

## Female Sex Offenders

Karen A. Duncan, M.A., LSW, LMFT

*"If we are to prevent child sexual abuse...we are going to have to accept that female perpetrators do exist."*  
Excerpt from Healing from the Trauma of Sexual Abuse: The Journey for Women by Karen A. Duncan, M.A., LSW, LMFT (Praeger Publishers, 2004).

### A Culture of Disbelief

Among the reasons our culture resist acknowledging the harm caused by females who commit sexual abuse is primarily due to a cultural belief that sexual abuse by women, especially when they act alone, is rare and that women are the victims of physical, emotional and sexual violence, and not the perpetrators of it. While it is true women and girls are the majority of victims of sexual abuse in their childhood that the effects frequently extends into their teen years and adult life—there are a *group of women* who are also commit sexual crimes. These women sexually abuse both boys and girls. Female sexual offenders are different from male perpetrators. And, although men remain the majority of perpetrators, research indicates that females also sexually abuse children.

### The Cost of Denial:

When our society denies that sexual abuse occurs by women we deny their victims the support they need to report this trauma and to seek help in their healing. We also aid the female offenders who commit this traumatic crime in not seeking the help they need to stop their offending. Tragically, through this cultural denial, we also allow the crime of sexual abuse by female offenders to continue to the millions of children they offend against *today* and we deny children who were their *past* victims the support they need to be believed.

Sexual Abuse of Boys by Women: Boys are especially harmed when they are victims of sexual abuse by women. Our culture will still refuses to accept that sexual abuse happens to girls and may even blame the female child or adolescent when it does. When sexual abuse happens to a boy society blames him, but in a different way. One of the most harmful cultural beliefs is that sexual abuse to boys by women is harmless—this belief is so embedded that jokes are actually made about the sexual abuse to boys. Sexual abuse is just that--sexual abuse. Sex offenders, whether they are men, women or adolescents are introducing their victims into a *cycle of a sexual abuse* that can sometimes last a lifetime. The traumatic crime of sexual abuse is known to create pathways to other types of victimization years after the original abuse ends. When we stop and realize that most victimization occurs by men, then we also have to recognize that women who abuse boys are contributing to the creation of perpetrators. Not a good legacy to leave our sons!

## Female Sex Offenders

Karen A. Duncan, M.A., LSW, LMFT

### The Background of Female Offenders:

#### What we know:

The following information is summarized from reports of the Safer Society Press, Center for Sex Offender Management and the U.S. Office of Criminal Justice on female sexual offenders:

1. In 2002, females accounted for 6000 sexual offenses (BJS, 2002).
2. Commit the crime of sexual abuse in 4 to 8 percent of reported cases
3. Estimates are that a total of 1.6 million men and 1.5 million women have been *sexually abused by women* when they were children. These estimates are based on the 1989 census figures and reports of sexual abuse at that time (1).
4. Among male offenders convicted and sentenced for the crime of sexual abuse 24.6 percent were sexually abused by women (1991 figures)
5. A significant number of women who sexually abuse children have been victims of sexual abuse

(1) Allen, C. (1991). *Women and Men Who Sexually Abuse Children: A Comparative Analysis* (Safer Society Press).

#### Characteristics of female sex offenders:

1. The majority of women who are reported are between 22 to 33 years of age.
2. A high percentage of females who commit sexual abuse have experienced sexual abuse as children or teens and can have victimization histories twice the rate of men who sexually offend.
3. They often have a history of alcohol and/or drug abuse.
4. The majority are not mentally ill in terms of suffering from a psychotic disorder.
5. A majority are employed in professional jobs or as managers.

#### Their child victims:

1. A high percentage of their victims are in the family or the perpetrator is close to the victim—friend, teacher, coach, sitter, clergy.
2. Victims are both boys and girls with a slightly higher number of girls but these numbers are considered low for males given the underreporting of boys as victims by both men and women.
3. Younger children, under the age of 12, are more often the victims of women over the age of 30 years old.
4. Children between the ages of 13 to 17 are often the victims of women who are between the ages of 18 to 25 years old.
5. Women do not tend to show a “victim age preference” in the same manner that male sex offenders do.

### Four types of adult<sup>1</sup> female sexual offenders who sexually abuse children and teens are proposed based on research and past proposed typologies<sup>2</sup>. These typologies do not include women who offend against adult women and men

1. **Predisposed familial offender:** An adult female family member who has a history of trauma and is predisposed to sexual offending and other types of child maltreatment as an outcome of her own history of sexual abuse and violence. This typology would include a woman who is currently the victim of domestic violence by a male who is also sexually offending. This category recognizes the risk of previous and current victimization in the developmental pathway to sexual offending for females either alone or with a partner.

<sup>1</sup> Adult female is defined as 18 years or older.

<sup>2</sup> Matthews, R., Matthews, J. & Spelz, K. (1993); Vandiver & Kercher (2004); Duncan, 2006).

## Female Sex Offenders

Karen A. Duncan, M.A., LSW, LMFT

2. **Developmentally delayed offender:** An adult female who indicates a developmental delay that is diagnosed by a standardized test or assessment. This category recognizes the impact developmental problems and organic syndromes can have on a history of sexual offending for this group of females as well as their risk for a history of sexual victimization.
3. **Child exploiter offender:** An adult female who is a non-family member and has a history of exploiting her dominant relationship or authority status with a child or adolescent. This category recognizes the cognitive distortions that may be distinct to this category of female offender in terms of believing that her sexual abuse of a child or teen is based on mutual attraction and love interests rather than on planned manipulation of a minor for her own sexual and emotional gratification.
4. **Violent female offender:** An adult female who primarily uses physical coercion to commit her sexual offenses and may share characteristics of the above categories of typology. These women most often resemble the predatory type of aggressive sex offender who has a predominant need for power and control over her victim.

### What Schools Can Do:

Provide prevention education to students about this group of sex offenders. Monitor and evaluate teachers and other adults in authority over children and teens with regard to appropriate standards of touching, dress, language and personal relationships with students. Set limits with regard to teacher-student time spent together and mandate appropriate supervision of these interactions. Act when violations occur and report suspected abuse to authorities and parents.

### What the Media Can Do:

Educate and provide training to reporters, journalists and producers about female sexual offenders and child sexual abuse. Use language in media coverage—television, radio and print—that conveys sexual abuse as a traumatic crime committed by women and men against children. Talk to and interview professionals who know about sexual abuse and sexual perpetrators. When interviewing a convicted female (or male offender) balance the interview with information from a professional expert in order to maintain ethical reporting and provide the public accurate and thoughtful information rather than conveying the distorted belief system of convicted sex offenders. When interviewing victims, whether children, teens or adults have a knowledgeable expert on the television or radio show and quoted within the text of an article in order not to present reporter bias, or the message that sexual abuse by women is harmless and better explain the traumatic crime of sexual abuse. The media can provide an invaluable community service by taking a primary role in educating the public about this crime and the people who commit it. Ms. Duncan offers a one day workshop for the media titled: "The Media's Role in Public Education in the Prevention of Sexual Abuse". Ms. Duncan can be reached at [www.theright2besafe](http://www.theright2besafe) or [www.healing4women.com](http://www.healing4women.com) or by calling 317-888-4141.