

“I Know It’s Hard to Believe, But the Monster Who Abused Me is My Mother:” Experiences of Being Sexually Abused as a Child by a Female

Sexual Abuse
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Abstract

In the present study we sought to shed light on the experience of adults who were sexually abused by females. Narratives in the current study were chosen from a large set of narratives ($n = 505$) that were submitted to the Israeli Independent Public Inquiry on CSA. Twenty-eight ($n = 28$) narratives of adults who experienced CSA committed by females were included in the study and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Two main themes were identified: (1) adults who as children experienced CSA committed by females, and (2) personal, interpersonal, and social constructions of the abuse. Most of the narratives included intrafamilial abuse, with half of the participants reporting that their mother was the one who committed the CSA, which often occurred during daily routine activities, with the main abuse scene being the shower/bathroom. Participants described various abuse experiences including the experience of powerlessness, “standing together,” and captivity. Finally, participants discussed how social constructions of gender impacted how they understood and experienced the abuse. Child sexual abuse committed by females was described by the participants as

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having serious consequences for their lives. Participants shared how perceived gender roles and social scripts have an important role in casting doubt on the existence and reliability of CSA experiences committed by females. Findings from the current study help to identify key characteristics of sexual abuse that was conducted by females, and suggests social mechanisms that may help explain why perpetration by females is understood and treated differently than perpetration by males.

Keywords

females, child sexual abuse

Introduction

Research on child sexual abuse (CSA) committed by females, especially maternal sexual abuse, is limited. This situation is problematic, as it is clear that the research being conducted on male individuals who commit sexual offenses does not necessarily generalize to their female counterparts. Even if the behavioral manifestations may be similar across genders, the underlying psychological differences or vulnerabilities are significantly different for females and males who commit sexual offenses (Pflugradt & Allen, 2015). Females who sexually abuse children are still considered to be social and moral outliers, as they undermine normative labels and challenge traditional gender stereotypes. In previous research, various aspects of the unique characteristics of CSA committed by females have been discussed: how females sexually abuse children and whether this abuse differs from abuse committed by males; the long-term effects of CSA committed by females; how/whether CSA committed by females affects the disclosure process; and how adults who experienced CSA by females think this phenomenon is perceived by society, policymakers, health professionals, and law enforcement (Cortoni, 2018; Cortoni & Gannon, 2016; Cortoni et al., 2017; McLeod et al., 2021; McLeod, 2015; Pflugradt & Allen, 2015; Tozdan et al., 2019). In the present study we sought to shed light on the experience of adults who were sexually abused as children by females.

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse Committed by Females

There is a significant discrepancy between official reports and victimization surveys on the prevalence of females who commit child sexual offenses (Cortoni et al., 2017; Tozdan et al., 2019). Prevalence is assumed to be lower compared to males who commit such offenses, but it is unclear whether the smaller number of cases reflects the reality, as there is less research data available on this issue, and a limited number of results (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022). Based on 17 samples from 12 countries, a recent meta-analysis revealed that a small proportion of sexual offenses reported to police are committed by females (2.2%), whereas victimization surveys have indicated

prevalence rates (of sexual offenses committed by females) that are six times higher than official data (11.6%) (Cortoni et al., 2017). In a recent study conducted among 2516 representative German individuals, of all participants reporting experiencing CSA, 1.0% reported the offense was conducted by a female (Gerke et al., 2020). This finding is in line with findings from other studies showing females to make up approximately one to two percent of all individuals who commit sexual offenses (Vandiver & Walker, 2002). However, clinical studies suggest that the prevalence is much higher. Data from a nationally representative survey investigating 3120 cases of CSA in Ireland revealed that 6% of all the individuals who had experienced CSA in the sample were abused by a lone female (Bourke et al., 2014). In a study featuring an examination of substantiated CSA cases reported to Child Protective Services in the U.S. for 2010, slightly over 20% of the cases involved a female who had the primary role in the abuse. When two individuals who had committed offenses were listed, the number of females identified in a secondary capacity of committing such abuses was over 42% (McLeod, 2015). The most recent review on CSA committed by females concluded that between 5% and 20% of CSA is carried out by females (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022). As these studies vary in their sample (general population vs. clinical sample) and vary in terms of their methodology, it is not surprising to find widely disparate results between studies that assess reported and unreported rates of sexual victimization committed by a woman.

Characteristics of Child Sexual Abuse Committed by Females

Most research suggests that females who commit sexual offenses differ significantly from males who do so (Cortoni, 2018; Pflugradt & Cortoni, 2014; Pflugradt & Allen, 2015). For example, in an overview of 40 cases, most of the females had a history of only one sexual offense and no other criminal history, were slightly younger than males (who commit sexual offenses) at the time of the arrest for their initial sex offense, and were significantly more likely to have committed such offenses for the first time (Vandiver & Walker, 2002). In addition, unlike males who committed CSA, in a meta-analysis of 10 studies (2490 individuals who committed CSA; average follow-up 6.5 years) females who committed CSA were found to have extremely low rates of sexual recidivism (less than 3%) (Cortoni et al., 2010).

A study using the National Incident Based Reporting System to compare males and females who committed sexual offenses among all 802,150 incidents of sexual assault reported to police across 37 states in the U.S. between 1991 and 2011 revealed that females committed sexual offenses with male accomplices in more than 30% of their sexual crimes—far more often than males jointly participated with females (2%) (Williams & Bierie, 2015). Typically, the accomplice is a male (Vandiver & Walker, 2002; Wijkman et al., 2010; Williams & Bierie, 2015), with whom the female is romantically involved (Ten Bensel et al., 2019; Cortoni & Gannon, 2016; Muskens et al., 2011). Females who commit sexual offenses on their own are more likely to commit these offenses against males, and score higher on dominance and aggression

scales (Miller & Marshall, 2019). In a cohort study of 111 females who committed sexual offenses in the Netherlands, 63% had committed these offenses with an accomplice, and 27% had done so alone. Those who had an accomplice were more likely to perpetrate offenses against multiple individuals, to commit these offenses against several individuals in the same family, to commit at least one offense that involved penetration, to be mothers, and to have a mental disorder (Wijkman et al., 2010).

As for the children who were abused by females, a study conducted in the U.S. suggested that the mean age of victims of females was 9.4 years, whereas for children who were abused by males, the age of the children was slightly older – 10.7 (McLeod, 2015). Other studies have noted that children who are sexually abused by females are even younger – with most such children being under the age of nine (Peter, 2009) and even under the age of six (Moulden et al., 2007). In contrast, other studies have reported that up to 67.7% of children sexually abused by females were between the ages of 11 and 17 (Ferguson & Meehan, 2005; Vandiver & Walker, 2002).

