

Youth, Sex, and Coercion: The Neglect of Sexual Abuse Factors in LDS Data and Policy on Premarital Sex

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LDS CHURCH STANDARDS REQUIRE that sexual relations be confined to marriage. While the world in general seems to have grown more tolerant of premarital sex, church standards have remained stringent. Sermons, articles, and auxiliary lessons continue to emphasize the importance of premarital and non-marital abstinence from intercourse and even from intimacies like petting.

Sociological research has demonstrated that such religious admonitions do indeed restrain sexual indulgence, not only among Latter-day Saints but also in other denominations with similarly strict standards—at least for young people who are religiously active.¹ Nevertheless, rates of premarital sexual experience have greatly increased since the 1960s in nearly all religious groups. While Mormons continue to have noticeably lower rates than most other religions in the U.S., a recent national survey of women revealed that nearly 60 percent of Mormon females reported having lost their virginity before marriage.² Can it be true that more than

1. Scott H. Beck, Bettie S. Cole, and Judith A. Hammond, "Religious Heritage and Premarital Sex: Evidence from a National Sample of Young Adults," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30 (June 1991): 173-80; Larry Jensen, Rhea J. Newell, and Tom Holman, "Sexual Behavior, Church Attendance, and Permissive Beliefs among Unmarried Young Men and Women," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29 (Mar. 1990): 113-17; J. Timothy Woodruff, "Premarital Sexual Behavior in Religious Adolescents," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 24 (Dec. 1985): 343-66; J. Timothy Woodruff, "Reference Groups, Religiosity, and Premarital Sexual Behavior," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25 (Dec. 1986): 436-60.

2. Tim B. Heaton, "Demographics of the Contemporary Mormon Family," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Fall 1992): 23.

half of LDS girls and women in America have set aside the standards of the church?

The fact is that there is no way to be certain of religion's influence on premarital sex rates in either the LDS community or in our culture as a whole, given the research methods and measurements which social scientists have thus far employed. Questionnaires and interviews, however carefully constructed and confidentially administered, have typically ignored a distinction that has become increasingly important in recent years: the distinction between *voluntary* and *coercive* sexual initiation, especially for girls. Most studies on the relationship between religiosity and sexual activity have simply ascertained whether or not the respondent was a virgin prior to marriage; a few have attempted to determine the age at first intercourse; but *none* has yet inquired about the partner or circumstances involved in the respondent's sexual initiation.³ For example: Did initiation take place voluntarily or with some degree of coercion? Was the partner an older relative or authority figure?

With the recent revelations in the media and in the professional literature about child sexual abuse (CSA), in which girls are far more often victims than are boys, we must assume that for some proportion of sexually experienced survey respondents, their loss of virginity is attributable to CSA; indeed, for many, such may be the *only* form of sexual experience they have ever had, especially if they are quite young. Given the lack of virtually any published data on CSA among Mormons, it would be premature to assume that LDS youth are any less at risk than are other populations.⁴ For those young Mormons who have lost their virginity non-voluntarily, it hardly seems fair to connect sexual behavior with religious upbringing. Thus we really don't know what proportion of LDS youth have rejected church teachings as a matter of choice. This distinction becomes important as church leaders and teachers frame their responses to what they deem unacceptably high rates of premarital sexual activity in the Mormon community.

In this essay I will first review some survey findings about national rates of sex abuse, and then assess how those findings may impact current estimates of premarital sexual behavior among Mormon youth. (It

3. Dyanette I. Reynolds, "Religious Influence and Premarital Sexual Experience: Critical Observations on the Validity of a Relationship," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (Dec. 1994): 382-87.

4. Although there are no reliable, published data on CSA among Mormons, LDS statistics for other forms of abuse, such as spouse abuse and parent-to-child violence, follow national trends closely, although a temple marriage does seem to decrease the risk of some, but not all, kinds of violence. See Boyd K. Rollins and Yaw Oheneba-Sakyi, "Physical Violence in Utah Households," *Journal of Family Violence* 5 (1990): 301-309; and Boyd K. Rollins and Craig K. Manscill, "Family Violence in Utah," in *Utah in Demographic Perspective*, ed. Thomas K. Martin, Tim B. Heaton, and Stephen J. Bahr (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 157-64.

will be obvious that the numbers of young Mormons *voluntarily* disregarding church teachings on premarital sex are almost certainly lower than currently estimated.) Next I will present three case studies of Mormon women whose lives have been deeply affected by childhood sexual abuse and whose problems have been ignored or even confounded by church leaders, church members, and church policy. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this issue for the ways in which LDS youth are taught and counseled in sexual matters.

