($N = 63$)	% of all reports	% of female per- petrators involved ($N = 40$)
Fondling	24	38.1	15.6	37.5
Oral sex	20	31.7	13.0	27.5
Digital	16	25.4	10.4	25.0
Intercourse	9	14.3	5.8	20.0
Group sex	28	44.4	18.2	55.0
Exploitation ^a	10	15.9	6.5	7.5
Pictures ^b	6	9.5	3.9	12.5
Made kids watch sex ^c	15	23.8	9.7	20.0
Made kids have sex ^c	9	14.3	5.8	15.0
Miscellaneous	17	27.0	11.0	32.5

^aExploitation refers to the women allowing others to use the victim sexually.

^bPictures refers to the woman taking pornographic pictures of children or causing them to be taken.

^cSome female perpetrators made the children watch them or others have sex, and some made the children engage in sex with each other.

type of sexual behavior inflicted by a given women on each child. For example, a woman might repeatedly fellate a boy victim, but these acts would be counted as one *type* of abuse. The offences were categorized into nine types, and the findings appear in Table 2.

A mean of 2.4 types of sexual abuse per victim was documented. As Table 2 indicates, the most often reported victimization was group sex, probably a function of the fact that the majority of the women in this sample sexually abused in a context with more than one perpetrator. This is followed by fondling, the most common type of sexual abuse found in other studies (Faller, 1988; Fineklhor, 1979; Russell, 1986), and then by oral sex. Included in the miscellaneous category were three instances of sexual abuse disguised as child care and one in which the female offender asked the child to provide personal care for her.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMALE PERPETRATORS

Data are available on race, age, and socioeconomic status of the 40 female perpetrators.

Race of Perpetrators

Thirty-eight of the female perpetrators (95%) were white and two were black. Ninety-one percent of the male perpetrators were white (N.S.). Blacks make up approximately 10% of the population in the geographical area from which the cases come. Thus black women are slightly underrepresented.

Age of Perpetrators

As a group, female perpetrators are fairly young, as is evident in Table 3. The mean age for female perpetrators is 26.1 (SD = 6.5), the minimum being 13 and the maximum being 47. More than three-fourths of the women are between 20 and 30. Even the grandmothers were only in their forties. Male perpetrators are significantly older, with a mean age of 35.8 (SD = 12.1), a minimum age of 11, and a maximum of 75 ($t = -4.92; p < .0000$). This wider age range for male offenders might reflect a longer time span of risk for sexually abusive behavior by men. The reason for the young age of female offenders and the fact that they are on average almost 10 years younger than the men is not readily understood. A possible explanation may be related to the leadership role of men in sexual abuse, at least that found in most of the polyincestuous situations; that is, perhaps younger women are more easily led or coerced into these behaviors than are older ones.

TABLE 3. Age Distribution for Female Perpetrators*

Age group	Number	%
Less than 20	4	10.0
20-25	15	37.5
26-30	17	42.5
Older than 30	4	10.0

*The mean age for female perpetrators is 26.1.

Socioeconomic Status

The female perpetrators tended to be poor and poorly educated. Although we did not have precise income data, we were able to classify them into lower and middle class on the basis of current employment status, employment status of head of the household (if not the woman), and public assistance (or other social welfare benefit) status. Thirty-three (82.5%) were categorized as lower-class and seven (17.5%) as middle-class. However, these findings should not be taken as reflective of a relationship between poverty and sexual abuse. All but three of the women were involved with protective services agencies, and poor families are more likely than prosperous ones to be referred to such agencies (Faller, 1981). Male perpetrators were more likely to be middle-class [64.8% lower-class and 35.2% middle-class (chi square = 4; $p = .05$)]. The reason for the higher percentage of lower-class ratings among female perpetrators is not clear, although it may be explained by the fact that three-fourths of these women were in polyincestuous situations, and 82% of all polyincestuous perpetrators were ranked as lower-class.

Sixty-five percent (26) of the women had not finished high school, whereas 30% (12) had, five of the women having some education beyond high school. For two women, educational achievement was not known. Again, because of the source of the sample and the likely overrepresentation of lower socioeconomic groups, these findings should not be taken as supportive of any association between lack of education and sexually abusive behavior.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VICTIMS

Information concerning race, sex, and age of the 63 victims was also collected.

Race of Victims

Fifty-nine (93.7%) of the victims were white and four were black, these being victims of the two black female perpetrators. Almost all (90.5%) of the victims of male offenders were white and 9.5% ($N = 28$) were nonwhite (N.S.).