In terms of the sexual acts themselves, sexual abuse by females involves a variety of different acts including voyeurism, exhibitionism, genital activities, mutual masturbation, penetration with objects or digital penetration, and exposing children to pornography (Saradjian & Hanks, 1996). Studies have also suggested that females who commit sexual offenses have lower intellectual levels than average and a high prevalence of mental disorders (Pflugradt & Allen, 2015; Wijkman et al., 2010). However, even though females who commit sexual offenses also have relatively higher rates of mental illness, it is yet unclear the extent to which psychological disorders influence or affect their sexually assaultive behaviors (Pflugradt & Cortoni, 2014).

The literature also points out that children who are sexually abused by females are significantly more often boys than girls (Bourke et al., 2014; Gerke et al., 2020). In a meta-analysis based on 17 samples from 12 countries, boys were much more likely to self-report having been sexually abused by a female than were girls (40% vs. 4%) (Cortoni et al., 2017). In addition, in a nationally representative sample of children in the U.S., boys reported more abuse by females (54.4%) than did girls (11.6%) (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finkelhor, 2019). Interestingly, children who were abused by a female were significantly less afraid during the abuse (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finkelhor, 2019). It is possible that this finding can be attributed to the close relationship between the one who abuses and the one who is abused in such cases, or the social construct that women, in terms of their gender role, are perceived as less frightening or dangerous.

Another main difference between females and males who commit sexual offenses against children is that females are less likely to be a stranger to these children, and are most commonly a relative (mother or sibling) or acquaintance (neighbor or babysitter) (Bourke et al., 2014; Tsopelas et al., 2012). There are almost no reports in which the female who commits sexual offenses is a total stranger to the child. In fact, a systematic review suggested that all females who committed sexual offenses had been in a relationship with the child for whom they were supposed to be caring (Tsopelas et al., 2012). A recent representative study in Germany found that a quarter of the females

who committed sexual offenses against a child were the mother figures of the child (Gerke et al., 2020), a finding that has implications for how such abuse occurs and is perceived both by the one who abuses and the one who is abused. Both the abusers and the abused in these situations have difficulty recognizing the behavior as sexually abusive, and the adults often use their childcare activities to commit their sexually abusive acts (Tozdan et al., 2019; Tsopelas et al., 2012). Pflugradt and Allen (2012) also suggested that despite the severity of the female's abusive behaviors, there were periods of time when most of the females who sexually abused the children exhibited nurturing behaviors (per reports by the females and the children). For example, on some occasions females who sexually abused children would care for the child's wounds resulting from the abuse, offer the child special food and drinks, and provide the child with special privileges and/or activities.

Why Child Sexual Abuse Committed by Females Goes Under the Radar

Despite these data and changing perceptions, a female who sexually abuses children is still considered to be a social and moral outlier. It has been suggested that traditional sexual scripts and gender roles (e.g., being a "woman") impede official recognition of the problem (Denov, 2003). Traditional sexual and gender scripts have influenced broader societal views concerning sexuality and sexual abuse and have also permeated criminal law, victim reporting practices, and professional responses to females who commit sexual offenses (Denov, 2003; Tozdan et al., 2019). In terms of gender roles, women are usually portrayed as victims – passive, innocent, and sexually submissive – and are seen as nurturers and protectors in positions of trust; they are thought of as mothers and as those who provide care for others (Tozdan et al., 2019). Some have even argued that in terms of anatomy, given that women are seen as "receivers," it is difficult to imagine a woman as someone who sexually abuses others (Tozdan et al., 2019). Women who sexually abuse children undermine normative labels and challenge traditional gender stereotypes. The implicit denial of women's potential for sexual aggression may ultimately contribute to the under-recognition of the problem in society as well as by official sources (e.g., professionals and law enforcement). Tsopelas et al. (2012) described this phenomenon – women who sexually abuse children – as a social "blind-spot."

As a consequence of child sexual abuse committed by females being a social taboo, it is often difficult for children to recognize their experiences as sexually abusive, and they are more hesitant to disclose the abuse than are children who have been abused by males (Tozdan et al., 2019). This state of affairs is perhaps why children who experience sexual abuse by women sometimes lie about the gender of the person who abused them (Tozdan et al., 2019) and why such children are rarely taken seriously when they make their allegations. The vast majority (86%) of children who have been abused by females and report such abuse are not believed (Tsopelas et al., 2012).

Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse Committed by Females

Although the long-term effects of sexual abuse acts committed by males have been studied extensively, minimal research has been dedicated to exploring the effects of sexual abuse committed by females. The lack of research on this matter may be due to professionals' misconception that sexual abuse committed by females is relatively harmless as compared to sexual abuse committed by men. On the contrary, deleterious effects have indeed been found. In a study conducted among 14 adults (seven males, seven females) who experienced CSA by females, the vast majority of participants described the experience of this sexual abuse (i.e., committed by females) as harmful and damaging and reported long-term psychological difficulties (Denov, 2004). Finally, disclosure rates of abuse committed by females are also significantly lower than those of abuse committed by males. The specific characteristics of CSA committed by females (e.g., the close relationship between the one who abuses and the one who is abused) and the many misconceptions and gender stereotypes about this phenomenon (e.g., males cannot be abused, females cannot abuse) seem to make children less likely to disclose their abuse, perhaps because they are too ashamed or too scared to do so (Tozdan et al., 2019; Tsopelas et al., 2012).

The Present Study

In the present study we sought to shed light on the experience of adults who as children experienced CSA committed by females. By voicing the experiences of individuals that were sexually abused by females, we can identify the unique characteristics of sexual abuse that was committed by females, as well as better understand why perpetration by females is treated differently than perpetration by males. For this purpose, we analyzed and described the experiences and perceptions of 28 such adults. Specifically, we focused on: (1) the experiences and perceptions of adults who as children experienced CSA committed by a woman, and (2) how the abuse was framed within the social construction of gender and sexual scripts.

Method

The Israeli Independent Public Inquiry

Narratives in the current study were chosen from a large set of narratives ($n = 505$) that were submitted to the Israeli Independent Public Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse, which was established with several aims, including changing policy regarding child maltreatment in Israel and gaining an in-depth understanding of adults' retrospective experiences of CSA. This project was initiated by the fourth author in collaboration with [masked for review], and its main aim is to promote policy change in all relevant systems and services in order to promote better adaptation of policy as well as prevention and intervention efforts. The project's working model is based on the concept

that changing policy and enhancing and promoting knowledge should be informed by individuals who have undergone CSA. Therefore, this project has made and is making intensive efforts to approach adults who as children experienced CSA and to learn from their experiences.

