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# **MASKING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: RECONSTRUCTING THE PAEDOPHILE AS THE DANGEROUS STRANGER**

by Malcolm Cowburn and Lena Dominelli

## **Introduction**

Public recognition of the significant numbers of children who have been subjected to sexual violence is becoming more evident as the media exposes a prurient interest in sex offenders through its handling of high profile cases of paedophiles - men who have been either recently convicted of sex offences against children or released from prison having served their sentences for such offences (1). The media's approach emphasises the view of the sex offender as a threatening stranger from whom the innocent public must be protected (Kitzinger, 1999). In advancing this image, the press engages in a process that features 'the paedophile' as an external threat; creates a 'moral panic' that focuses attention on the extent to which the dangers that paedophilic sex offenders pose can be assessed so that people can go about their business with minimum disruption from the sexual predators who will pounce on them if they do not exercise vigilance; and assists in masking the relevance of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1995) in men's sexual abuse of women and children.

We share the media's desire to create a society free from sexual violence. However, we are not convinced that the current perspective on the problem will meet this objective. We adopt this stance because we feel that the press in redefining the issue as it does, raises expectations about protection which cannot be fulfilled within the present state of professional knowledge about sex offenders. Additionally, we do not think that it suffices to concentrate public discourses about sex offenders primarily on 'stranger-danger'. Too many women and children have been and are being abused within the allegedly safe boundaries of their homes by men they know and trust (Rush, 1980; Newburn and Stanko, 1994, Ehrlich, 1998). And, their approach ignores the relevance of gendered power relations in sexual violence and fails to consider how sex offenders might be rehabilitated. Finally, we are concerned about the silencing of feminist insights about hegemonic masculinity resulting from media-led discourses on this subject.

In this article we argue that the current social construction of 'the paedophile' creates a media-orchestrated 'moral panic' that masks hegemonic masculinity and diverts attention from the extensive variety of forms of sexual abuse perpetrated upon women and children that take place in both the private and public domains. The media has been aided by professional discourses that perpetuate the myths of 'scientific certainty' and gender neutrality in searching for methods of risk assessment that can accurately predict whether a convicted sex offender will re-offend. This approach has created unrealistic expectations of professional practice with convicted sex offenders, while those who are unconvicted continue their secret assaults. Furthermore, the adoption of the paradigm of

exact science and ignoring the (larger) group of unreported and unconvicted sex offenders have promoted the false expectation that community safety can be achieved by more sophisticated risk assessment methodologies and greater diligence on the part of workers within the criminal justice system. In focusing on the public domain, this position maintains the private-public divide that suggests the private arena is safe whilst a few 'paedophiles' cause problems in the public realm, thereby precluding the unmasking of masculine dynamics that oppress women and children in both domains.

We are aware that there are questions about the civil rights of sex offenders raised by the media's viewpoint on the issue, but we will not be exploring these in this article (see Power, 1999). Moreover, our focus is men sex offenders, so we will not consider women sex abusers here. We feel this is an important topic which should be addressed in its own right (see Saradjian, 1996).

### **Social constructions of the 'paedophile'**

There is no legal definition of the term 'paedophile'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'paedophile' as 'a person with paedophilia, that is, an abnormal especially sexual love of children'. This definition has been quoted in debates within the British Parliament surrounding the development of the Sexual Offences Act, 1997. However, usage of the term originated in 'medicalised' professions (2) and has subsequently been adopted and re-framed by the popular media. Medicalised discourses provide the

dominant framework within which discussions about sex offenders occur. These have focused on the pathology of individuals with little regard for the social context of hegemonic masculinity which shapes social expectations about men's behaviour in particular ways. Hegemonic masculinity draws on dynamics that construct men around a polarised dichotomy of 'normal' men and 'deviant' men (Hanmer, 1994; Connell, 1995) who maintain a social distance between each other. The 'normal' or ordinary man assumes the role of protector whilst the 'deviant' man is portrayed as a predator that needs to be guarded against. The predator is external to the community of 'normal' men - an outsider who is untrustworthy and dangerous.

Medicalised discourses are rooted in two principal systems of 'classification' of all diseases - the International Classification of Diseases, Injuries and Causes of Death (ICD) and The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) (APA, 1994). Unchanged for nearly 50 years, the current ICD version (ICD-10) (WHO, 1988) defines paedophilia as 'a sexual preference for children, largely of prepubertal or early prepubertal age'; 'paedophiles' may sexually molest their own or other children (cited in Fisher and Mair, 1998, p. 17). The diagnostic criteria for paedophilia in the DSM (Version IV) emphasise recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasises, sexual urges, behaviours or sexual activities involving prepubescent children (Fisher and Mair, 1998, p. 18) and underplay the gender of the perpetrator.

