

JUST ANOTHER CHILD ABUSE?

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Child abuse has been in the news recently. But, is it really on the increase...

In 1985 three major scandals hit the headlines - the deaths of Tyra Henry, Heidi Koseda and Jasmine Beckford. People find it difficult to analyse why child abuse has come to public attention: whether it is simply because it is being more widely reported or whether change in our economic climate has produced an increase in violence against children. Whatever the causes, both statutory services and voluntary organisations have come in for serious public criticism.

There were two common responses to these cases - that of shock horror outrage (Andrew Neil, Tyra's killer, was described by the tabloids as an 'animal' or 'monster'); and that of complacent acceptance (Brent's former social services' chief, Henry Whalley, described Jasmine's situation as 'on the face of it. . . just another child abuse case').

Neither of these attitudes come as a surprise to anyone working in the field of child abuse. What is more surprising is that - in spite of the stream of public inquiries into similar cases of state neglect going back to the 1940s - neither of these responses have changed. Nor for that matter have these attitudes helped to bring any change about. Both reactions reflect a refusal to recognise that child abuse is something we all have a responsibility to prevent.

To label child abusers as 'monsters' is to put them at a safe distance from the so-called normal people who, it is assumed, could never do such a thing. This false distinction does nothing to help us identify the occurrence of child abuse, which is so widespread precisely because it is disguised by respectable circumstances. On the other hand, to treat child abuse as part of a routine normality - which is therefore acceptable - is to distance oneself unforgivably from the rights and interests of children themselves. Unfortunately, this attitude that two broken bones are part of the rough and tumble of family life, but

three are a social problem is only too deep-rooted in all of us.

Since child abuse is thought to be on the increase, childcare professionals have sought to find a cause and have hastily latched on to the idea that this must be unemployment. This fuels the old 'subculture' myth - that child abuse only occurs in working class or ethnic minority families. This is reassuring for the Right and allows the Left to duck the issue of violence, substituting in its place an analysis of economic issues.

But child abuse must be defined by every circumstance in which it occurs: in families, even in the comfortable homes of the rich; on the street; in classrooms; and in those salacious accounts of child molestation in the media. Child abusers come from all socio-economic backgrounds and they abuse children both within and outside their families. But they are predominantly male - 97% according to the Rape Crisis Centre.

Today social workers are beginning to be criticised for venerating the nuclear family. The Jasmine Beckford inquiry panel made play of the fact that Beckford was not Jasmine's 'real' father, as if this would have influenced his behaviour, in a way that the social services should have monitored. In fact, to abuse a child is a choice that the offender makes independent of family considerations. Being related by blood to a person who chooses to abuse you is not the protection or the comfort we might wish it to be.

With growing concern about corporal punishment in schools, physical abuse is perhaps more confined to the privacy of

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the home, residential establishment or playground. Sexual abuse, however, has no boundaries. A stranger who walks up to a six-year-old on the street and punches her on the nose may be immediately stopped by passers-by; but if that same stranger secretly pinches a child's bottom or perhaps simply ogles her in an offensive

way, we might hardly notice. Yet for a child, the effect will be the same: regardless of the act, the message is that she is not safe, not protected, not liked and not respected.

From a child's-eye view, the pain of being abused is not the broken bones. It is the realisation that you are not loved - that, perhaps, you are even hated. You make this painful realisation straight away if you are battered or starved. But the discovery may be more gradual, as after years of sexual abuse whose inherent violence was disguised with attention and rewards. For children who have been 'cheated' in this 'gentle' way, the lovelessness of the molester can seem even more cruel.

Incest, often considered separately from other forms of violence and considered to be the most common type of child sexual abuse, is in fact part of the general continuum of disrespect and abuse. Similarly, we cannot disassociate domestic violence from the male violence cultivated in our popular culture. The child abuser is someone who, for whatever reason, refuses to love or respect children. This refusal is the lowest common denominator, linking 'monsters' - the sex killers - and 'normal family men' - the incest offenders - alike.

Women rarely abuse children and yet, in the few cases that have come to light, public outrage against female abusers reflects society's contradictory expectations of women. Take the case of Myra Hindley, whose part in the Moors murder was that of colluder rather than perpetrator. The press attention she has received has been far worse as a failed mother-figure than Ian Brady, who actually cut the children up. Almost without thinking, we accept his violence as part of the continuum of male aggression, whilst saving our rage for Myra's refusal to nurture and protect.