Data Collection

Professionals affiliated with the project reached out to Israeli citizens aged 18 and older who had experienced sexual abuse during childhood (ages 0–18). These individuals were invited to share their narratives of abuse through advertisements on Facebook, the radio, newspapers, social media personalities, public figures, and community leaders. One of the project's aims was to approach individuals from diverse communities in Israel with diverse backgrounds such as race, region, socioeconomic status, religion, and culture. As such, a public appeal was disseminated in five languages (Hebrew, English, Arabic, Russian, and Amharic). Two platforms were established to collect individuals' narratives. The first was an online form where participants could submit a written story or upload an audio file. Participants' confidentiality was protected via the use of secure software. The second platform was a personal meeting scheduled with an Inquiry member where participants could share their narrative in a face-to-face meeting; the narrative provided by the participant was then transcribed.

Both the online form and the face-to-face interview included the following questions: general demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, education, employment) and questions about the characteristics of the abuse (e.g., participants' age when the abuse began, the identity and gender of the person/people who committed the CSA). In addition, on both the online form and in the interview, most of the space was given to open-ended questions such as: *"Please tell us the story of the abuse in your own words"* *"Please share the way in which the abuse was disclosed"* and *"Please share with us whether you received help as a child."* In the last section, participants were invited to write recommendations for several entities including the child protection system, the health and education systems, the public, and so on, from their own experience. They could also write messages meant for children experiencing sexual abuse, families of maltreated children, and individuals who commit such abuses.

Sample

The study was based on a specific online form that permitted the submission of written narratives. Taking into account the variations between narratives in terms of the length and thickness of data, and after reviewing all the narratives and discussing the inclusion criteria, the authors decided to include only the narratives with rich and thick data. As such, the current study's sample included 28 such narratives, provided by Israeli adults across a wide age range (23–59, $M = 33.76$) who experienced sexual abuse in their childhoods by females. Narratives describing abuse committed separately by females and males were also included. Out of 28 participants, most ($n = 26$) were Jewish, and

two ($n = 2$) chose “other” for their religion. In addition, the majority of participants identified as women ($n = 23$), three as men ($n = 3$), and two ($n = 2$) identified as transgender. Of the 28 narratives, 20 were intrafamilial cases of abuse, and eight narratives were extrafamilial cases of abuse. Out of 28 narratives, 14 narratives included more than one individual who had committed the sexual abuse. With regard to the identity of the females who committed the sexual abuse, the mother was the most common such figure ($n = 13$), followed by a female authority figure of some sort (such as a teacher, $n = 7$), a sister ($n = 4$), a grandmother ($n = 3$), a female relative ($n = 4$), and a female neighbor ($n = 1$). Some narratives included both males and females who had committed the sexual abuse. Most of these stories ($n = 8$) comprised intrafamilial cases of abuse which included, in addition to the female who had committed acts of sexual abuse, a brother ($n = 4$), a father ($n = 5$), an uncle ($n = 1$), or a male neighbor ($n = 1$). Two such narratives in this latter intrafamilial category ($n = 2$) pointed to the inclusion of strangers who were men.

In most narratives ($n = 16$), the abuse first started at the relatively young age of 1–5, followed by ages 6–10 ($n = 7$). Five ($n = 5$) participants said that they did not remember how old they were when the abuse began. With regard to abuse occurrence, most cases ($n = 26$) were described by participants as constituting continuous abuse, and in two cases ($n = 2$) participants made reference to a one-time incident of abuse.

Data Analysis

A qualitative method was used for the study in order to give voice to people whose experiences have not been adequately represented in the empirical literature (Levitt et al., 2018). The authors of the current study used inductive thematic analysis, a process which aims to identify patterns or themes in the data, and followed a six-phase guide provided by Braun and Clarke (2006) to explore the experiences of adults who as children were sexually abused by females as conveyed by them in their narratives. First, following an initial meeting, the two coders (the authors; CK and AAN) immersed themselves in the data for several weeks, reading it repeatedly and recording their early thoughts in reflective journals. All narratives were then divided among the coders and broken down into relevant meaningful segments before being assigned codes. The coders talked about the codes and new topics. Then they went back to the remaining narratives to finish coding after creating a codebook. An initial coding merged approximately 70 codes and were written in Word files. In order to connect the codes that arose from all the narratives, an additional round of coding was conducted on the final set of narratives. During this time, new codes were introduced. The group (the coders and the first author) gathered once more to discuss the codes and coding procedure, and to exchange journals, and judgments were made regarding the initial codes’ integration into the coding scheme or removal. Eventually, the codes were divided into categories, which were then divided into a number of subthemes, which eventually emerged into two major themes: “Adults’ experiences of the abuse” and “Personal, interpersonal, and social constructions of the abuse.” The coders used a systematic procedure to revise and

test the codebook throughout the analytic process in order to increase intercoder agreement. The coders took a number of actions, such as segmenting the text, creating a codebook, coding, evaluating the codes, and reaching a consensus in regard to them, modifying the codebook, and final coding. In these narratives, the coders were looking specifically for each segment of data referring to participants' experiences and units of meanings related to participants' experiences. In order to adhere to participants' experiences, codes and categories were created by using the participants' words. For instance, the themes and subthemes were then examined and classified according to their dimensions and properties in the following stage (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The different subthemes relating to the participants' experiences of abuse were merged and separated from the subthemes relating to the participants' perceptions regarding the social constructions of abuse committed by females. Some themes were combined, and new themes were created to produce an accurate representation of participants' experiences. The authors then compared the themes to the data within the narratives to ensure that the themes did in fact represent the data. Finally, the authors identified the "essence" of each theme and wrote up the findings. All of the authors, as well as two more members of the research team, are all child abuse experts who contributed to the analysis by offering their unique perspectives.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is frequently employed to allow readers to assess the study's quality in a variety of ways (for review see Levitt et al., 2018). Peer debriefing, audit trails, and reflexivity were used to achieve trustworthiness in the current study. Throughout the analysis process, peer debriefing (Nowell et al., 2017) was conducted during authors' weekly meetings to ensure that the work was methodical and uniform. The audit trail (Bowen, 2009) included complete documentation of the raw data and how it was collected and evaluated, as well as excerpts related to interpretations and a written record of the peer debriefing process. Finally, the writers kept reflective notebooks in which they wrote about their own experiences during the research and how these experiences influenced their conclusions (Jootun et al., 2009). Although, as previously stated, a public appeal for narratives was disseminated in five languages, in the current study the authors analyzed only those narratives that were written in Hebrew. The findings were translated from Hebrew to English by one of the authors and then back-translated by another author to ensure that the content was accurately conveyed.

Ethical Considerations

The narratives in the current study contain personal and sensitive data regarding the participants' experiences, which were collected through an online platform or face-to-face interviews. The authors thus went to great lengths to ensure the highest ethical standards in terms of maintaining privacy and confidentiality, using secure protocols

and software. In addition, the narratives were available only to the Inquiry research team. Prior to analysis, the authors deleted all identifying information. In terms of the participants, they were given an explanation of the study and its aims prior to their participation, and they signed informed consent. In addition, they were informed by the Inquiry members that their participation was voluntary and that they were not required to answer questions they wished not to answer. Ethical approval was obtained from the [masked for review] ethics committee. Participants were given an email address to contact the Inquiry team, who were available on a daily basis for any request, including referrals for mental health assistance. Moreover, information regarding free support from non-governmental organization services was provided to participants.