CHILD SEX ABUSE STUDIES

Estimates of the number of sexually abused children in the United States vary considerably, due largely to the fact that sex abuse has been defined and measured in many different ways. For example, the rate of sex abuse actually *reported* to government agencies was only 0.7 per 1,000 children in 1981.⁵ However, virtually all experts believe that a majority of abuse remains unreported, perhaps throughout a person's lifetime.⁶ Therefore, other methods of data collection have been judged more useful in determining child sex abuse rates.

To date the most respected and methodologically sound study of the prevalence of child sexual abuse was done by researcher Diana Russell in 1978.⁷ In a random sample of San Francisco women, who were questioned during lengthy face-to-face encounters by carefully trained interviewers, Russell found that 38 percent reported sexual abuse (either incestuous or extrafamilial) before the age of 18, with 20 percent before the age of 14, even when a *conservative* definition of abuse was applied.⁸ Unfortunately no comparable study has yet been done on men, but a more recent sample of male college students found that 7.3 percent re-

5. David A. Wolfe, Vicki V. Wolfe, and Connie L. Best, "Child Victims of Sexual Abuse," in *Handbook of Family Violence*, ed. V. B. Van Hasselt, R. L. Morrison, A. S. Bellack, and M. Hersen (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), 157-85.

6. Arthur H. Green, "Overview of the Literature on Child Sexual Abuse," in *Child Sexual Abuse: A Handbook for Health Care and Legal Professionals*, ed. Diane H. Schetsky and Arthur H. Green (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1988), 30-54; David Finkelhor, *Sexually Victimized Children* (New York: The Free Press, 1979); David Finkelhor, *Child Sexual Abuse: New Theory and Research* (New York: The Free Press, 1984); Wolfe et al.

7. Diana Russell, *Sexual Exploitation: Rape, Child Sexual Abuse, and Sexual Harassment* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1984).

8. Each incident mentioned by a respondent in the Russell study was judged as abusive or non-abusive by the *researchers*, rather than by the subject. Some scientists support this method; others have doubts about it. See C. L. Muehlenhard, I. G. Powch, J. L. Phelps, and I. M. Giusti, "Definitions of Rape: Scientific and Political Implications," *Journal of Social Issues* 48 (1992): 23-44.

ported an abusive experience before the age of 14.⁹ In addition, a nationwide random-sample telephone survey conducted by the *L.A. Times* in 1985 found that 27 percent of women and 16 percent of men had been molested as children, for a combined population estimate of 22 percent.¹⁰ These three studies, all carefully crafted for methodological reliability, have produced what may be the most accurate existing data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse in the United States.

Thus it appears likely that significant numbers of individuals in our society (Mormon or otherwise) have been victims of sexual abuse during childhood. The question then becomes: How may sexual abuse rates affect the relationship between premarital sexuality and religiosity, particularly LDS religiosity? Let us take a closer look at the existing LDS premarital sex data to see what may have resulted had researchers thought to include a question on sexual abuse.

LDS PREMARITAL SEX DATA

Two major studies published since 1980 have examined the rates of premarital intercourse specifically among Mormons: one in 1992 by BYU sociologist Tim Heaton, another in 1993 by Bruce Chadwick and Brent Top, BYU professors of sociology and history, respectively.¹¹ These two studies used different samples and different survey techniques, which led to widely different results. I will examine each in turn, then discuss the importance of their findings.

The Heaton Study

Heaton used two national databases to extract Mormon respondents for his sample.¹² While it is unclear exactly which questions were used to determine premarital sexuality in Heaton's source data, the circumstances of first intercourse were almost certainly *not* considered. As I have already mentioned, the issue of coercive sexual initiation has been

9. The largest percentage of those experiences was initiated by female babysitters. See Mary P. Koss, "Hidden Rape: Incidence and Prevalence of Sexual Aggression and Victimization in a National Sample of College Students," in *Rape and Sexual Assault*, vol. 2, ed. Ann W. Burgess (New York: Garland, 1988), 4-25.

10. John Crewdson, *By Silence Betrayed: Sexual Abuse of Children in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1988).

11. Bruce L. Chadwick and Brent L. Top, "Religiosity and Delinquency among LDS Adolescents," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32 (Mar. 1993): 51-67. For a brief review of studies prior to 1980, see Tim B. Heaton, "Four Characteristics of the Mormon Family: Contemporary Research on Chastity, Conjugalality, Children, and Chauvinism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (Spring 1987): 101-14.