Glasser (1990, p.739), a British psychiatrist, also ignores the significance of gender dynamics and calls paedophilia 'a perversion in which an adult has a sexual interest in

children'. He notes 'the ambiguity' of the term and the degree of diversity in what is considered to be the upper age limit of a 'child' and the lower age limit of an 'adult'. Glasser identifies two distinct types of paedophilia - primary and secondary. Secondary paedophilia is regarded as the consequence of some pathology not specifically related to paedophilia, such as mental illness or disintegrated personality conditions resulting in sexualised behaviour. In contrast, primary paedophilia is further divided into 'invariant' and 'pseudoneurotic' types. The 'invariant paedophile' is consistently involved with children and/or adolescents and 'evinces no real guilt or shame over his paedophilia' (Glasser, 1990, p. 739). The 'pseudoneurotic paedophile' is usually a heterosexual adult with sexual difficulties in adult relationships and carries out a 'paedophilic' act that fills him with guilt or shame (Glasser, 1990, p.741).

These classifications produced an ungendered tripartite distinction amongst the different types of 'paedophiles': 'fixated paedophiles' who have a specific and often longstanding sexual preference for children; 'regressed paedophiles' who engage in sexual activity with children particularly in family settings as a result of external pressures and 'unskilled psychopaths' who may have an identifiable psychiatric disorder.

Medico-legal definitions of sex offenders have exerted a powerful influence on both professional and lay public perceptions of sex offenders because they have been crucial in shaping the social construction of 'the paedophile' conveyed through the media and dictating professional responses to their 'treatment'. These discourses have achieved

prominence by dividing those so convicted into those who are ‘treatable’ - ‘regressed’ or ‘secondary paedophiles’ and the ‘untreatable’ ‘primary’ or ‘fixated paedophiles’.

Medico-legal definitions of paedophilia highlight the major categories of ‘paedophiles’ convicted of sexual assaults and the dangers each type poses without explicitly highlighting their gender. Moreover, the identification of both the typologies and risks associated with each grouping are inadequate. The classification systems are essentially descriptive, but have been presented as scientific measurements of an individual’s capacity to commit further sex offences. Although unable to handle the sex offender’s complex motivations, these have become significant in developing risk assessment tools for work with sex offenders that we critique in a forthcoming article. Additionally, clinical knowledge relies almost exclusively on information based on the tip of the iceberg - *convicted* sex offenders (Percy and Mayhew, 1997), thereby failing to engage with sex offenders who have not been convicted either because they have not been reported (Newburn and Stanko, 1995; Percy and Mayhew, 1997) or because the evidence against them will not stand up in a court of law (see Cowburn and Dominelli, 1998). Thus, the extensive range and complexities of sexual abuse occurring within both intimate and formal settings are downplayed. And, the issue of the creation of a safe environment for women and children at the societal level is bypassed.

Medico-legal discourses minimise sexual violence by individualising and pathologising this kind of behaviour, thereby diverting attention from addressing its underlying social causes and links to hegemonic masculinity. These are embedded within a range of social

relations of domination and subordination. Particularly important in this regard are: *adultism* in which adults exercise power over children (Dominelli, 1989); *sexism* or the power that men deploy over women (Newburn and Stanko; 1995) and *racism* with its stereotyping of black men as sexually promiscuous (Wilson, 1993). Feminist analyses have problematised hegemonic masculinity and emphasise the importance of creating more nurturing behavioural paradigms for men (Dominelli, 1991). In short, we find medico-legal definitions problematic because they draw on the polarised dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ men to define men convicted of sex offences as abnormal individuals acting within either psychological or psychiatric parameters to transgress the criminal code. Thus, in individualising the issue, medico-legal discourses dismiss the complexities of the social contexts within which sexual violence takes place.