Findings

In the current study, we explored the experiences and perceptions of adults who as children experienced CSA committed by females. A qualitative thematic analysis generated two main themes: (1) participants' childhood experiences of sexual abuse committed by a female, and (2) personal, interpersonal, and social constructions of the abuse.

Survivors' Experiences of Sexual Abuse Committed by a Female

The Experience of Powerlessness: "An Act of Torture That I Had to Wait for Everyday". An exploration of the narratives chosen for the current study that were submitted to the Israeli Independent Public Inquiry of adult survivors of CSA who were abused by females revealed that in half the cases, the female who committed the sexual abuse was the mother of the child. Participants highlighted their mothers' unique power, reflected in their dominance in their children's lives. It was also reflected in the social construction of mothers as individuals who are not suspected of being abusers, and in their continuous presence in their children's lives, making the abuse more complicated. Furthermore, among stories in which there were several individuals who abused the participants, the mother was perceived by some as being the main abuser, even though she was not the one who performed the actual sexual act upon the child. Rather, she may have directed/encouraged the other individuals who sexually abused the child. Tami, 36, who was abused by her mother and brother, shared: "From a very young age, I remember my older brother touching and hurting me. The abuse lasted until I was about 20. Over the years the form of abuse changed. There were situations where he was more 'loving and gentle,' and there were times he sadistically abused me along with some of his friends. My mother, who would have sex with him, would ask him to punish me when things happened that she did not like..." In a similar manner, Yael, 26, shared: "She [her mother] was the main abuser, but no one suspected her."

Participants also emphasized the other types of abuse committed by their mothers which accompanied the sexual abuse, as a means of subjugating them, and how the mother's continuous presence in their lives made them captives of the abusive

relationship. Yael talked about the period that preceded the act of the sexual abuse itself and noted that it was part and parcel of the abuse ritual. During the daily shower, she was not allowed to turn on the water and had to wait “sometimes for 2 hours.” She explained how her mother used intimidation and torture to keep her in a state of fear: “It was simply routine – an integral part of the regular agenda. Torture that I had to wait for every day. It did not matter if it was summer or winter, it did not matter if I was 5 or 12 years old. I always had to wait. An act of torture that I had to wait for every day, at least an hour, sometimes 2 hours, without clothes, in the bathtub, when the tap must not be turned on.” In this quote and others, study participants emphasized their vulnerability, stemming both from their powerless position as children as well as the *powerful* position of mothers who committed the sexual abuse. Being the mother of the child gave her authority, and she could use this authority in an abusive way with no supervision.

Participants also revealed in their narratives that a common location for the abuse that was committed by their mothers was the shower/bathroom. Instead of bathing being a pleasant experience and a healthy interaction between mother and child, the bathroom seemed to be the most common location for the committing of sexual abuse. Dana, 31, shared: “They [her mother and grandmother] were toxic, evil, forceful, violent...[they] touched me, went into the shower and laughed at my hair, laughed at me, and were violent all the time.” Abusing them during a shower was experienced by participants as confusing; it blurred their body boundaries and affected their understanding and perceptions of the reality of the abuse they were undergoing. Such confusing feelings were particularly highlighted by participants from conservative/religious communities; they elaborated on how their communities could make girls feel helpless and subjugated, and how there was little if any discussion of sex or sex education, potentially affecting their experiences with the sexual abuse. Rakifit, 26, who was abused by her mother, shared: “I did not know what sexuality or sexual assault was or whether something was being done to me in a non-normative way. I grew up in the Ultraorthodox community in those years. The boundaries of my body and my privacy were not maintained. I did not know that I had the right to have boundaries and that I was an independent entity.” In this narrative and others, the intersection of culture, age, and hierarchy differences between the mothers who committed the sexual abuse and the children who were undergoing it served to increase the inequality of power, the domination of the mothers, and the vulnerability of the abused children. These factors also blurred the child’s awareness of the abusive relationship.

In addition, because bathing is an act that the child expects daily, the abuse was also anticipated, with trepidation, on a daily basis. Yael shared: “It happened every day. From the time I can remember until the age of 14. There in that shower, in the old house; and every time when it hurt, when my body shrank back, when my tears wanted to come out, I heard: ‘You have to be clean, and down there is the dirtiest.’” Participants’ narratives highlighted how girls who were sexually abused can be blamed, in a gendered manner Dana shared: “From the age of four, I remember them [her mother and grandmother; the ones who abused her] calling me a whore, zero, dumb. [They said]

that I brought upon myself the abuse by boys and men, that I was guilty of everything, that I was fat, repulsive, a whore.”

Participants, in their narratives, reported severe mental and physical abuse alongside the sexual abuse during and after bath time. Yael continued: “And it was cold, and my body was shaking, and my hair was standing up, and I was thirsty and hungry... When I was eight, something was added. I was dragged from the bathroom, while I was still wet, straight onto the bed in the bedroom, and my brothers and sisters were given a show, an illustration of what should be done to a ‘dirty whore’ like me. These were the words of the monster [her mother]. I tried to hide myself with my hands, and the monster pushed them apart by force and touched and hurt and pushed her hands and she was so violent.”

For some participants, the understanding that bathing was meant to be a personal matter was what led them to finally bring the abuse to an end. Rakifit shared: “[The abuse] was proactively stopped by me at the age of 12 after one of my sisters asked me if our mother still showered me. I suddenly knew what had happened to me and that I had been sexually abused.”

The Experience of Standing Together: “My Sister Herself was Victimized When She Abused Me”. In some narratives, participants mentioned that they were sexually abused by females from the nuclear and extended family circle, mostly sisters and family relatives. In these narratives, the relationship between the abused children and the females who committed the sexual abuse was complicated. In some cases, participants related to themselves as partners in this abusive relationship as a result of being manipulated by the females who abused them. Moran, 29, who was abused by a family relative shared: “She [the female who sexually abused her] would say she was teaching me. Later she told me to kiss her, touch her ass and vagina and she also pushed my fingers into my vagina. She would tell me not to tell anyone, and if she thought I was telling or I was going to tell then she was very angry and I had to ‘compensate’ her.” Ilanit, 24, who was abused by her sister shared: “When I was five, I was sexually assaulted for about a year by my big sister ... she taught me and my other little sister to do all sorts of sexual things for her.” Furthermore, in these narratives, participants tended to highlight that the females who sexually abused them were individuals who had experienced sexual abuse themselves. Sara, 33, who was abused by her sister, shared: “My sister herself was victimized when she abused me.”

