

'ON BECOMING A VICTIM': POWER, GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE PRODUCTION OF VICTIMS OF SOUTH AFRICAN FEMALE SEX ABUSE

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FEMALE SEXUAL ABUSE (FSA): AN OVERVIEW

- **FSA prevalence rates:**
 - Research directly with female sex abusers: 1-8%
 - Victims' self-reports: 58%
- **Little has been verified concerning the female sex abuser profile**
 - **3 tentative classification groups:**
 - 1) **Lover/Teacher Type**
 - 2) **Predisposed Type**
 - 3) **Male-Coerced Type**
 - **Recent additions:**
 - 4) **Experimenter/Exploiter Type**
 - 5) **Psychologically Disturbed Type**
- **BUT: studies demonstrate that female sex abusers make up an extremely heterogeneous group...**



RESEARCH CHALLENGES

- **Compared with their male counterparts, very few women that commit sexual crimes are actually convicted and sentenced**
 - **Accessibility difficulties**
- **Ingrained and socialised beliefs: men are aggressors and women are victims → reports concerning female sexual offending are dismissed by police and mental health services**
 - **Those women that are apprehended and researched by the justice and mental health systems tend to have committed a sexual crime against a child and are most often an accomplice to a male offender**
 - **This does not necessarily indicate that women only act under the coercion of a male accomplice and that they only sexually abuse children, but rather that, given the conventional construction of the male aggressor and the female victim, women acting outside of this 'acceptable' framework for the female gender, are often ignored, dismissed or denied**
 - **Results in research being conducted only on those women that have male accomplices and child victims → narrows the already constrained scope and range for describing FSA**



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- **FSA: object of increased interest in the academic literature both internationally and within the South African context**
 - However very little local work has been committed to understanding the FSA victim population
 - While some global work has provided broad overviews of general female sex abuser characteristics, occurrences and circumstances; to date there is no academic information concerning FSA victims
 - The media is currently peppered with images and stories of women that have committed a variety of sex crimes; however the victims of these women remain invisible
 - The invisibility of FSA victims is particularly significant in a country such as South Africa where trauma and victim discourses inform daily discursive practices and child sex abuse, rape and sexual violence are commonplace
 - The country's promotion of a national human rights discourse recognises that every citizen has the right to be treated humanely
 - Inadvertently acknowledges that every citizen- regardless of gender, sexuality or race- is capable of inhumane victimisation
- **Despite these extremely prevalent discourses, FSA victims in South Africa, and globally, continue to remain invisible**



- **Shameful and sensitive nature of sexual abuse: many victims resist reporting the incident and thus numerous sexual offences go undetected**
 - **Female sex abusers: reporting is likely to be less accurate due to gender stereotypes, research limitations and professional biases as a result of widely circulated gendered discourses that imply the impossibility of female sex crimes**
- **FSA is therefore often registered as obscene conduct rather than as sexual assault and so the extreme disparities in the reported prevalence rates between male and female sex abusers are often misrepresentative**
- **Some international indications of FSA rates:**
 - **Canada: 10.7%**
 - **New York: 2%**
 - **International rate: 1-8%**

However these rates increase to 59% when victim self-reports are taken into account



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- **Despite these self-reports and the global and South African agenda to prioritise vulnerable populations in research, FSA victims remain invisible in academic, judicial and health disciplines**
- **In fact, legal, medical and psychological institutions continue to insist that female sex crimes are rare regardless of the fact that when various individuals are surveyed about their sexual victimization experiences, the incidence of female perpetrated sex crimes is often higher and much more variable than expected**
- **While we know that 0.6% of all incarcerated sentenced female offenders are sexual abusers in South Africa (Department of Correctional Services, 2011), there is no real indication of South African FSA rates based on victims' self-reports**



- **What accounts for the continued invisibility of FSA victims and, in turn, which discursive coordinates would allow individuals exposed to FSA to occupy victim subject positions?**
 - **This thesis therefore aims to identify these coordinates by understanding the role of gender, sexuality and power in constructing the conditions of possibility or impossibility for the production of the FSA victim**
- **Given the noticeably gendered and sexualised political landscape of the country, a South African specific FSA study may provide valuable insights into the local conceptualisations of FSA that are currently in circulation**
 - **By understanding FSA through this particular political lens, South African productions of gender, sexuality and power may provide a new and novel avenue to surface these conditions of possibility for FSA victims both locally and globally**



RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY

Sense of disbelief and doubt in public consciousness and legal and mental health systems concerning FSA

- **Sensitive nature of the subject of sex abuse → denial and suspicion are common reactions**
 - Has characterised the history of sexual abuse research
 - E.g. sexual violence as a real and relevant research subject was only surfaced in the 1960s, despite previous occurrences of sexual coercion and other behaviours later categorised as sexual violence indicators
- **The production of sexual violence as a category of knowledge → very gradual interest in the area**
 - Particular sectors of society continued to rely on discourses that excluded certain forms of sexual abuse such as marital rape and the rape of sex workers