Clinical practitioners working with sex offenders have adopted these systems of classifications, but have found them inadequate and wanting (Knight et al., 1985; Knight and Prentky, 1990). Consequently, there have been sociological developments in classifying ‘child sexual abusers’. For example, Waterhouse et al. (1994) devise *RAPID* (random abusers, paedophiles, incest abusers and deniers) to yield three types of ‘paedophiles’: ‘professional paedophiles’ who use children sexually to make money; ‘committed paedophiles’ who openly acknowledge their attraction to children without seeking financial gain; and ‘latent paedophiles’ who are ambivalent about their sexual feelings for children in that they are disturbed by such tendencies (Waterhouse et al,



1994). But, these also neglect the relevance of gender and the dynamics through which sexual violence reinforces and (re)creates hegemonic masculinity

From our point-of-view, the key issue about medico-legal and other categorisations is their failure to: problematise masculinity; distinguish amongst a variety of causes of sexual abuse and encompass the wide range of forms it takes. Although these have been contested within the professions and by feminists working both inside and outside their boundaries (see Rush, 1980; Nelson, 1982; Dominelli, 1986, 1989; 1988; Newburn and Stanko, 1995), the media presents medico-legal discourses as unproblematic. Moreover, the media's account gives a sense of certainty and limits the problem of sexual violence to be tackled to more accessible proportions, thereby proving more comforting in the fearful circumstances portrayed by a generalised 'moral panic'. The outcome of feminists losing the struggle for public acceptance, is that medico-legal constructions of 'paedophilia' have been reaffirmed as the most legitimate and appropriate. As a result, feminists' concerns with the broader issues of hegemonic masculinity and its validation of sexual violence against less powerful groups of women and children have become less publicly visible. The loss of this dimension as an integral part of any attempt to create an environment free of sexual violence is, therefore, of grave concern.

### **Re-defining sex offenders**

Earlier stereotypes of sex offenders have drawn on two major images - the dangerous beast and the harmless, largely incompetent and misunderstood dirty old man that was

often the butt of sexist humour and jokes. In this context, there is no stereotype that relates to the abuser who offends against children for whom he has a responsibility of care. Yet, the abuse of women and children by those who are known to them is an area of sexual assaults that has been highlighted by feminists as being widely prevalent and also linked to hegemonic masculinity (Rush, 1980; Dominelli, 1989; Newburn and Stanko, 1995). Current media perceptions have focused largely on the dangerous and destructive 'paedophile' without interrogating masculinity. Very little is being said about the 'dirty old man' or the 'dangerous rapist'. Recent constructions of rapist danger feature an externalised threat which occurs in other communities or within the confines of war zones such as Bosnia or Indonesia (*The Guardian*, 21 June 1998). Thus, the contemporary silencing of women's voices and experiences can be attributed to the media construction of a 'moral panic' around the 'paedophile' and the redefining of sex offenders in terms set by the scientific medico-legal discourses we considered above.

The recent re-imaging of the sex offender can be categorised as follows:

**Table 1: Historical shifts in defining sex offenders**

<i>Time Frame</i>	<i>1980s</i>	<i>1990s</i>
Most Dangerous	Rapist	Paedophile
Less Dangerous	Dirty Old Man	Date Rapist

Media coverage of sexual violence has shifted from focusing on the rapist to ‘the paedophile’ even though both types of sexual violence have been around for a long time and are increasing in their prevalence (Percy and Mayhew, 1997).

The current media construction of sex offending concentrates attention on ‘the paedophile’, a social construction which reinforces the notion of ‘stranger-danger’ in the public sphere and calls for ‘risk assessment’ as a method for managing the threat posed. Through this approach, the old story of sexual violence has been recast with a new character in the leading role - ‘the paedophile’ replaces the rapist. This formulation of the problem is incapable of providing the protection it claims and also contributes to the silencing of the voice of the victim-survivors. Moreover, it deflects concerns away from

sexual violence that occurs within the private domain. And, it lets 'the community' in its broadest sense off the hook.

Current press coverage of sexual violence indicates this shift in the social construction of the sex offender by using the word 'paedophile' to reinforce the 'stranger danger' myth, with one additional dimension. Instead of being a pathetic individual who is unable to control his harmless sexual urges (Kinsey et al, 1948, p.595), he is portrayed as a dangerous, calculating and ruthless sex offender from whom the public must be protected (Kitzinger, 1999). This accords 'the paedophile' a rationality that has been missing for the rapist. Through this categorisation, 'the paedophile' has been created as a cunning predator who targets children and distances him from the 'rapist' who was deemed to present the greatest threat to personal safety not so long ago.