Sex of Victims

Twenty-three (36.5%) of the victims were male and 40 (63.5%) were female. The proportion of female to male victims in the sample supports an observation made by Finkelhor and Russel (1984) that female perpetrators are more likely to sexually abuse girls than boys, but not so likely to do so as males. The proportions of boys and girls abused by male offenders were 21.8% (boys) and 78.2% (girls) [chi square = 5.3; $p = .02$]. The latter figures are consistent with most reports of the sex of sexual abuse victims, between 70 and 95% of whom are female (Finkelhor, 1984, Finkelhor et al., 1986; Herman, 1981). The relatively more frequent choice of same-sexed victims by women than by men may be only indicative of the greater vulnerability of girls to victimization. There is no evidence that women are more likely than men to engage in homosexual sexual abuse.

Age of Victims

Data were collected on the age of victims when the sexual abuse was reported.¹³ For all except the adult victims seeking treatment, this was the age at the time of assessment, since the children were seen within a few days or weeks of the report of sexual abuse.¹⁴ The mean age of victims at the time of assessment was 6.4, 7 for boys and 6.1 for girls (N.S.). Their average age is much younger than that reported in national statistics collected annually from child protection agencies, which in 1985 was 9 years (American Humane Association, 1987).¹⁵ Furthermore, when the age at assessment of victims of female perpetrators is compared to that for the sample of victims of male offenders, which is itself atypically young (mean = 8 years), the former are still significantly younger ($t = 2.62$; $p = .009$). Age distributions for all victims and for those sexually maltreated by males and females appear in Table 4.¹⁶

Table 4 indicates that, except for victims under the age of four, ages of children sexually abused by men are fairly evenly distributed across age groups. In contrast, three-fourths of victims of female offenders fall within the four-through-six and seven-through-ten age groups, and very few are older than 10. The young age of victims of female perpetrators is probably in part a function of the type of cases that come to a specialized diagnostic and treatment unit. Arguably, the diagnosis of young victims is more difficult than that of older ones. Therefore, a child protection worker would be more likely to refer young alleged victims to experts. Why the victims of female perpetrators are younger than those of males is not altogether clear. It might be argued that this is because almost three-fourths of the perpetrators are mothers, and as mothers, they have greater opportunity to abuse young children. It might be also the case that women choose young, available, and vulnerable sex objects because they themselves are young and powerless when compared to males and male offenders (Finkelhor, 1987). However, in all but three cases in which the female perpetrators were mothers of at least one of the victims, the *oldest* child was sexually abused. Therefore, at least in choosing among her children, the mother did not pick only the youngest, and presumably the most vulnerable child. Another possible explanation is that close to three-fourths of the cases in the sample are polyincestuous and these cases tend to involve young victims. The mean age for the 82 victims of male perpetrators in polyincestuous situations is 6.9—not significantly different from the age of the victims of women; 79.3% of all polyincestuous victims were 11 years old or younger when evaluated.

TABLE 4. Age Distribution for Victims of Male and Female Perpetrators

Age group	All cases N = 308		Victims of males N = 294		Victims of females N = 63	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Less than 4	47	15.3	45	15.3	12	19.0
4-6	101	32.8	96	32.7	26	41.3
7-10	77	25.0	72	24.4	19	30.2
Older than 10	83	27.0	81	27.6	6	9.5

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONING OF FEMALE PERPETRATORS

In order to further understand why these women sexually abuse children, data were gathered on their psychological and social functioning. We examined a number of variables that clinicians have identified as possible causal factors in sexual abuse: mental difficulties, substance abuse, the propensity to be poor parents in general (as reflected in other maltreatment of the victims), and having been sexually abused as a child. There was ample evidence that many of these women had significant difficulties in these areas, 85% having at least one of these three problems and 75% having either mental difficulties or a chemical dependency problem.

Mental Functioning

Nineteen (47.5%) of the women had mental difficulties. Of these, 13 (32.5%) were mentally retarded or brain damaged, conditions which gravely affected their judgment and impulse control. As already noted, seven (17.5%) suffered at some time from psychosis. While in only three cases were the delusions directly related to the sexually abusive behavior, being at times psychotic is indicative of problems in general ability to cope. One woman was retarded and also had psychotic episodes. McCarty (1986) makes similar observations regarding her sexually abusive mothers, noting that about one-fifth were of borderline intelligence and approximately one-third had some form of emotional disturbance.

Substance Abuse

Data were gathered about chemical dependency using agency reports and information from the perpetrators, the victims, and other family members. Substance abuse was reported for 55% (22) of these women. In 13 cases the chemical was alcohol, in 6 cases, drugs, and in 3 cases, both drugs and alcohol. Statistics related to substance abuse vary somewhat in other studies of sex offenders, from 8 to 57%, depending upon the type of sex abuser being examined and the sample source (Finkelhor et al., 1986). The percentage found in female perpetrator situations is at the upper end of the continuum; however, it is not quite as high as the percentage for male perpetrators in this study, which is 61.8% (N.S.).