- **In fact, most sexual violence incidents are still currently framed by the public in terms of typical myths and stereotypes: the black male aggressor, the woman victim that instigated the abuse by virtue of her dress code and the sexual abuser as a stranger rather than as an acquaintance**
 - **Widely circulated gendered and racialised discursive practices → stereotypical public discourses → limited definitions for sexual abuse → fewer reports of incidents**
 - **Sexual abuse prevalence rates are dependant on historical and cultural conditions**
 - **E.g. sexual abuse: previously defined exclusively in terms of vaginal penetration, limiting sexual abuse victims to a cohort of women and girls**
 - **Recently, gendered discourses: slightly less rigid → conditions arise for the production of sexual abuse definitions that expand beyond vaginal penetration, thus providing a subject position for sexually abused male victims**
 - **This has not extended to the production and categorisation of FSA victims**



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- **Historical pattern: small and gradual developments of various forms of sexual abuse**
 - Likely that the current academic interest will begin to produce and surface the category and consolidate the research area of FSA victims
 - This research intends to be amongst the first of such studies by surfacing discursive conditions for the possibility of a South African FSA victim
- **The South African literature base covering FSA is scant.**
 - Few studies conducted by Kramer (2010; 2011): investigated FSA from the perspectives of both South African academic, legal and mental health care professionals and the female sex abusers themselves
 - These studies demonstrated that South African mental health professionals, academics and police workers cannot yet fully conceive of a woman that sexually offends and consequently incarcerated South African female sex abusers receive light sentences and very little rehabilitation → FSA continues to be unthinkable, even by the abusers themselves → little support for the abusers and the victims
 - Incarcerated female sexual offenders tend to rely heavily on gendered and sexualised social constructions in producing their subjectivities and thus these women are incapable of perceiving themselves as anything other than characteristically maternal, nurturing and feminine; despite being convicted for sex crimes



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- **Female sex abusers who have attempted to express themselves through discourses that are not reliant on gendered constructions of femininity, are most often silenced by ‘expert’ discourses that rely on understandings of men and women in gendered terms**
 - **These ‘expert’ discourses, usually belonging to legal and mental health institutions, explicitly mute the voices that may provide counter-knowledge and discourse for the expression of sexuality and gender**
- **A number of recent studies have focused on the characteristics of victims sexually abused by a female**
 - **However, these studies are based on the abusers rather than the victims**
 - **Focused on generalised victim demographics based on statistical data gathered from the abusers**
 - **Cannot depict the more detailed experiences of FSA victims which may provide novel and alternative understandings of FSA**



- **Academic and public invisibility of FSA victims is based on the circulation of gendered, sexualised and criminal discourses that imply that FSA is both improbable and harmless**
 - **By investigating the macro-level discourses that feed into FSA victims' micro-level experiences and subjectivities, the current critical study attempts to understand the politics of the 'scientific oversights' in the FSA victim literature and in the sexual abuse discipline more broadly, provides a channel to account for the discursive silence on FSA and depicts FSA victim experiences as subjectively possible, real and relevant**
 - **The production of a counter-knowledge informed by alternative discourses will result in the exposure of gender and sex role scripts and the modes of power by which these are relayed between and onto bodies**
 - **Provides innovative understandings of the gendered and sexualised human body**
- **The invisibility of victims in both international and South African FSA research necessitates the provision of the first victim study as well as an opportunity for these victims to occupy a discursive space that may provide an occasion to produce themselves as FSA victims**
- **Noteworthy advance as to date there is no single international or South African study that investigates FSA from the standpoint of the victims**



RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

- **Primary aim:** To identify and investigate the discursive coordinates by which persons subjected to FSA are able to occupy a victimised subject position
 - To demonstrate how productions of gender and sexuality interact at the interface of modern power to either produce or exclude FSA victim subjectivity at the level of discourse
 - Achieved by interviewing persons identified as FSA victims according to set criteria
 - Critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be employed to interpret the transcriptions of these interviews to distinguish the links between discursive practices and broader social and cultural developments and structures by analysing discourse at the micro-level of language in interpersonal conversation as well as at the macro-level of masculine hegemony that filters into this discursive practice
- **Secondary aim:** To utilise the particularly gendered and sexualised political landscape of South Africa to attain novel understandings of FSA victimhood that, while still applicable, may not be so obvious in other countries characterised by more equitable gender and sexual relations.
- Accordingly the primary research question that frames the overall study is:
 - What are the discursive conditions of possibility for the production of an FSA victim subject position in South Africa?



THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND NGOS

- **Appreciation for gender, sexual and racial diversity → broadens available discourse → subject positions become available for FSA victims**
- **This research will surface victims of FSA → in turn government and NGOs need to develop discourse that expands on this possibility**
- **Possibility of FSA:**
 - **Increased FSA reporting rates**
 - **Possibility for women to be aggressive, violent and sexually coercive in the public imagination**
 - **These women are able to identify themselves as sexual abusers**
 - **Persons subjected to FSA are able to identify themselves as victims and call on the assistance of South African victim organisations**
 - **Foundation for future research and initiatives in the area**

THANK YOU



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