12. Heaton, "Demographics of the Contemporary Mormon Family."

overlooked by virtually all social scientists of religion.¹³ Using these extracted data, Heaton found that 60 percent of women who indicated their religion as "Mormon" on the survey admitted to having engaged in premarital sex. These numbers were much greater than those found in previous studies, even with the potentially higher rates of inactive members considered.¹⁴

Church leaders who saw the Heaton study were surely alarmed at such an increase in premarital sex over a relatively short time. I have reason to believe that the Heaton rate of 60 percent has been taken seriously by the church, since various Church Educational System and lay church officials have quoted that rate to me in the past few years, though none could say on what data it was based. As we will shortly see, there are several reasons to conclude that this rate is too high, particularly for an active Mormon population.

The Chadwick-Top Study

In the second study, Chadwick and Top questioned Mormon teens living on the East Coast regarding a number of "delinquency" measures. Again, the nature of the premarital sex question was not specified; however, since no information was offered on sexual abuse rates, we can safely assume that the issue was not considered. Chadwick and Top found that only 7 percent of eastern LDS boys and 12 percent of eastern LDS girls had engaged in sexual intercourse. They were surprised to find that more girls than boys were sexually experienced, since previous studies had found boys to be more sexually active. Although the researchers did not propose an explanation for this finding, it may have been due to the fact that girls are more at risk for sexual abuse.

Differences in the Two Studies

The disparity in premarital sex rates between the Heaton study and the Chadwick/Top study is puzzling until one examines the data more closely. Several distinctions are evident: First, the Heaton study used a national database which certainly included inactive as well as active members, while the Chadwick/Top study sampled only LDS teens enrolled in seminary, who can reasonably be categorized as active members.

13. Reynolds.

14. For example, Miller et al. (unpublished, quoted in Heaton, "Four Characteristics of the Mormon Family") found that 17 percent of LDS male and female high school students were sexually active, while Smith found rates of 15 percent among males and 9 percent among females (Wilford E. Smith, *Social Disorganization and Deviant Behavior* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1974]).

Second, the Heaton study sampled adult women (making his results more comparable to a “lifetime risk” rate), while the Chadwick/Top study was limited to high school students.

Third, the Heaton study used data which did not distinguish between women who were LDS when the incidents occurred and those who joined the church later.

Fourth, it is unclear how premarital sex was defined in either study. The definition may have been explicitly limited to intercourse experiences, or—more likely—respondents may have been permitted to define “premarital sex” for themselves. (For example, some respondents may have defined certain forms of petting or oral sex as “premarital sex,” while others may not have.) The Heaton paper is vague regarding exact wording of the question. The Chadwick/Top paper mentions intercourse specifically, although again we don’t know what words were actually used on the questionnaire. This question is important because sexual abuse can involve a variety of experiences, only one of which may be intercourse, and all of which may influence a young person’s future sexual behavior. Thus if premarital sex were defined specifically as intercourse in either study, lower rates of overall premarital sexuality would probably result.

It can be seen from this brief examination that the findings on premarital sex among LDS populations are far from conclusive. Church leaders may wish to consider this fact before formulating official policy based on these studies or before citing statistics intended to alarm local leaders. More to the point, leaders should realize that of those young people who *are* sexually active, a certain number carry a heavy load of self-guilt for something that may not have been their fault. Let us now examine how sexual abuse rates may impact these data.

IMPACT ON CURRENT DATA: DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

Whether the percentage of premarital sex among LDS women is 60 percent or 12 percent, the question remains: How many were actually victims of sexual abuse? Is it really enough to make a difference?

Since it seems that at least some church leaders have accepted Heaton’s 60 percent figure as grounds for alarm, I will base the following calculations on his study. Let us determine how the existing data on sex abuse in the general population would impact Heaton’s data on Mormon women. Remember, the national surveys quoted in this essay found a high of 38 percent sex abuse¹⁵ and a low of 27 percent¹⁶ among women. If

15. Russell.

16. Crewdson.

we plug those numbers into Heaton's study results, we can get a more accurate picture of how many of his respondents willingly engaged in premarital sex. The mathematical formula we will use is: *Total Premarital Sex minus Involuntary Premarital Sex equals Voluntary Premarital Sex*.

Thus if 38 percent of Heaton's sample had been sexually abused (our high estimate), the formula would read: 60 percent minus 38 percent equals 22 percent, i.e., 22 percent of the women in Heaton's study would have engaged in voluntary premarital sex. This is considerably less than the original 60 percent figure.

However, we must also consider the possibility that some of Heaton's respondents who were victims of sex abuse answered "no" to the premarital sex question. These would have been automatically removed from the 60 percent figure, causing less inflation of the data. Let us assume, for example, that half of our hypothetical 38 percent for some reason or other declared on the survey that they had not engaged in premarital sex. (This is certainly a generous assumption.) The formula would thus read: 60 percent minus (38 percent multiplied by 0.5) equals 41 percent. We can see that even if half of our sexual abuse victims did not designate themselves as premaritally sexual in Heaton's study, the resulting 41 percent of voluntarily sexual is still a far cry from 60 percent.