'The paedophile' knowingly commits his offences, he is a calculating and premeditative stranger who strategically plans his attacks, whilst the 'rapist' is construed as an outsider who acts like an irrational beast dominated by uncontrollable urges. This fosters a distinction in which 'the paedophile' is considered of the community but out of it, whilst the rapist is neither in the community nor of it. Both of these constructions are crucial to maintaining a critical distance between ordinary men who are deemed not to commit sexual offences from those who do, and thereby contribute to sustaining hegemonic masculinity as an unproblematic entity. This point has been raised in feminist analyses of

sexual violence which have made a direct link between ‘ordinary’ men and ‘deviant’ ones (Hanmer, 1994), but ignored in current media discourses.

But there is a further difference between the two categorisations. ‘The paedophile’, usually but not always, operates within the spaces and protection offered by public agencies and is construed as cunning because he manages to fool his so-called professional co-workers and employers. ‘The paedophile’ is, therefore, also more dangerous than the ‘rapist beast’. And, more powerful because he undermines both public safety and professional competence.

To make sense of such changes and the public responses to sex offending that these encapsulate, we need to deconstruct the notion of ‘dangerousness’ and what it means for the victim-survivors, the general public, the professionals who work with sex offenders and the policy makers.

A large body of literature considers ‘dangerousness’ (for example, Beigel et al., 1984; Quinsey and Maguire, 1986; Miller and Morris, 1988; Quinsey and Walker, 1992; Prins, 1993; Laws, 1994; Limandri and Sheridan, 1995; Quinsey, 1995). When applied to a person, ‘dangerousness’ relates to the potential to commit an act or actions from which serious harm to an individual or communities can ensue. Assessing a person’s level of ‘dangerousness’ requires the identification of circumstances, situations and actions which when brought together can be used to predict that something harmful will happen and enable professionals to recognise specific types of *risk* to persons known or unknown.

Risk assessments have been targeted as tools that will sharpen professionals' capacity to manage and control sex offenders' behaviour (Quinsey, 1995). Risk, however, is not the simple concept implied in the largely descriptive material used in risk assessments. Nor can their individualised focus consider the social causes of sexual abuse or examine hegemonic masculinity. So, we are not convinced that risk assessments are capable of ensuring the safety of women and children.

### **Current constructions of the sex offender as a 'paedophile' in the British press**

Nonetheless, risk assessment as the way of dealing with sex offenders has been popularised by the media alongside the view that the predatory male has to be kept in check by the protecting male. The media has played a key role in promoting inadequate responses to the problem of sexual violence by redefining the issue as one of managing a dangerous external threat residing within the personalities of those individuals accused of being sex offenders. A brief glance at recent newspaper headlines including those in the broadsheets, exposes the inadequacy of the media's approach to sex offenders because it draws on medico-legal discourses centring on 'the paedophile' as an ungendered being and ignores the complexities of the issues to be addressed (see Kitlinger, 1999; Soothill and Francis, 1998; Soothill and Walby, 1991; for a more comprehensive exploration of this point). By ignoring offences that occur in the domestic sphere and focusing instead on those which occur in the public domain, headlines are used to perpetuate the notion of a generalised danger only in the public arena. And, they fail to consider the relevance of gendered relations to the issue. For example, 'Subway Sex Pest' (*Southampton*

*Advertiser*, 17 September, 1998, p.1). 'Child sex threat stalks resort' (*The Guardian*, 25 August 1998, p. 5). Or, 'Police seek pervert who chased terrified girls' (*Southampton Advertiser*, 17 September, 1998, p. 1). 'Refuges for village in fear' (*The Guardian*, 25 August 1998, p. 5). Fear and danger are also evident in media coverage of sex offenders abusing children when in care. This is illustrated in 'Paedophile social worker', Keith Laverack, being described as 'Captain Hook' when sentenced for his '20 year reign of terror' (*The Times*, 8 March 1997, p. 3). Children and parents were warned that 'Captain Hook', was 'never more sinister than when he is at his most polite' (*The Times*, 8 March 1997, p. 3). Similar sensationalising headlines have featured in high-profile cases such as those involving sex offenders, Robert Oliver and Sidney Cooke, when they re-entered the public realm after serving lengthy prison sentences for sexual violence and murdering children (Kitzinger, 1999).

