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SURFACING (IM)POSSIBLE VICTIMS: THE ROLE OF GENDER, SEXUALITY AND POWER IN CONSTRUCTING THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR VICTIMS OF FEMALE SEX ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

Female sex abuse (FSA) has recently emerged as an object of enquiry in the academy and medico-legal systems both globally and in South Africa. However, the academic research is primarily focused on perpetrators, resulting in very limited information on victims. Victim data that are available are based mainly on studies conducted with perpetrators. FSA victimhood is underexplored and many victims remain invisible to the criminal justice and health systems and are barely discernible as objects of human science knowledge. Despite the accent on vulnerable populations and human rights in the contemporary world, there is very little work on precisely why these victims remain invisible. Accordingly, this research aims to identify the cultural conditions of possibility for FSA victimhood as a means to advance contemporary critical understandings of the role of gender and sexuality as instrument-effects of modern power. The study's objectives were achieved by interviewing persons who self-identified as FSA victims. A Foucauldian informed discourse analysis was employed to interpret the transcriptions of these interviews and to explore conditions of possibility for FSA victimhood as they were constructed in the interview context. The findings illustrate precisely how deeply engrained constructions of gender and sexuality both produce and constrain the possibilities for reporting, disclosing and self-identifying victimhood. Overall, a particular configuration of access to non-normative psychological, gender and 'sex' discourses, mostly mediated by the internet and incited through the confessional context of the interview, provides the possibilities for an identification as a victim of female sex abuse. These points of identification are coordinates for disrupting normative understandings of gender, sexuality and power in sex abuse and thus constitute the beginnings of a counter-knowledge on transgressive sexualities. This counter-knowledge will further contribute to critical accounts of the way that power/knowledge produces, reifies and naturalises human subjects through technologies of sexuality.

Keywords: Female sex abuse; female sexual perpetrations; sexual abuse; sexual abuse victims; sexuality; gender; power; discourse; discourse analysis; South Africa