Other Maltreatment

Data were collected on other types of maltreatment that the female perpetrators in this sample inflicted on the sexual abuse victims. The primary source of this information was protective services records, but statements from the women, the victims, and other family members were also incorporated. Twenty-nine (72.5%) of the women were involved in some sort of maltreatment other than sexual abuse. Findings for specific types of maltreatment appear in Table 5.

Physical neglect was the most common type of maltreatment noted, involving more than half of the women and affecting almost two-thirds of the children. This was followed by physical abuse, inflicted by almost one-third of the women on a little more than one-third of the victims. Emotional abuse, involving six women and about one-tenth of the children, was fairly conservatively defined and had to be dis-

tinct from emotional trauma associated with the sexual abuse or physical maltreatment. It included severe scapegoating, chronic humiliation, rejection, and villification.

For 27.5% (11) of the women, no evidence of maltreatment other than the sexual abuse was found. In two cases, the children appeared to be well cared for by the women, both of whom were their mothers; in the remaining nine cases, no other maltreatment was documented. In these nine cases, the women had no caretaking responsibilities for the victim(s). Moreover, when the women offenders are compared to men, the percentage of men engaging in other maltreatment is lower (56.3%; *N.S.*), possibly due to less time spent with the children and fewer responsibilities for care taking.

Childhood Experiences of Being Sexually Abused

Nineteen (47.5%) of the female perpetrators reported being sexually abused in childhood. McCarty (1986) finds a comparable percentage among her incestuous mothers. Seventy-one percent of those interviewed by IPCAN reported sexual molestation in childhood. This figure might have been higher had we been able to interview all of the women. While these figures may sound high, they do not differ greatly from those documented by Russell (1983) and Wyatt (1985), who examined sexual abuse of women in the general population and found that 54% and 62% respectively had had such experiences during childhood. Although the definitions used in these studies were somewhat more broad than ours, their findings nevertheless suggest that sexual abuse during childhood cannot completely explain why these women became perpetrators. Moreover, when the rate of childhood sexual abuse for female perpetrators in our study is compared to that found among nonperpetrating mothers in our total sample (49.3%), the rates are essentially the same.

CONCLUSION

What conclusions can be drawn from the examination of the characteristics of these 40 women and their victims?

First, women do sexually abuse children, but they represent a small proportion of the sexual abusers in our clinical sample, less than 15% of the cases seen by IPCAN. While this incidence is higher than very early clinical estimates, it probably represents an increased awareness, rather than increased occurrence, of sexual abuse by women.

TABLE 5. Other Types of Maltreatment Inflicted by Female Perpetrators

Type	Number of women reported (<i>N</i> = 40)	% of women	Number of victims involved (<i>N</i> = 63)	% of victims
Physical neglect	21	52.5	41	65.1
Physical abuse	13	32.5	24	38.1
Emotional abuse	6	15.0	7	11.1

Second, there appear to be certain contexts in which women are at risk for becoming sexually abusive; the most frequently occurring one in our cases was a polyincestuous situation, a configuration comparable to that noted by McCarty (1986). Our findings also suggest that such women are typically not the initiators, but that they are persuaded, coerced, or otherwise drawn into sexual abuse by men. Thus, polyincestuous sexual abuse by women may be yet another illustration of the unfortunate effects of male dominance. Nevertheless, male hegemony is not the only factor leading women into patterns of sexual abuse. Female perpetrators had other characteristics that increased their vulnerability and contributed to their sexually abusive behavior. For example, they had substantial rates of mental difficulties, chemical dependency, and problems in parenting.

The finding that women are likely to be involved in group sex and to sexually abuse more than one child appears in large part to be reflective of the polyincestuous context of the sexual abuse examined in this study. Moreover, multiple victimization appears as common among male abusers. Thus, these findings cannot be attributed to any greater deviance on the part of female offenders.

Because of the small number of cases in each of the other contexts in which women sexually abused—as single parents, as psychotic perpetrators, as adolescent perpetrators, and as noncustodial parents—no conclusions can be drawn about them.

Third, the fact that more than four-fifths of the perpetrators were mothers of at least one of their victims should not be interpreted to indicate that most sexual abuse by women is intrafamilial, as approximately the same percentage of male perpetrators in the total sample were from within the family. Rather, this finding is reflective of the referral source, which was a protective services agency in the overwhelming majority of cases, and the exclusion of a number of out-of-home abuse cases from this study. Similarly, the lower-class status and lack of education of these women is probably a reflection of the sample source, not an indication of any association between sexual abuse and low socioeconomic status.

