

Child Sexual Abuse

Words From Concerned Women

BY THE ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S COUNCIL OF SASKATCHEWAN

The sexual abuse of any child is hard to understand. For thousands of children, however, sexual abuse is a reality and a hell that must no longer be ignored. As Native women, mothers and friends of victims, many of whom are very young children, we are concerned about the abuse that is happening within our own families, in our communities and on our reserves. Some of us were ourselves victims and have had first hand experience with what sexual abuse does.

We have felt the pain and anger not only at the offenders, but at the system which tends to punish people more for damaging property than it does for damaging a child's life forever. We have realized just how difficult it is for victims who have absolutely no support services available and, sometimes, do not have family support from the non-offending parent.

We have learned to quietly listen as a 65 year-old grandmother, with tears in her eyes, shares the pain of her abuse at an early age. We know of other victims who have been unable to tell anyone about their abuse until years later. We have heard the stories of victims who hated their offenders (sometimes fathers and grandfathers) and how this has affected their lives. Some victims are able to talk about the abuse, years after, while others still cannot as it is too painful a memory. We know of generation after generation of our families being damaged by the abuse. We also know that sexual abuse repeats itself, often harming several generations.

Very often, violence against women is also involved; not only does the child victim live in fear, but the victim's mother is also living in hell. All too often, more than one child becomes a victim. It is a cycle that is hard to break, but it must be broken for the sake of our future and for the well-being of our children and future generations.

Many people, including our own, choose to ignore the sexual abuse of children by saying such things as "no, that doesn't happen to my people" or "no, I've lived in this community all my life and I haven't seen any." Oth-

ers claim that "only White people do that," while some White people claim "only Native people do that." Sexual abuse does not know any boundaries; it can and does happen to all people regardless of their colour, ethnic background, religion or socio-economic class.

Specific cases need to be provided; these are documented by authorities or at least the cases in which charges have been laid, or an investigation was completed, are documented. While the reporting of abuse has increased, there are many victims who are not able to tell, while others have told and were not believed nor supported. Very often the community will be silent about the abuse and people refuse to become involved in reporting it or in supporting the victim. While this is a difficult issue to address, it will continue to damage generation after generation if we remain silent and ignore it.

Even more dangerous is the attitude of "what are you complaining about? That happens to everyone around here." The sexual abuse of children is not acceptable in any community or culture and traditionally Native people were very specific about this. The abuse of children, sexually or physically, was not tolerated and there were community standards that were followed. Incest and child molestation were not acceptable, and people were punished or banned if they broke these social standards.

When one looks at the other social conditions facing many of our people, it is not surprising this social ill also affects us. It is perhaps the worst of the social conditions. While some people

feel alcohol is responsible for many problems, including sexual abuse, we feel this is a very dangerous assumption. This implies that the offender is not responsible for his actions when, in fact, he is. The sexual abuse of children is a crime; very often the offenders are not drunk at the time of their offence.

Offenders are aware of what they are doing and they know it is wrong. Some may have been victims themselves and are repeating a generational



pattern. Few child molesters seek help on their own. They tend to deny their crime if they are caught; there are, however, those who plead guilty and admit the crime. In far too many cases, charges are not laid and the crime is further ignored. This enables the offender to further abuse the victim and even seek out more victims.

When sexual abuse is ignored or when the offender goes free, the victims are left without any support and may never tell again. Victims who are not helped very often go through life being further victimized. Sadly, many of our young women turn to the streets, while many victims turn to self-mutilation and/or suicide attempts.

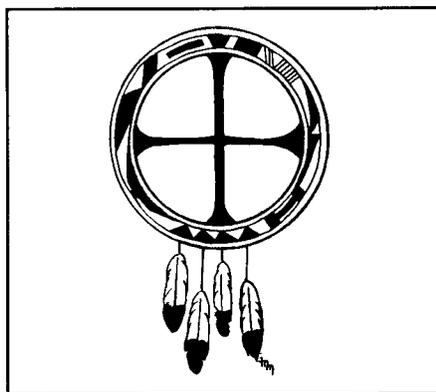
What is particularly sad is that victims are often quite young and, despite community knowledge of the crime, the offender will have a free hand at molesting yet another generation of children.

The following is a case that recently took place:

A child molester in his fifties molested a six year-old (and probably her younger siblings) and was charged but not convicted (possibly due to the young age of the victim). After this, he returned to his community and despite the efforts of some women to tell community members of his crime, he recently married a woman with several young children.

It is predictable that this offender will molest his step-children and continue to damage more generations. This should not be the case: all children have the right to healthy lives. Child molestation is perhaps the worst of all crimes.

Often, victims and their families are left without support or counselling. They are often blamed for the abuse and there is little understanding or support from family or community members. Sometimes they are told they must "forget and forgive" and to "stop bringing up the past." Worse yet, some victims are blamed for the offender's actions! The child victim is blamed for "leading on" the offender and for "letting it happen." The mother of the victim is blamed "for not treating the offender right in bed (when she is the spouse of the offender)," or otherwise. Sometimes there is the community's denial that sexual abuse exists because it is a subject that very often is too personal and too true for people to face. It is painful and personal, but it must be recognized as a community issue and it must be overcome. Rather than denying it is happening, we must work for solutions; the longer



we deny it the worse the abuse becomes until it is generational.

When one considers the level of violence (including physical, sexual and mental abuse) towards women (and again this is ignored and considered a family problem), and how this is a power situation, similar treatment towards children is related. The abuse of children, women and Elders was not acceptable in the past and it should not be acceptable today.