Moreover, participants stated that in their childhood they perceived the abuse as a normal act and emphasized through their narratives the strong connection and relationship with the females who committed the sexual abuse. Ilanit shared: “At the time this seemed natural to me as I admired my sister and thought that everything she said was worthy. She told us how to do different sexual things with her, and how men act in bed.” More than that, participants highlighted through their narratives that they had no feelings of anger toward the females who sexually abused them. Ilanit shared: “For many years I forgot about the event, I guess I pushed the story into the depths of the subconscious so as not to encounter such horrible things again. I remembered the

experience only in the military and the recollection was unbearable. I have no anger toward my sister for what we – me and my sister – went through because of her, because she too was abused herself.”

Some participants stated that it was important for them to confront the females who committed the sexual abuse in their adulthood, so as to understand why the abuse occurred. Ilanit shared: “About 3 years ago I asked my older sister if she remembered the case [the abuse]. She started crying and could not believe I remembered and she apologized again and again for the actions [the abuse]. It was important to me to understand where it all came from and why it happened, and she told me that when she was 12 her friend did these things to her because her friend’s uncle did them to her [to her friend]. Only when she told me this was I able to completely forgive her. I understood what a vicious cycle was going on here.”

Participants shared that they were not willing to disclose the abuse and tended to keep it to themselves. They did so both because they wished to keep perceiving their relationships with the individuals who committed the sexual abuse as meaningful and also because they feared society’s response to the disclosure. Sara shared: “Just about 2 years ago I first talked about it [the abuse] to my best friend. It was so hard because my sister and I are in a very close relationship and talking about such a thing kind of creates a feeling that it is a sick relationship. However, the incidents stopped after about a year and nothing happened when they stopped. To this day I have no thought of telling another person the truth, certainly not my parents.” Ilanit also shared: “My sister and I talked but we both agreed never to talk about it again or share this case with others. I think we both realized we were victims of a situation and each of us preferred to deal with it in our own way.”

The Experience of Captivity: “I Could Not Go Out Alone and Talk to Others”. In some narratives, participants talked about the sexual abuse committed by other females who were involved in their lives during their childhoods. Similar to abuse characteristics committed by mothers, the shower was also the site where other female individuals, outside the family, committed abuse. Mera, 33, who was abused by a welfare community services worker, shared: “[They] let her [the worker] shower me. I fought to stop her from undressing or touching me. But she [did] and I was crying and she punished me [for crying]. This went on for a few months, a year. Three times a week, she would undress me forcibly and put me in the bath and just touch me and I would cry and cry. On one occasion she fought me and I cried and she pushed her fingers in and she hurt me and I bled. I thought it was from her nails. Later when I had a period, I realized that she tore my hymen.”

Some participants who were in childcare during their childhoods talked about sexual abuse committed by females in out-of-home placements. Edna, 28, an Ultraorthodox participant who was abused for 2 years by an educational counselor (i.e., an Ultraorthodox woman who adopted her), shared how the home that was supposed to have kept her safe after she escaped her violent parents became an abusive placement: “I am Ultraorthodox and I could not manage at home. I moved in with them [the adoptive family] and she [the female who committed the abuse] hurt me sexually, physically, and

mentally. From the moment I opened my eyes until two in the morning her husband and she would have me working in their house and would not give me a moment. There were a lot of manipulations and difficult situations that also included physical violence on her part at nights when I had already going to bed. She [the female that committed the abuse] would enter the room and sexually assault me. I was held captive; I could not go out alone and talk to others.” Participants talked about the fact that there was no place to run to avoid the abuse because there was no family anchor: “And I had no home to return to.” Edna continued and shared how she survived the continuous abuse: “Only after the relationship became more and more violent was I able to muster up the courage and just, without thinking, and like a robot, their neighbor suggested I marry her brother. They lived next door and I just agreed to it. The main thing was to get out of there, and even then, I had a very hard time and no one helped me. I did not know how to leave the house there and it was impossible but I was approached with the matchmaking offer and within a month I got married.”

Participants shared how females in a position of power were able to use their power in an immoral and abusive manner because they had knowledge about the circumstances of the children’s lives: “And she [the individual who committed the sexual abuse] used all the knowledge she had about me to hurt and exploit me.” In the same manner, Mera talked about her life circumstances, including poverty and the loss of her mother, as situational factors that led to her exploitation: “We lived in Tel Aviv in a rented apartment with Dad, even though for most of our lives he had not been in the picture. My mother, at age 36, collapsed and died without any warning... We moved to another city. A year later, my father approached the welfare office to receive benefits... She [the welfare community services worker; the individual who committed the sexual abuse] knew about all of this and exploited me.”

Even in cases where the abuse was disclosed, the females who committed the sexual abuse continued to work with children. Participants’ narratives emphasized the role of the cultural context, especially in religious and conservative communities, in shaping societal responses to disclosure. Edna shared: “I got a call from an inspector from the southern region and I was asked some questions about the family I lived with, especially the abusive woman. I realized she was harassing first-grade girls at a school. The inspector told me that she [the individual who committed the sexual abuse] was fired from the school that was under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, but at the moment I know that she is still [working as] a counselor in a private high school for Ultraorthodox girls in a very closed community in the south.” Ahuva, 25, who was abused by a teacher shared: “The reactions of the community are very silencing. Both my mother-in-law and father-in-law who are neighbors [of the teachers] warned us not to complain or do anything about it. They want peace and do not talk about it.”

Personal, Interpersonal, and Social Constructions of Abuse

Labeling the Abuse. Some participants found it difficult to define as sexual assault the abuse they underwent by a female, especially when this assault was carried out by a

caregiver in the family. Alona, 33, who was abused by her mother shared her hesitation regarding labeling the abuse: “When I was hurt by my mom, it came more from a place of not knowing boundaries, that I didn’t feel comfortable removing her panties or undressing in front of her when she watched me, that she would touch my breasts excessively when I went to buy bras, etc. It may be mostly a matter of personal boundaries. I was not hurt by her.” Dorit, 47, who was abused both by her mother and by a neighbor, shared: “My mother sexually abused me in an indirect and covert way. [She] forced me to do things against my will physically, forced me to touch myself and forced me to be naked in the presence of strangers. Also, she was verbally abusive and she was an abusive mother in general. There was physical violence ... beatings of all kinds.” In addition, in terms of the difficulty of classifying what they went through during their childhood as sexual abuse, Neta said: “There is not enough awareness of sexual abuse in the family and sexual abuse by women in particular. A phenomenon [cloaked in secrecy] will continue to go on because it has fertile ground [in which to grow]. Awareness and publicity can help people [to] name what they went through. As it is, there are those who do not even know they went through such a thing, even though they remember [things]. I was one of them.” The complexity of the child-caregiver dynamic may also delay a child’s understanding of the reality of the abuse and make it difficult for a child to perceive that what is happening to them is sexual abuse. Hana, 59, a transgender individual who was abused by her grandmother, shared: “My grandmother really wanted a daughter but this did not happen. My father was her only child. I was the first grandchild and my grandmother raised me as a girl. I also remember that I suffered from severe violence, including sexual abuse, on the part of my grandmother, for no reason. But on the other hand, I also received a lot of love and pampering.”