The media have taken the issue of managing the threat that sex offenders pose to communities into their own hands because they perceive the statutory services as ineffective and unable to fulfil their responsibilities to the public. The media gained the upperhand in setting the agenda for handling sexual violence by drawing on professional knowledges and disempowering those professionals including feminists who do not share their analyses or who do not respond according to their demands in protecting the public. The *Bournemouth Echo* in Dorset, for example, sought to highlight professional inadequacy by establishing its own database of 200 names of convicted sex offenders. These, it releases to employers wanting to vet job applicants (*The Times*, 25 August 1998, p.6) as part of a campaign to initiate more effective statutory responses. Ironically, the

Dorset police had already compiled a database of 622 men whom it deemed to be either convicted or potential sex offenders (*The Guardian*, 25 August 1998, p. 5). And, the local probation service was already running groups for sex offenders. But the media utilised their inability to control the problem to underscore professional powerlessness vis-a-vis sex offenders. Yet, media coverage has few suggestions as to what should be done with sex offenders other than excluding them from a particular locale.

Also, in Bournemouth, the banner headline that the ‘Town is a magnet for paedophiles’ as part of the local paper’s campaign to highlight its lack of confidence in official responses backfired by engendering fear amongst tourists who horrified, threatened to go away and never return, thereby endangering the local economy. Moreover, the statement’s capacity to engender fear and damage the town’s reputation had local politicians and city officials scurrying into damage limitation mode (*The Guardian*, 25 August, 1998, p. 5). However, the trick was how to concentrate on safety without denying that the danger was a real one. As a result, civic dignitaries became caught up in the construction of ‘the paedophile’ as the dangerous stranger coming into town and minimising the extent of the problem to be addressed by centring on a few convicted sex offenders and ignoring either their real numbers or the home-grown variety.

Public information on stranger danger has also been used to design protective responses focusing on the potential victims of ‘paedophiles’ whilst ignoring power relations, particularly those involving sexism and adultism. An illustration of this has been the identification of ‘safe houses’ that children could go to whilst awaiting the arrival of their



own parents. For example, Thames Valley Police in Reading planned to set up 'safe houses' for children when local sex offender Rhys Hughes was released from jail (*The Times*, 25 August 1998, p. 6). These houses were to be vetted by both the police and social services and marked with special stickers that children can readily recognise (*The Guardian*, 25 August 1998, p. 5). Such provisions create an illusion of safety and thwart professional objectives. For these facilities can become new sites in which 'paedophiles' can exercise their trade given the inadequacy of current professional responses in either identifying potential sex offenders or meeting the need for the rehabilitation of those they know. In any case, much of the sexual abuse of children occurs in 'safe houses', as the stream of examples of child sexual abuse in care settings, foster homes, schools and in children's own families have revealed (Finkelhor and Lewis, 1988; Levy, 1991; Kirkwood, 1992; Brannan et al, 1993; Kilgallon, 1995; White and Hait, 1995).

Other aspects of the 'moral panic' produce fear amongst particular groups, even though sexual violence occurs amongst all categories of the population (e.g., Kelly et al., 1991). Hence, lone mothers are warned that 'paedophiles target single mothers'. Given that this headline is accompanied with 'Police fear serial stepfather' (*The Times*, 25 August 1998, p. 6), what hope is there for single mothers to ensure their own and their children's safety? This question has an answer that can play into the hands of self-styled vigilante groups who will undertake the task for them. At the same time, coupling the threat in this article with, 'Dorset is haven for sex offenders' (*The Times*, 25 August 1998, p. 6), and the entire county becomes out of bounds for victim-survivors, especially lone mothers and children. Although the press coverage suggests that the danger can be targeted upon

particularly vulnerable groups within specified areas, the British Crime Survey shows that sex offenders can be found throughout British society (Percy and Mayhew, 1997).

Thus, as we head towards the end of the twentieth century, the gender neutral term, ‘the paedophile’, is most often used in the media to define any sex offender who sexually assaults children. This characterisation ignores the different types of sex offenders and their potential to re-offend, overlooks the relevance of unconvicted sex offenders and hegemonic masculinity and neglects their needs for rehabilitation. This framing of public reactions do not facilitate the complexity of responses needed to ensure that women and children live in an environment free from sexual violence.

