

Chapter 1

Introduction and overview of child sexual abuse in Europe

Corinne May-Chahal and Maria Herczog

Introduction

A significant minority of children in Europe, between 10% and 20% as an informed scientific estimate, will be sexually assaulted during their childhood. This problem has been recognised by child care professionals, policy makers and increasingly the public at large. Debate continues about what can be done: how best to intervene, how to build confidence in the child protection services (CPS), which responses work and what to do about the perpetrators. The view of sexual assault as being something rare, often perpetrated by strangers, has shifted to an acceptance that children are most frequently in danger from those closest to them: fathers, stepfathers, brothers, relatives, friends and those living close by. The context of this sexual behaviour can vary widely, from the economic and market context of commercial sexual exploitation to the domestic context of intra-familial sexual violence.

Child sexual abuse can take many forms including incest, prostitution, pornography, date rape, peer sexual violence and institutional sexual abuse; that is, the sexual abuse of children by people who provide or live in substitute, educational or social care. All forms of child sexual abuse are linked because they involve children in sexual activity but to use the term “child sexual abuse” to cover all forms of sexual violence can lead to confusion as these activities are different in many ways, each requiring their own context-relevant solutions.

In western Europe, specific responses to these different forms of child sexual abuse are still in development, whilst in central and eastern Europe there is little hope in the near future of the provision of separate actions, services and approaches as there is a general lack of resources. Over the past decade the numbers of children and adult “survivors” coming forward have gradually increased so that knowledge of the many forms of sexual abuse has expanded. From these accounts it is known that, although sexual abuse can happen anywhere, there are specific

groups of children who are more vulnerable than others. Children in out-of-home care or living in homes with a family history of violence or neglect, children who live with, or close to, men who themselves were sexually abused, disabled children and those living in a context of extreme economic and social deprivation are most at risk.

Awareness and understanding of the problem varies from country to country. In some European countries awareness of child sexual abuse has inevitably to be viewed against a backdrop of transition, major socio-economic difficulties, organised conflict and individual trauma that has eclipsed all but day-to-day survival. Child care professionals were beginning to develop awareness of sexual abuse in many of these countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s but their struggles to get the problem onto a more public agenda had to wait until a time of greater stability. In other countries, public awareness has continued to grow through high-profile cases involving child abduction, murder and "paedophiles" highlighted in the media. These extreme tragedies often detract from the more mundane, everyday experiences of child sexual abuse perpetrated by carers, "friends", parents and other people in a position of trust. Whether awareness is high or low no country or single profession seems to have the "right" approach or response; no one has all the answers. There are many lessons to be learned from each other. Where governments have developed national child protection services child sexual abuse still occurs and prevalence rates remain relatively high. Children still report that they do not tell anyone, perpetrators continue to escape recognition and both fail to get help. Most people will agree that child sexual abuse is a terrible problem – if they know enough about it – so what is standing in the way of effective solutions and why does it not appear to be reducing to any significant extent? These are important questions for all countries to address, whether they are developing new responses and initiatives or whether they are reviewing and evaluating established provision.

Awareness of child sexual abuse in Europe

It is not possible to make general statements on the overall European situation regarding child abuse although legal and professional frameworks are becoming more similar over time. There are many variations between countries evident in approaches to child welfare and child protection systems that reflect different cultural, religious, political and ideological traditions (Kooijman and Wattam, 1998). Child sexual abuse has become an issue across Europe over the last two decades and the past ten years has seen considerable advances in response. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,¹ the increased activity of the

1. <http://www.unhcr.ch>

Council of Europe (see Chapter 2) on this matter, and UN organisations, and the development of more widespread methods of monitoring (see Chapter 10) have all made a difference to awareness, media attention, public interest and professional response.

Political and economic changes in central and eastern Europe have shed light on the predicament of children in need of special attention and protection. Previously, this part of Europe was considered a low-risk region with regard to child abuse because of the apparently high levels of social cohesion and social control. The greater security offered by this social cohesion also fostered higher levels of secrecy at all levels. Although many problems, such as child poverty, have become worse since transition there is no evidence that domestic violence and child sexual abuse within the family would have been less frequent than it was in other countries prior to this period. The emerging numbers of abuse cases show not only a new openness and opportunity to speak out about sexual abuse but also a lack of legal and professional services, public acceptance and sympathy. In the eyes of the public, child sexual abuse, just like corporal punishment and other forms of neglect and abandonment, still seems to be in many ways a private matter. The best interests of children and the ways they can be achieved are insufficiently discussed and not part of the training for those working with and for children or making decisions about them. The right to privacy, the integrity of the family and the non-interventionist approach remain important but the limits still require clearer definition. Improvements in the extent of social problems and a fear of making the problem of sexual abuse visible without providing an appropriate professional response, along with a lack of ethical and professional standards, holds many professionals back from addressing these issues.

Debates about intervention in the family in most European countries include the question of parental responsibility. It is expected that parents must be competent and knowledgeable as soon as they have children; they should know how to take care of the child, how to detect and handle problems, how to ask for help. Yet few countries provide comprehensive information for prospective and actual parents on these issues. Even where the information is accessible it is hard for most parents to talk about sexual (and other forms of) abuse; they are not taught how to recognise signs of abuse, how to communicate about it or where to go for help, or how to deal with feelings of shame, guilt and fear from the perpetrator and the family or neighbourhood.

Among professionals there are harsh debates on who should do what. In many European countries health professionals are considered to be key players as they meet regularly with families. In other countries social service agencies are considered to have the main role, while in others the police are seen as the main source of intervention. In the United

Kingdom there is a strong emphasis on team work and an interagency approach (Department of Health (UK), 1999; Herczog, 2001).

Research has shown that in European countries only 1% of those asked have never heard of sexual abuse of children within the family, the vast majority of people getting their information from the media. Most Europeans (97%) consider the sexual abuse of children as violence while 59% consider corporal punishment as violence. Of those asked, 77% think it is frequent and 74% presume that children are sexually abused by strangers, or if not a stranger then 71% think the perpetrator is the child's stepfather. Among the reasons considered to be most significant in the perpetration of abuse were alcohol (94%), drugs (93%), or the perpetrator's own sexual abuse victimisation as a child (77%). The majority (64%) in all countries thought legislation was not satisfactory; 91% wanted more strict punishment and 91% of those asked favoured an EU policy on preventing and dealing with domestic violence and child sexual abuse (European Dialogue, 1999).