We are a group of Native women who have experienced the sexual abuse of either our children, our families or ourselves. Some of us are vocal and are able to address the issue openly, while some of us are not yet able to speak. Some of our children are also able to speak about the abuse openly; others are not.

We are learning more about this crime and are beginning to realize that it has affected more Native women and children than we initially thought. It seems now that we are talking openly about this, others (usually female victims or their mothers) are able to tell us about their abuse. These are sad stories and many are similar. Sometimes when we speak to other women, we know they have been abused by the tears and pain in their eyes.

Those of us who are mothers of victims have had other victims tell us that they wish their mothers would have believed and supported them. For some, it has been the first time they have been able to speak about childhood horrors. Others have said that this is a problem that affects a lot of our people.

Many people fear the process of facing up to the abuse, but it is necessary. It is not easy; for the sake and well-being of our children, it must be done. Widespread changes must occur in our families and in our communities to put a stop to this crime which affects generation after generation.

There is a need for support services for victims and their families and, unfortunately, many communities lack these and other essential services.

Something must be done about the offenders. Some people believe treatment is effective and others feel child abuse should be treated as a family court matter. Others feel long-term jail sentences are the answer. Some victims and their mothers also feel castration is the only cure.

While no one has all the answers, communities must begin to talk about this issue and deal with it.

Awareness programming directed towards our child victims, their families and offenders, must be put in place as must be support services. Perhaps some problems arise from the reporting procedures: people are reluctant to report abuse and 'become involved.' It is the Law to report child abuse and it is the only way to make the offender accountable for his actions. It is difficult to report, but it must be done. Often the victim is isolated and is not willing to talk to the authorities. We must look to our own communities for groups and individuals who are prepared to support and assist victims.

Because many Native women have been, and still are oppressed, whether through violence, lack of political power, or fear, this is a difficult challenge. But who else will do this? It will not be the men in positions of power, because some of them may feel the issue is too personal or, worse yet, some may be offenders. Child molestation, incest and sexual abuse are not popular topics that one discusses over a cup of tea, but they must be brought out and communities must develop solutions. We understand just how difficult this will be, given the present social and economic conditions of our people. But it is essential. The future of our people rests with this. Far too many of our children are suffering from abuse and, unless something is done, it will continue to repeat itself from generation to generation.

ONE LIFE DAMAGED BY ABUSE IS ONE TOO MANY. THERE ARE THOUSANDS OF VICTIMS WHO ARE DAMAGED AND THE CYCLE MUST BE BROKEN.

If you are involved in this area or if you have concerns about the sexual abuse of our children, we welcome your input and the opportunity to share information and ideas. For further information, please contact: Box 3764, Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3N8.

This article is reprinted from [the newsletter of] *Aboriginal Women's Council of Saskatchewan* (May 1988), pp.12-14.

NEDRA LEE PRISK

The Path

Am I so different than my sisters
Long since laid to rest?

Who am I to think that this life
Is so new, and virgin?

I am but a body, going through the
Predestined motions
Appointed to me.

I will attend to my task with a
Certain gladness of heart.

(The Year, 1985)

End to a Novice?

Writings, like soft tears
Flowed from her pen.

Poised. On the edge!
Knowing something
Wonderful was waiting
For her on the other side.
Temptingly, incessantly
Calling out to her
On the wings of the wind.

Crossing over!
Preconceptions pass
As truths.

How lucky to feel, to
Explore, to breathe in,
To taste! her new life.

The waiting, carried on
Over centuries of time
Passed.

Spitting her up; soft
Amoeba-like, on the
Stops of her destiny.

Gratitude poured forth
From her very being.
Tears flowed,
Covering her with a
Soft coat of Sisterlove.

She was at peace.

(January 1988)

ERRATA

Two errors appeared in Angela Gibbs Peart's article entitled "UNHCR and Refugee Women" on p. 107 of our "Refugee Women" issue (Vol. 10, No. 1). The figure of \$5,000 should have been \$5 million, and the date October 1989 should have been October 1988. We apologize for these errors. Also, the article appeared under the section heading "Government." Ms. Peart asked us to note for our readers that the UNHCR, as an international organization, is not answerable to individual governments.

Australian Feminist Studies

"Australian Feminist Studies is a gift to the whole world that cares about intellectual transformations."

Catharine R. Stimpson

AFS 3 Braidotti on Foucault & Irigaray 1986	AFS 4 Haraway on Cyborgs Albury on I.V.F. 1987	AFS 5 Feminism and the Body Grosz & Allen 1987	AFS 6 Equal Pay Language & Gender 1988	AFS 7 & 8 Feminism & history Socialism and/in feminism 1988	AFS 9 Feminism & Anthro- pology Outwork 1989	AFS 10 Sex/ Gender A Discussion 1989
---	---	--	---	--	--	---

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS (payable to *Australian Feminist Studies* starting with issue Number/renew my subscription (Tick appropriate rate)

Australia and New Zealand

- Supporting: \$50
- Individual: \$20
- Non-waged: \$15
- Institution: \$35

Overseas

- Individual: \$AUS 35 (air)
- \$AUS 25 (surface)
- Institution: \$AUS 50 (air)
- \$AUS 40 (surface)

I enclose a cheque/money order/bank draft for \$.....

or charge Bankcard

or Visa card

valid fromuntil end.....signature.....

Name

Address

.....

Cheques should be made payable to *Australian Feminist Studies* and sent to the Research Centre for Women's Studies, University of Adelaide, GPO Box 498, Adelaide, S. Australia 5001.