Julia Krane.

What’s Mother Got to Do With It? Protecting Children From Sexual Abuse.
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‘What’s Mother Got to Do With It?’ is a befitting title for Krane’s book which explores the asymmetrical links between the state, child-protection workers and the non-offending mothers of sexually abused children. The introduction highlights the heavily biased assumptions about family ties as well as serves as a methodological snapshot of Krane’s work. It is here that we learn about the convenience sample of interviewees (7 social workers and 8 non-offending mothers). An additional four non-offending mothers who were not interviewed, client files, court documents and training and procedural pamphlets from child protection agencies also contribute to the discussion. Unfortunately, other than reading many direct quotations, the reader is never clear on what was asked to whom, where, when and why.

The remaining eight chapters of the book explore women’s and children’s relation to the welfare state (2 & 3), conceptual approaches to child abuse (4), blaming women (5), the push to transform mothers into protectors of their children and strategies to keep them in that role (6 & 7), and the critical reflections on what this gendered process means for women and their exclusively female (in this book) workers (8 & 9). Although chapters are well-written and interesting to read, both the theory section and the statistics about the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse need updating.

The single most important theme that threads through the book is already captured in the title: why harp on mothers? Given the ideological conceptualization of “best interest of the child”, at least in North America and in Canada, the State assumes the responsibility for the protection and well-being of children. The best interest concept also subsumes assumptions about the least amount of intervention into family affairs (the private/public divide). In cases of sexual abuse, in the vast majority of the cases, it is men (fathers, brothers, uncles, etc.) who transgress ethical and moral rules, and it is the children (mostly but not exclusively female children) who are victimized. Krane’s passionate inquiry is about why and how do mothers come to bear the disproportional burden of the sexual abuse trauma, even though they are not the perpetrators.

The pivotal process identified in Krane’s book is the transformation of mothers into ‘mother protectors’. Childcare workers who act like the outstretched arm of the State clearly expect mothers to know/should have known about the abuse. Moreover, mothers are expected to put a stop to the abuse, regardless of what sacrifices that protectionist role may entail. Quotes from the non-offending mothers are generously sprinkled throughout the book. Women’s stories clearly show that they are expected to change their work schedules, alter their social patterns, readjust individual habits such as sleep, and/or sacrifice their jobs in order to fulfill the protection requirements. As Krane points out, they are considered as unidimensional mothers rather than multidimensional women with complex lives and commitments. Moreover, women are plunged into the position of choosing between their children and their partners, and there is a lot of coercion on them to choose the victimized child. Time and time again, Krane accentuates the discrepancy between designating mothers as protectors, but depriving them from voicing their own experiences, needs, perceptions and choice. Although women’s availability and supervision are coopted as the most important factor in stopping violence, their agency in looking for alternate solutions is treated as selfishness or failure.
Krane points out that turning women into mother protectors, on the surface, might appear beneficial. With increased vigilance of mothers, the State ensures a stop to children’s victimization, without too much intervention (i.e., removing the victimized child from home). Again, designating mothers as protectors may appear to be congruent with the genderized views of ‘ethics of care’ (my words, since Krane does not refer to Gilligan), without putting too much of a burden on public funds. However, cajoled, coerced and threatened mother protectors are often unhappy, frustrated, anxious and angry. Rather than working in unison with the State agencies, they try to survive despite them. Krane wonders if the adversarial child-protection system can ever be for the “best interest of the children” when the system is totally dismissive of the needs of the women they are entrusted to.

So, Krane’s book surely identifies an Achilles’ heel and numerous contradictions in the existing (Canadian) child protection system. In that regard, I consider this book a timely wake-up call for front-line workers and for policy makers. Having said that, however, the almost tunnel-vision emphasis on the precarious and disadvantaged position of mothers detracts from the more general applicability of the book in the following ways:

1. The real victims of child sexual abuse are most certainly the children. Yet, in this book, the pity for mothers has taken on such overpowering proportions that the suffering of children has been relegated to a backdrop. One of the consistent findings in the literature is that sexually abused children, more than anything else, need to be believed. Another consistent finding in the literature is that the effects of not being believed may be as traumatic as the abuse itself. Balancing the victimized children’s and the mothers’ needs, in my mind, requires a more complex balancing act than what this book delivers.

2. Krane repeatedly points out the fact that perpetrators often get overlooked (or perceived in more positive terms than they deserve) because of shifting the emphasis on the failures of mothers. Nevertheless, she falls into the same trap she (rightfully) criticizes. In this book, there is very little discussion about what needs to be done with the male perpetrators. Sensitivity for mothers’ desire for ‘family unity’ should not undermine the problem that men, given a chance, often re-offend. What also receives much less attention than it deserves is the fact that some men who molest their daughters/sons are also violent towards their wives/partners. How these multiple layers of violence compound the problem of child sexual abuse is unexplored and undertheorized.

3. Krane’s over-emphasis on the dilemmas of mothers, perhaps unintentionally, has meant that the case workers’ behaviour and intentions are cast in less than a positive light. Although trying to be even-handed, Krane nevertheless highlights many disparaging ways workers refer to women who either question their children, or side with their partners or resist being cast into mother protector roles. I think this depiction is partially due to Krane’s rather hasty categorization of childcare workers as an arm of the State. Probably a more insightful feminist analysis would have identified the mostly female, less than adequately trained, mostly underpaid and certainly overworked workers as another layer of gendered manipulation and exploitation by the State. Krane’s analysis often misses the point that the disproportional level of tension, frustration, and anger amongst mothers versus workers have more complex, structural reasons. For one, workers themselves are almost exclusively female and are often marginalized in what they do and how they do it.

4. One of Krane’s solutions to lift the burden from non-offending mothers is to enlist the help of non-offending fathers. Of course, no one can argue against non-offending men to be enlisted in the protection process. What I do have a problem with is the hasty calculation (p. 190) which reduces offenders who are father-figures to 7%, and raises the enlistable, non-
offending father-figures to 75%. It is either that Krane’s figures are overly optimistic here, or that all the rest of books/articles/statistics written on child sexual abuse are wrong.

In sum, What’s Mother Got to Do With It? is an interesting and timely book. I have no hesitation in recommending it to undergraduate students in social work or social sciences. Unfortunately, the insights it brings do not reach their full potential since most of the analysis is limited to the micro, interaction level, even when the term ‘State’ is repeatedly used. Macro level factors such as poverty, women’s overall marginality, gendered violence, gendered division of labour, gendered discrimination, access to quality childcare, etc. are mentioned but not successfully assimilated into the analysis.

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