### **Hegemonic masculinity and the ‘dangerous paedophile’**

‘Dangerousness’ provides the backdrop for men wishing to exercise their role as protectors of those who are weak and vulnerable. As we explained earlier, men’s role as protector is a key feature of hegemonic masculinity and crucial to men’s identity as men in their relationships with others, especially women and children. The protector’s role characterises normality for men in a dichotomous formulation of hegemonic masculinity which creates a dyad of the protective man against the predatory man. This binary division is central to the separation of seemingly normal men from deviant ones. However, the protector’s role can only be enacted if the man is powerful enough or is in sufficient control of the instruments of coercion to impose his will on others. The

protector role is also ambivalent in that a man can use his power and control to both protect and/or destroy, thereby setting up another dyad - the 'good' man versus the 'bad' man. The 'good' man is the 'normal' man who enacts the protector role by not committing acts of violence against women and children. Jalna Hamner (1994) refers to him as 'Mr Anyman'. The 'bad' man is 'Mr Deviant', the paedophile or dangerous individual from which the public must be protected - a motif which as we indicated above, has underpinned the media's (re)construction of 'the paedophile'.

Within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, the idea of men as protectors juxtaposed against the notion of 'dangerousness' becomes important in distancing the 'normal' man from the sex offender. This distancing occurs through the process of 'othering' the sex offender on the basis of his dangerousness. This 'othering' casts him as non-human, different from and outside the community of 'normal' men. The sex offender's 'dangerousness' is an integral feature of his role as a predatory male who does not protect those less powerful than he and contributes to the process of 'othering' him, thereby enabling 'normal' men to maintain separateness from him. In addition to 'othering' 'the paedophile' as a dangerous stranger, there has been a de-gendering of him. The de-gendering of sex offenders ignores the importance of gender and obscures the reality that most sex offenders are men.

The helping professionals and police responsible for working with sex offenders have been allocated the task of acting as protectors of the public. However, the media portrays them as powerless against predatory males and ineffectual in their implementation of

their responsibility to control 'paedophiles'. Consequently, a 'moral panic' ensues in which the powerlessness of the protectors is highlighted. Their apparent failure as professionals creates a vacuum of authority that has led to the formation of vigilante groups composed largely of men, not explicitly perceived in these terms, who take it upon themselves to 'punish' those defined as 'paedophiles' by the media. Additionally, men who have not committed sexual violence but who have been identified as having done so by vigilante groups may find that they become targets of their wrath, as happened to an older man in Manchester who was severely beaten up by such a group (Kitzinger, 1999). This reaction reinforces the stranger-danger construction of sex offenders and continues to ensure that sexual abuse occurring within the ambit of the family (including close non-kin relationships) slips off the agenda. The private sphere has thereby been reconstructed as safe and the public sphere as 'dangerous'. In short, the family has been recreated as a safe haven without any demonstrable proof that it is necessarily so. And, men's role as protectors within hegemonic masculinity is reinforced.

The suspicion of a sex offender in their midst also initiates another set of dynamics within the community. These draw on men's roles as protectors within a randomised and generalised fear that any child might be assaulted. This fear justifies the formation of vigilante groups whose sole concern is to protect their own community, not to rehabilitate the sex offender or to stop him from abusing others outside of their particular residential area. As a result, the problem of safety is exported from one neighbourhood to another without safety ever being achieved. As a result, the idea is perpetuated that children remain primarily the responsibility of their parents.

Vigilantism usually involves men and draws on the predator/protector dichotomy within hegemonic masculinity. But, in the process of enacting the protector role to capture the predatory sex offender, the men involved as vigilantes become predators themselves, an unhelpful blurring of the boundaries which makes the division of men into these two categories somewhat meaningless except in the context of a 'moral panic' when it reinforces the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity and the public sphere as dangerous.

This response enables the community to be seen as a passive victim of the perpetrator to which defence by vigilantes comes forth as the justifiable solution to the problem. It also endorses the loss of civil rights on the part of the 'paedophile' including a disregard for his rehabilitation while a general sense of lawlessness reigns. Characterised within the terms of hegemonic masculinity, community responses reconstruct men in their role as protectors of the women and children living within it. Meanwhile, vigilante violence against sex offenders in the interests of protecting their own people, reinforces the 'good' man who protects his community as part of the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. In these constructions, concerns about sex offenders are firmly lodged in the public domain. Sexual assaults within the family are conspicuous by their absence.

Additionally, vigilantism conflates protection with punishment and revenge. As a result, another form of violence often gains ascendancy, so that the sex offender is not simply driven out of town, but is also physically attacked. Thus, vigilantism goes beyond public 'naming and shaming' to subject the sex offender to his own personalised reign of terror.

This dynamic draws on the *power over* others tenets of hegemonic masculinity in which a perceived threat is answered by counter-violence and in its enactment, hegemonic masculinity is both legitimated and extended.