Positioning of the Abuse by a Female Who Committed Sexual Assault in the Narrative. In the current study, in the narratives that included sexual abuse committed by more than one individual, the abuse committed by male individuals received more attention and space than did the abuse committed by a female. For example, one of the participants was sexually assaulted by a female welfare community services worker and also physically abused by her father. However, the financial and physical abuse committed by her father received much more space in the narrative than did the sexual assault committed by the female community services worker. As can be seen in the following, Mera spoke at length of her father’s abuses, but not of the worker who sexually assaulted her: “My father imprisoned us at home. A month and a half was the longest time; we could only go to school and were forbidden to go anywhere else or do anything else. We were forbidden to talk... he threatened to throw us out on the street. He was abusive, he would ‘put us on trial.’ He was miserly and deprived us of money. We would wear the same clothes to school every day... once he dumped us out in the middle of a highway at night, about 40 minutes walking distance from my aunt’s house.” In addition, participants tended to file a complaint with the police about abuses committed by males rather than those committed by females. Abigail, 32, who was sexually abused by her father, mother, and two brothers, chose to file a complaint only against her father: “I

experienced sexual abuse from my mother, forbidden touching, and strange rituals. At all ages. [Also] prolonged sexual abuse from my father from about age 15 ... At age 24, I filed a complaint with the Israel Police against my father, but the case was closed due to lack of evidence and public interest.”

The difficulty of talking about sexual abuse committed by females was evident in participants’ narratives and seemed to be based on their own difficulty in believing that they were abused by a female and especially by a caregiver/mother. Edna shared: “I was very ashamed because of the prolonged and traumatic abuse I went through by a woman... I did not believe it and to this day I have a very hard time with people’s reactions [to the abuse disclosure].” Furthermore, participants shared their fear that others would not believe them. Such fears are connected to the public discourse in which sexual assault is generally not viewed as something committed by females. Yael shared: “I know it’s hard to believe, but the monster who abused me is my mother ... No one imagined I was being sexually abused by my mother, because she presented herself as a weak and submissive woman, while my father gave the impression of being an aggressive and impulsive man. But my father is not the one who sexually abused me, he only physically [abused me].” Lital, 23, who was sexually abused by her mother and by her uncle (the brother of her mother) shared: “I was abused by my mother from the time I was 12 until I was 16, but not very often ... and although I did not agree to it and did not feel comfortable [with it], she probably did not intend to abuse [me].” Lital wrote in detail about the sexual assault that was committed against her by her uncle but did not provide additional information in regard to the sexual abuse committed by her mother. She portrayed her uncle’s sexual abuse of her as the main abuse she experienced: “So, I was mostly abused [when I was] in the U.S. In general, my uncle started abusing me when I was about 5 years old.” Furthermore, participants’ narratives revealed the internalization of the gendered discourse that views abuse committed by males as more severe and dangerous than abuse committed by females. Ilanit, who was abused by her sister, compared her experiences with those of another girl who was abused by her uncle, and shared: “Most of all I was in pain for her friend [her sister’s friend], as I believe that malicious sexual assault by a man is much harder to deal with.”

The Social Construction of Gender. Participants described in their narratives their impressions of how society perceives women and especially mothers. Rakifit said: “There is no reference to sexual abuse by women. Not to mention [abuse] by a mother. The culture sanctifies and glorifies mothers. There is a tremendous taboo that forbids one from saying anything negative [about mothers].” In addition, participants referred to society’s perception of women as those who fulfill important and valued social and educational roles. Tami shared: “My mother [who committed the sexual abuse], [who is] an educational counselor, sent a clear message that treatment [for sexual abuse survivors] is for the crazy, and that life is shit and has to be dealt with on one’s own ... By the way, my mother was considered a very, very, very respected professional in the education system. Women play a very important role in the [education] system.” The implication of Tami’s words seems to be that if a woman is perceived as being a valued

member of society, how can she also be perceived as an individual who committed sexual abuse? Avital, 31, who was sexually abused by both of her parents, shared: "My father is a lecturer and my mother a teacher, so they always made sure that from the outside it looked like we had a normative [house]." Furthermore, participants emphasized how sex education programs are constructed in such a way that men are automatically assumed to be the abusers and women the individuals who experience the abuse, and explained how this gender construction affected their understanding of the abuse they underwent in their childhoods. Elina shared: "I remember they [the school staff] brought us a presentation on this topic [CSA]. In the presentation, there was a male guard who turned out to be a pedophile... in general we knew not to talk to strangers and to distinguish between good and bad. But this presentation made it very difficult for me to identify and to share the 'non-normative' abuse I experienced... I did not know how to put into words what was happening. If it [the education class] had included more examples of sexual abuse, by different individuals, I would have been able to recognize the abuse I went through."

In this regard, participants described the inherent clash they experienced between society's expectations of females in general (and of mothers in particular) and what they experienced as children. Tami, who was abused by her mother and brother, shared: "I write, and all the time I'm writing I'm also thinking about what a surreal story I have. A story in parts. A story in which each part of my personality experiences a so-called separate life. This detail in my life history sounds surreal even to me (for 7 years I have been lecturing on the subject) but it describes so accurately the disintegration and the death in life that happens to a girl who, from such a young age, suffered at the hands of someone who was supposed to take care of the child. Someone who abused her in such a cruel way." In other words, instead of serving as a refuge or a source of comfort for a child who is in distress, the mother who committed the sexual abuse has become that which the child most fears. Yael stated: "The monster who abused me is the person who was meant to be the person closest to me, the person I was meant to go to first, if I was scared or hurt. But she represents my biggest fear and my deepest wound. She is my mother."