Fourth, the findings from this study do not support the assertion that most sexual abuse by women is disguised as personal care behavior, as only four instances of this type of abuse were identified. However, this does not rule out the possibility that other unrecognized and unreported sexual abuse by women is in the form of maternal care.

Fifth, the finding of higher percentages of female than male victims, but nevertheless larger proportions of male victims than found among victims in general, is consistent with Finkelhor and Russell's (1984) interpretation of previous statistics. Nevertheless, the findings do not entirely refute the assertion that sexual abuse by women is underreported because they predominantly abuse boys, who do not reveal their victimization. If indeed males do fail to disclose, cases involving boy victims would be less likely to come to our attention.

Sixth, explanations for the atypically young age of the victims—such as that young age may be characteristic of the type of case sent to experts; that the women, almost three-fourths of whom are the victims' mothers, are also young; and that close to three-fourths of these children are in polyincestuous families, and victims in polyincestuous families in general are young—are helpful. Nevertheless, the young age of these victims raises many questions about trends in sexual abuse.

In conclusion, a great deal still needs to be understood about female perpetrators. In interpreting the findings reported here, the exploratory nature of this study and the special characteristics of its sample must be appreciated. Nevertheless, it appears the circumstances that lead women to sexually abuse children can be differentiated from those causing men to do so.

NOTES

¹For a full explanation of assessment procedures and the methods employed to assure these were valid cases of sexual abuse, see Faller (1988).

²There were three situations in which two women sexually abused at least one victim in common. Each of these women is considered a separate case. However, information on the children is included only once.

³With the exception of this observation, information regarding the victims will be based on the 63 validated cases.

⁴For example, women appear to be at risk for engaging in sexual abuse when working in daycare (Faller 1987, Finkelhor, Burns, & Williams, 1987). Faller's day care center cases are not included in this study because very little information was available on the perpetrators (as opposed to the victims).

⁵If a woman was involved in sexual abuse in more than one context, information about her will appear in the discussion of each context, but this will be noted.

⁶Two mothers sexually abused in polyincestuous contexts and then later as single parents. Two others sexually abused their children and later, in polyincestuous contexts, their grandchildren. However, there was not enough known about the circumstances of their sexual abuse of their children to classify these events. Therefore, these cases are reported only as polyincestuous abuse situations.

⁷McCarty (1986) also has two other classes of mothers who perhaps are part of polyincestuous configurations, those whom she calls accomplices ($N=5$) and mothers who she says were independent offenders but where there was also a male offender ($N=6$). When the three groups are combined, co-offenders, accomplices, and independent offenders with a male offender, they constitute 77% of her sample. However, her terms are not defined clearly enough to know whether it is appropriate to consider all three of these groups comparable to polyincestuous women.

⁸Men were more likely than women to sexually abuse in more than one context.

⁹As already noted, two single-parent abusers also victimized in polyincestuous situations.

¹⁰Sexual abuse by single parents may be seriously underreported. As a rule, a child first reports sexual abuse to a significant adult in his or her life, often a nonperpetrating parent. If there was no such person available, as would be the case in a single-parent family, the child would not have that recourse.

¹¹Patterns of sexual abuse by single males are somewhat different from those for females. There is usually not a history of multiple partners who have superficial family involvement, but rather of a mother who is dead, is severely impaired and therefore not a suitable custodian, or has abandoned her children.

¹²Sexual abuse by adolescent males is recognized as a significant problem today (Becker, Kaplan, & Cunningham-Rathner, 1985; Knopp, 1982; O'Brien, 1986), and it represents a substantial proportion of sexual abuse cases. No doubt there would have been many more such cases in our clinical sample if our referral sources had been different, for example, juvenile court delinquency services. Moreover, clinicians and researchers have differentiated a variety of patterns of adolescent sexual abuse. The three girls in our study sample fit into one of those patterns, that of the ineffectual adolescent (see also Faller, 1988).

¹³The age of victims at onset is very likely to be even younger than age at assessment. In part, age at assessment was used because of difficulties in discerning age at onset for victimization by female perpetrators when there were multiple perpetrators.

¹⁴These cases were considered reported when a victim told someone who might take action.

Thus, one adult survivor told the police, and this led to the victim and two siblings, also abused and in the sample, to be placed with grandparents. Another survivor told her father after a beating by her sexually abusive mother, who was then hospitalized.

¹⁵Researchers who investigated nonclinical samples found the mean age of onset, which would in most cases be younger than the age at report, to be about 11 years (Finkelhor, 1979; Russell, 1986; Wyatt, 1985).

¹⁶Children sexually victimized by both males and females are included under both columns but only are counted once for the total number of victims.

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