We are concerned about this solution to the problem despite acknowledging an element of truth in this strategy: People can protect themselves better if they know that someone has been convicted of sex offences, as the American case which led to the passage of ‘Megan's Law’ demonstrates (Power, 1999, p. 13.). But much of this protection is illusory because most sex offenders have not been convicted. Indeed, as the data below indicates, most have not been identified as such.

### **Hiding unsafe masculinities**

Reconviction data and the fact that the majority of convicted men sex offenders have no previous convictions (Quinsey, 1995) problematises masculinities and the comfortable separation between those who do and those who do not commit violent acts (see Hanmer, 1994). Constructing ‘the paedophile’ as the problem hides unsafe masculinities. The difference between ‘normal’ men and men convicted of sexual offences becomes less clear when considering research that examines the attitudes about and proclivities towards sexual violence in populations of ‘normal’ adult men (see Hanson and Bussiere, 1998; Cowburn, 1998 for a review of the relevant literature). Most of these studies have used American college students. The majority of them are from white middle-class socio-economic groups and unrepresentative of the general population. These studies

demonstrate that a significant proportion of the 'normal' male population believe it acceptable to carry out a sexual assault and report the likelihood of doing so if they could be assured of not being detected or punished. Around 28 per cent has reported having actually carried out forced sexual assaults against women (Rapaport and Burkhart, 1984); whilst 10 per cent claimed to have engaged in coercive sex with children (Finkelhor and Lewis, 1988). Within this context, it is easy to understand why the women's movements have called attention to hegemonic masculinity and its links to men's harmful and dangerous behaviour, while male dominated institutions and organisations have largely ignored it.

Men theorists of masculinity have problematised dominant forms of masculinity and endorsed feminist insights regarding this (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is, as Mac an Ghail (1994, p. 96) observed in his study of 'Parnell' comprehensive school in England, characterised by 'compulsory heterosexuality, homophobia and misogyny'.

After reviewing phallometric and self-report evidence from populations of offenders he termed 'normals', Laws (1994) found that the literature relating to both self-report surveys and to phallometric testing was unable to clearly and consistently distinguish the convicted rapist from the so-called 'normal' male. As he says:

Those who proceed to become adult sex offenders apparently fail to develop the inhibitions that constrain normals. For their part, normals appear to harbour many

of the same feelings, have the same fantasies, but fail to act upon them (Laws, 194, p. 8)

In examining the impact of hegemonic masculinity within a men's prison, Sim's (1994) study of masculinities, highlights considerations that move beyond the individual and have implications for therapeutic work with sexually abusive men both in custody and in the community: He states:

To speak in terms of normal and abnormal men - as the vast majority of state and sociological studies have done - is to miss a fundamental point, namely that normal life in male prisons is itself highly problematic - it reproduces normal men (Sim, 1994, p. 108).

These accounts highlight the importance of deconstructing hegemonic masculinity for the purposes of working with men sex offenders and redefining masculinity more in keeping with the interests of women and children.

An alternative interpretation of the data presented above is that sexually violent behaviour by men is endemic in our society, but only some get caught. Thus, a significant and problematic element of hegemonic masculinity is that it is indistinguishable from the espoused masculinity of most male sex offenders. Addressing this issue requires more than studies of convicted sex offenders. Concentration on this group, particularly 'the



paedophile', has taken attention away not only from problematic masculinity but also from another location where much sexual abuse is perpetrated: the family.

### **Hiding unsafe families**

The current construction of 'the paedophile' as another version of 'stranger danger' has enabled the issues that feminists have raised about the extensive amount of child sexual abuse which takes place within the confines of families of all types to be submerged. Consequently, only vulnerable and deprived people are considered objects of sexual violence and, therefore, 'at risk', thereby excluding 'normal' children in 'normal' families from this category. Yet, the home has been demonstrated to be a place where a significant amount of sexual abuse occurs (Rush, 1980; Kelly, 1988; Kelly et al, 1991; Wilson, 1993). Moreover, if the estimates of Percy and Mayhew (1997) are correct, and there are 15 times more unreported sex offenders than reported ones, the bulk of sex offenders have not been brought to public notice and their offences remain unacknowledged in the private domain.