Society's Response to Sexual Abuse Committed by Females. Participants described their disclosure of the abuse (i.e., by females) and the reactions of those around them to this disclosure, emphasizing their feelings of disappointment in these reactions. Such reactions included indifference, lack of interest and/or empathy, and disbelief in participants' narratives. Some of the people to whom participants made their disclosures told the participants that their perception of reality was poor, and that in fact nothing had happened to them. Rakifit said: "I revealed these things to my older sister [who was married with children] at the age of 15. She believed me, but nothing was done about it. Later all my brothers and sisters heard about it, some from me and some indirectly through my sisters." Lital also shared: "Whenever I disclosed that I was abused by my mother, I always started in a relatively light manner, and the truth is, even in the testimony, I did not write about the most difficult things she had done to me. But

anyway, they did not believe me, [they] said I was overly sensitive, that I misunderstood, that basically everything was fine.” In one case, disclosure of abuse committed by a female outside the family also received an unhelpful and inadequate response from the participant’s parents. As Elina said: “I tried to tell my mother after the abuse had already stopped [when I was in second or third grade], but I could not say what happened, so I said that this older girl kissed me and my mother thought it was cute and laughed ... after that attempt I did not talk about it at all.” David, 37, who was sexually abused by the school nurse in elementary school, said: “When I told my parents, at least my mother but I’m not sure, they said she [the nurse; the individual who committed the abuse] was being silly and I should just ignore her.” Participants encountered similar responses from professionals upon disclosing their abuse. Lital said: “Just a year ago I started talking more about it [the abuse]. When I was 17, I told my therapist [in a session] about it, and she said that this did not really qualify as abuse ... it would have been good if she [the therapist] had reacted to the abuse [that was committed] by a woman as significant.” Lital also stated: “It’s strange to me that once a woman is the one who commits the abuse, there must be an extreme situation in order for it to be considered abuse.”

Participants, in their narratives, also reported that they were told by others in their social environments that the abuse was not carried out with malicious intent. Elina shared: “At the age of 14, after [participating] in a youth movement project about sexual abuse, a friend told me about an incident of sexual abuse she had experienced and asked me if I too had experienced [sexual abuse]. I told her about what had happened to me, and she said to me: ‘Surely she [the female] who abused you went through more terrible things than you did.’” Elina then went on to say that, after being dismissed the first two times she disclosed her abuse by a female, she changed the narrative and particularly the gender of the person who had committed the abuse: “The next time I tried to expose the assault was [when I was] 16 or 17, after it became more acceptable to talk about sexual abuse in general, and all my friends opened up to me about some past assault they had undergone. But this time, when I shared that I was abused, probably out of fear of their reaction, I said that I had been abused by a male. And indeed, the environment was friendly and supportive, and not disrespectful as it had been in the past when I exposed the real gender identity of the person who abused me. I later said in therapy what really happened.”

Participants also highlighted that society’s response to abuse committed by females is reflected as well in the “system’s” response to such cases. David shared: “Police who refuse to accept complaints against women ... [they should] look at the law and [they should] stop discriminating against males who experienced sexual abuse and stop exempting women [who committed sexual abuse] from punishment.” David discussed two main ideas: not only does law enforcement not believe that females can commit sexual abuse, they also tend to overlook males who have experienced sexual abuse. As such, males who as children experienced sexual abuse by females suffer from a kind of double marginalization. David continued: “I personally remember two cases published about women raping minors, and they were not prosecuted... all of these situations

have led to a society in Israel that today accepts and overlooks sexual abuse committed by women against boys, children, and men.” Robi, 39, who was abused by her mother, said: “I do not believe in the justice system at all. From what I understand, my case is not even considered incest because it consists of a mother who abused her daughter.” Lital also stated: “I was afraid to reveal what happened to me because I knew that they [the Welfare Ministry] would not remove me from my home. What happened to me there would not be terrible enough, in their opinion. I don’t know what can be done about this.”

The inadequate and frustrating responses seem to motivate individuals who experienced sexual abuse to look for explanations as to why such abuse occurred and/or to suggest that the females who committed the sexual abuse were individuals who experienced sexual abuse themselves. Tamar, 24, who was abused by her older sister, shared: “As I mentioned, I never talked about it except with my older sister [the individual who committed the sexual abuse] and my good friend. My sister and I talked about the abuse a few years ago, but we both agreed never to talk about it again or to discuss it with others. I think we both realized we were survivors of a ‘situation,’ and each of us preferred to deal with it in her own way. My good friend was quite shocked by the incident. She was not angry at my sister and claimed she [my sister] also was under the same circumstance.” Rami, 28, who was abused by his father and sister, said: “At a certain age my father stopped touching my sister, and then at the age of 9, I was abused by my sister [who was abused by the father].” And Tami said: “My mother survived incest herself.”

Participants, in their narratives, called for policy change and emphasized the need to change society’s response to abuse committed by females. Rina, 33, who was abused by her oldest sister, shared: “A law must be enacted that requires a police clearance certificate from women, just as it is required from men (in Israel), and not allow women with a violent past or a history of sexual abuse or pedophilia to work with children. The authorities must start arresting, investigating, and filing indictments against women as well, not taking it easy on them, as is done now, which leads to a society that views abuse by women as acceptable.” In addition, Rami said: “Society and the authorities need to understand that boys are abused, that men are abused, and that women are abused, and that it happens a lot, and no less than it happens to women by men, and stop treating this abuse as a normative thing.”

Discussion

In the current study we examined the experiences and perceptions of 28 adults who as children had been abused by females. The narratives had been sent to the Israeli Independent Public Inquiry. Findings included two themes: (1) Participants’ experiences of having been, as children, sexually abused by females, and (2) Personal, interpersonal, and social constructions of the abuse. The first main theme included three subthemes: (1) The experience of powerlessness (2) the experience of standing together, and (3) the experience of captivity.

Half of the participants in our study reported that the person who had committed sexual offenses against them was their mother. This finding is in line with previous findings; namely, females who commit child sexual abuse tend to abuse children who are related and/or known to them, with 70% of the females who commit these offenses being a family member (for review, see: [Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022](#)). Similarly, in a sample of 31 females who had been convicted of carrying out such abuses, it was found that 58% of them were biologically related and known to the child they were abusing, as opposed to 23% in a comparison group comprising males who had carried out such abuses ([Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2009](#)). It has been suggested that one of the reasons for the high proportion of females (who commit these offenses) having a close relationship with the child(ren) they abuse is due to the increased opportunity for females to offend against children with whom they have a relationship and/or caregiving role ([Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022](#)).

We also found in our study that most of the participants reported sexual abuse committed by multiple individuals. Interestingly, in some cases, although the mother jointly committed such offenses with another individual, participants perceived the mother as being the one primarily responsible. In some cases, despite the fact that the females were not involved in the actual physical assault, but were only witnesses of it, they were still perceived by the participants as having been the ones who primarily committed the abuse. This finding may be due to the child's perception of the maternal figure as a protective, caring, and nurturing individual ([Tozdan et al., 2019](#)). The child might therefore feel more betrayed by her when such an offense occurs. In this sense, females who sexually abuse children undermine normative labels and challenge traditional gender stereotypes ([Tozdan et al., 2019](#)).