The assignment of such roles to these strangers is symptomatic of our expectations of family life. We often see as colluders mothers who are innocent victims of their husband's abuse, forgetting that collusion implies equal access to information and power. And when a mother is plainly guilty of neglect, our angry response can

prevent us from noticing that we are operating a sexual double-standard - we take it for granted that men abuse, and yet expect women to refuse to accept this. Psychiatrists and social workers in particular hold women responsible in families where men are abusing children. As the recent cases show they often refuse to use their own powers to protect children in such cases.

The publicity now given to sexual assault of both boys and girls follows the rise of the women's liberation movement of the 60s and 70s, when women began in large numbers to speak openly about domestic violence. But, child sexual abuse is not a new issue for women in Britain. From the 1870s female activists petitioned parliament against the sexual abuse of girls. Child prostitution was rife and the public was quick to respond to feminist information campaigns, as a result of which the age of heterosexual female consent was raised in 1885 from 13 to 16.

But public understanding of the extent of child sexual assault, then as now, fell far below the feminist ideals. People were happy to be outraged at assaults committed by strangers - for this was no challenge to their sense of social structure and family coherence. Take the reaction to the rape of a boy in Brighton in 1983 described by



Recent cases of child abuse that have been brought to the attention of the NSPCC.

Katherine Whitehorn; 'There's an unpleasant element of queer bashing in the howls of outrage - with little girls, it's only when they actually get killed that there is normally this sort of fuss'.

Nineteenth century feminists campaigned without the benefit of a vote of their own, to get parliament to make sexual abuse within the family a criminal offence. In 1908 our present incest laws were duly passed. These, as the Lord Chief Justice of the time declared, were long overdue considering 'the frequency of assault by

fathers on their daughters.' Incest was known even then to be widespread.

The Women's Freedom League was a suffragette organisation active in the movement for votes for women. The League was also involved in the campaign against rape. A column in their weekly paper included regular bulletins from women who monitored court cases and compared the very low sentences passed on child-molesters with the much higher sentences dealt out to people who committed property crimes. Even today, one offender was put on probation after raping his three children whereas someone who stole a bottle of champagne received a sentence of six months.

One magistrate reported by the Women's Freedom League had said in mitigation of a man who had sexually assaulted a three year old: '(such crimes) are committed by the very best-conducted men, just one of those things that the very best people in all walks of life are apt to commit in some unguarded moment.' Compare Judge Brian Gibbens, Old Bailey, December 1983, on the rape ('unlawful sexual intercourse') of a 17-year old girl by an ex-army man Watson-Sweeney: 'It is one of the accidents that can happen in life, although of a different kind, and

could almost happen to anyone. . . I felt compassion. . . this was a momentary lapse.' Watson-Sweeney got two years.

While the attitude of the courts may be changing only very slowly, other organisations have helped lift the veil of secrecy from child abuse. In the 1970s Rape Crisis Centres were established all over the country, and began to receive calls from, or about, sexually-assaulted children. In the 80s we have witnessed the burgeoning of a network of self-help groups-

This network was originally coordinated by the Incest Survivors' Campaign (founded in 1981 from the first self-help group in Britain) but there are now autonomous groups in all the major cities. These groups perform a variety of functions from running girls' refuges to founding drop-in centres or holding preventive workshops for children and developing professional training and policy.

Women's groups like these have done much to publicise the issues of child sexual assault in recent years. They provide a voluntary network of personal support for children and adults, and aim to prevent what they call 'secondary abuse' - collusive and prejudiced treatment from professionals, such as doctors, social workers and teachers - by monitoring and lobbying

statutory services so that they too become more answerable to the public.

Public reaction to child abuse is influenced by both professional treatment and media coverage. The emphasis laid by professionals on keeping the nuclear family together, and the moralising outrage of the tabloids, though contradictory responses, both cater to a reactionary morality. The Left remains confused, perhaps because questions of personal morality have not traditionally been a left-wing issue. But, by refusing to confront the issue of children's rights, socialists cannot remain neutral - this refusal contributes to a reactionary mythology of childhood.

Neither is making excuses for the offender going to help children. There has been a lot of confusion over the 'civil liberties' aspect of child abuse which for many socialists has concentrated attention on the protection of offenders and not children. At the moment public perception of the offender varies: from considering him a 'monster' to an 'ordinary' man who is responding to social deprivation or whose civil liberties are under threat. Whatever light we see him in, one factor remains constant: that debate over his fate is preventing us from considering the real issue of child abuse - the rights of the child. •

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