Social policy in other arenas endorses the view of the family as a safe haven. Blairite policies on the family as illustrated in the Parenting Orders introduced in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, assume that if mothers and fathers could become better parents, everyone would be in a happy family. Those not fitting this mould are threatened with punishment aimed at making them better parents through legislative fiat. Besides ignoring the safety dimension, this approach fails to address the problems of significant

numbers of children who are raised under conditions of overwhelming poverty, live in overcrowded housing, reside in areas lacking legitimate employment opportunities for adults and are denied hope for a better future. It ignores the contexts which contribute to familial and societal violence, blames parents by suggesting that they are individually and solely culpable when things go wrong; reinforces dominant ideologies about adultism, parenting, and masculinity; and endorses the state's lack of responsibility for the well-being of children and vulnerable others.

Furthermore, care homes as private arenas in the public domain also simulate nuclear family relationships where sexual violence is being perpetrated. Sexual violence can occur within care settings because the work culture ignores the prevalence of sexual violence in society and reinforces power relations of adultism (Dominelli, 1989) which privilege the adults' voices over those of the abused children within them (Colton and Vanstone, 1996; Kirkwood, 1992). This is because social relations within these agencies normalise and minimise specific behaviours that in other situations would be taken as abusive (Colton and Vanstone, 1996). For example, sexual harassment is taken as a normal part of everyday routines at work and incorporated into workplace humour so that the abused person feels that there is no one to whom they can complain and who will take their situation seriously enough to do something about it (Benn and Sedgley, 1984; Morrison, 1990; Cowburn, 1998). This normalising behaviour endorses hegemonic masculinity and the gendered and adultist relations on which it is predicated.

Meanwhile, the family continues to be seen as a safe haven whilst the community is portrayed as the dangerous arena in which the 'paedophilic' sex offender practises his unwanted trade. We would want to posit another vision of community: one that is rooted in the right of *all* its members to live in a violence-free environment. This would require the realisation of the rights of men, women and children not to be subjected to sexual violence whilst upholding the right of sex offenders to engage in a rehabilitation programme. Its implementation would draw on notions of interdependence and reciprocity for the rights of any one group cannot be held as superior to those of any other group. For children, this would mean redefining childhood from their perspective within a context of their existing for themselves and not as the private property of their parents (Franklin and Franklin, 1996). Additionally, taking care of children would be seen as a community responsibility, not simply a private parental matter, thus putting into practice Hilary Clinton's view that, 'It takes a village to raise a child'.

More importantly, it challenges a simplistic division of the world into the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the community. A more complex understanding of the relationship between the two becomes necessary. For the sex offender, this means that the requirement to change his behaviour to respect the rights of others in the community to a violence-free environment would be based upon his right to rehabilitation. This would become the basis of his re-integration into the community. Rehabilitation would then be a process commenced when he begins his sentence and continued throughout the period of punishment.

## Conclusions

The 'paedophile' has been (re)constructed as a 'dangerous' stranger through the creation of a 'moral panic' largely orchestrated through the media. This casting of 'the paedophile', we have argued, denies voice to victim-survivors whose safety cannot rest on tools of assessment that are unable to consider unconvicted perpetrators of sexual violence and the large amount of sexual abuse of children committed by people known to them, often in an allegedly safe environment - their homes. Thus, discourses equating community safety to procedural risk assessments contribute to silencing victim-survivors who may be experiencing sexual abuse whilst these discourses are taking place.

Moreover, the idea that the danger posed by an individual 'paedophile' can be assessed by professionals using 'risk assessment' tools to control his behaviour is inadequate. Our critique suggests that the objective of 'protecting children' is unlikely to be realised if it relies on risk assessments and the establishment of 'safe houses' without unmasking the role masculinity plays in perpetuating sexual violence against them.

The 'moral panic' around 'paedophiles' has also encouraged 'the community' to take a greater interest in the safety of its children and promoted the establishment of 'vigilantes' groups. Their task has been to provide community safety in the face of what they consider inadequate responses by those officially entrusted with securing their safety, that is, the police and the probation service. Our critique of vigilante efforts has exposed their failure to ensure children's right to live in violence-free environments at all times. To

achieve this aim requires us to consider and resource ways of rehabilitating convicted sex offenders and tackling the social relations which endorse the sexual abuse of children by vast numbers of men who are either not brought to the attention of the police or if charged, not convicted. We have also identified the need to redefine masculinity within more nurturing parameters and to appreciate children as a community responsibility.

**Notes:**

1. We use the word 'he' to refer to sex offenders, since most of them are men. There are women sex offenders, but they are a small proportion of the overall sex offender population. Moreover, we take the view that their problems are different and so they require another study.
2. We include the professions allied to medicine in our term 'medical professions'. These include psychology and at times, social work.

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