The experience of powerlessness and the feeling of being held captive were very dominant in the context of females (often the mother) committing sexual abuse against the children. Most of the participants in our study highlighted in their descriptions that the abuse occurred during daily routine activities, with the main scene of the abuse being the shower/bathroom. This finding is consistent with previous findings on the dynamics of intrafamilial child sexual abuse ([Katz & Field, 2020](#)) and more specifically with findings showing that some females use their regular daily childcare activities, such as bathing children or applying creams, to commit their sexually abusive acts ([Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022](#); [Tozdan et al., 2019](#)). In this manner, these tactics are different from the grooming behaviors applied by men in order to create the opportunity to offend a child in a way that reduces detection (e.g., giving gifts or special attention to a child or making close physical contact sexual, such as inappropriate tickling). It has been shown that use of regular daily activities are particularly applicable to children under 5 years of age, who are likely to be more dependent upon their caregiver ([Curti et al., 2019](#)). Thus, instead of bathing being an enjoyable mother-child interaction, it becomes in this context a confusing and hurtful experience. Consistent with previous findings ([Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022](#)), participants in our study described various forms of sexual abuse that they experienced as children, including being touched, having fingers and objects inserted into their genitals, and undergoing other forms of

abuse. These acts were performed using various levels of force and cruelty. Nurturing behaviors alongside abuse and force can also be seen as a strategy to create an emotional bond or dependence in which the child relies on the mother/female caregiver for basic relationship needs (Pflugradt & Allen, 2012).

As for the subtheme of “standing together,” when the person who committed the CSA was female, many participants discussed how the two shared common ground: Participants referred to how both they and the females who committed the CSA against them were victims of sexual abuse in the past. This process of standing together may be understood through the lens of Ferenczi’s “identification with the aggressor” conceptualization (Frankel, 2002), in which individuals who have been abused/violated identify with the person who poses a threat to them. The dynamic of standing together can also be understood as an intellectualization – a psychodynamic defense mechanism in which a person who has experienced abuse tries to rationalize the abuse. However, this dynamic (described by the study participants) may also be associated with how society and the person who has experienced abuse view females who commit such abuses. The inability to believe that females are capable of committing sexual abuse, and the view of females as being passive and harmless, may also contribute to the idea that the person who commits CSA and the person who undergoes CSA are both victims.

The second main theme – personal, interpersonal, and social constructions of abuse – included four subthemes: (1) labeling the abuse, (2) positioning of the sexual abuse by females in the narrative, (3) the social construction of gender, and (4) society’s response to sexual abuse committed by females. These subthemes were generated from societal views on gender which might explain the dearth of literature related to females who commit sexual offenses as compared to males who do so (Beech et al., 2009). In terms of societal views, the literature indicates that sexual offenses committed by females are ignored, as the mere notion of such a phenomenon contradicts traditional views of women as harmless, passive, and unable to carry out aggressive acts. As a result, individuals who experienced sexual offenses committed by females often have doubts as to whether the abuse actually happened. As the abuse is oftentimes embedded in daily routines and committed by a woman who is supposedly a loving caregiver, it is evidently harder to grasp that an act of abuse has really occurred. The difficulty of talking about sexual abuse committed by a female was evident in participants’ narratives and seemed to be based on their own difficulty in believing that they were abused by a female and especially by a caregiver/mother.

Individuals who experienced sexual offenses committed by females also discussed the difficulty of positioning the abuse by females in the narrative because of social constructions of gender and the under-recognition and low awareness of abuse committed by females. Whereas males who commit CSA are publicly condemned, females are all but ignored as they are typically viewed as caring nurturers who are incapable of such heinous, offensive, and socially unacceptable acts (McLeod et al., 2021). By ignoring and dismissing the notion that females can also commit CSA, society may implicitly allow for a broader range of acceptable behaviors from females (Banning, 1989).

Also, while there has been a growing awareness and recognition in the occurrence and prevalence of child sexual abuse committed by men, especially since the feminist movement that has focused attention to that issue in the late 1970s/early 1980' (Herman, 1992), it seems that the awareness to child sexual abuse committed by women is still lagging behind. This is implicated in the under-reporting of offences conducted by women. One of the explanations to this underreport might is the view of females as harmless (Denov, 2003). Individuals who undergo abuse report that they experience disbelief from the legal system and other professionals. This phenomenon was evident in participants' narratives, in which they shared their fears that others would not believe them. Such fears are connected to the public discourse in which sexual assault is generally not viewed as something committed by females. It is not surprising that these deep-rooted and highly perpetuated societal gender role norms are common among the different systems that are responsible for children's safety and welfare (such as the legal system, clinicians, and child protective and police services). Nonetheless, this situation might have a direct effect on the decision-making processes of professionals handling cases of individuals who were abused by females.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study findings further the understanding of individuals' experiences and perceptions regarding the sexual abuse they underwent during their childhoods by females. Moreover, instead of focusing on cases that were formally reported, in the current study we used a community sample in which narratives were submitted to the Israeli Independent Public Inquiry, potentially capturing a larger spectrum and enabling broader representation of individuals' experiences. However, there were a few limitations. First, the current study was primarily dependent on written narratives of CSA, aligning with the Inquiry's particular format. Conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with individuals who experienced CSA might help us better grasp the experiences regarding abuse committed by females. Second, it was clear from participants' narratives that CSA committed by females is not perceived by society as an alarming phenomenon. Participants' perceptions of their experiences may thus have been affected by this perception and may have discouraged some individuals from sharing their stories and experiences; as a result, one of the challenges that must be addressed is the influence of the social constructions and social responses to CSA committed by females and how these crucial factors might discourage other voices from being raised. Third, most of participants in the current study were females. Future studies would do well to approach males who experienced sexual abuse committed by females, and explore and learn from their experiences so as to promote a more accurate representation and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Finally, there is an urgent need to further explore diverse cultural contexts, as these can greatly affect the nature of such sexual abuse (i.e., that which is committed by females), including the perceptions of those who experience such abuse.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The current study findings provide a glimpse into the experiences of adults who as children underwent CSA committed by females and could very well inform clinical interventions and policy change. Professionals from various domains should acknowledge the abuse committed by females as a phenomenon with serious consequences for people's well-being. It is also important professionals identify the unique characteristics of sexual abuse that was committed by females, such as that in many times the abuse occurs during daily routine care activities such as bathing. Second, the study findings highlight the important role of perceived gender roles/gendered expectations and social scripts in casting doubt on the experiences of individuals who experienced sexual abuse committed by females – an important issue/topic for treatment. This issue is important as gender roles and social scripts may help explain why perpetration by females is treated differently than perpetration by males. Third, the findings emphasize the crucial need for prevention efforts and programs to be established in multiple arenas including updated educational programs for children so that they can understand how females – even those in positions of caregiving – can commit abuses; raising this phenomenon in public and professional discourse; working on the macro level to raise awareness; initiating processes for policy change including legislation; bringing charges against females who commit sexual abuse; and imposing more severe punishments on them.

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