Let us now consider the lower sex abuse estimate. If 27 percent of Heaton's respondents were sexually abused, and if they all inflated the data by answering "yes" on the survey, only 33 percent would have been truly voluntary: 60 percent minus 27 percent equals 33 percent.

Likewise, if only half of these sex abuse victims inflated Heaton's data, the percentage of voluntarily sexual would be 46.5 percent: 60 percent minus (27 percent multiplied by 0.5) equals 46.5 percent.

Let us be even more generous and suppose that only 15 percent of Heaton's respondents were sexually abused. (This would likely be an underestimate, since Heaton's study included inactive as well as active Mormons, and converts as well as life-long members. As discussed earlier, his sample would thus more closely approach the sex abuse rates of the general population.) The resulting percentages of voluntarily sexual would still be 45 percent and 52.5 percent: 60 percent minus 15 percent equals 45 percent; and 60 percent minus (15 percent multiplied by 0.5) equals 52.5 percent.

It is obvious that unless we assume a *very low sex abuse rate* as well as a *very low "inflation" rate*—both of which are optimistic assumptions, even for Mormon society—the adjusted figures for voluntary premarital sex will never approach the 60 percent found by Heaton. It is highly probable that young Mormons are engaging in *voluntary* premarital sex at significantly lower rates than Heaton's data would lead us to believe.

SEX ABUSE AND THE CHURCH

As I have indicated, church leaders should determine not only how much premarital sex is occurring among Mormon teens, but how much of it stems from a real disregard for church teachings and how much stems from abuse. Such knowledge should shape the nature of the official church response to premarital sex. If a punitive response is made when a loving and counseling response is required, the negative effects initiated by sexual abuse could well escalate. As will be seen below, there is good reason to believe that many church members have already suffered life-long consequences due to the church's hesitation to tackle the problem of childhood sexual abuse.

Three Women's Stories

To illustrate my point, I will turn to three individual cases. The names of the women whose stories are set forth here have been changed, but I will try to faithfully relate their experiences as told to me during personal encounters with them. In one case, I have received permission to print excerpts from a paper written by the member herself, telling her story in her own words. While only one of the women here links her childhood abuse directly to subsequent premarital sexuality, as well as to a rejection of the church and its teachings, the link is implicitly clear in all three cases. Furthermore, it is clear from all three stories that the church as an institution proved largely ineffective in helping these victims overcome the very real problems which followed their abuse. Indeed, in all three cases church teachings and church members inadvertently confounded the self-blame and guilt already felt by these women.

The ways in which these stories were collected should be discussed before turning to the actual stories. I began this line of research a few years ago when several inactive women—living separately and unknown to each other—to whom I was assigned as a “visiting teacher” began disclosing during my monthly visits that they had been sexually abused as children and that the experience(s) led them to make subsequent negative choices. Indeed, the abuse was still affecting their adult lives, particularly their church activity and feelings of spiritual worthiness. I never initiated these conversations; the disclosures were made freely over time and in the course of normal friendships, but my professional training as a journalist may have facilitated the process.

At the same time, I was working as the assistant editor of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, an academic journal which publishes sociological and other scientific research on religion. During my time with the journal, I read several papers on the relationship between premarital sex and religion, none of which considered the issue of sexual abuse, an

issue which had begun to concern me as I continued in my religious role as a visiting teacher. Although I am sure these researchers (all of whom were men, incidentally) neglected this issue more out of oversight than from malice, I was nevertheless enraged at the implicit presumption that anyone who had engaged in premarital sex had done so voluntarily. My concerns eventually led to the publishing of a scholarly paper on the same topic in the *Journal* after I was no longer affiliated with it. I have since moved to a different state, been assigned new women to visit, and have heard more stories of sexual abuse. The need for a critique specifically aimed at the Mormon community seemed obvious.

These stories are meant to provide anecdotal evidence for my argument that the church must change its approach to premarital sexuality and chastity, particularly in relation to the issue of childhood sexual abuse. Because these women are my friends, I admit freely that the tone here is not entirely objective; on the other hand, the reader will gain an appreciation for these women which would have been impossible had the data stemmed from a dispassionate scientific survey.

Marla. Marla was in her late twenties when I met her, the mother of three, and the working wife of an inactive, returned missionary undergraduate college student. Later she became a nursing student herself. Marla told me during one of my visits, almost in an aside, that she had been sexually abused by a male relative sometime during her childhood. She did not reveal how often the abuse occurred or at what age it occurred. She did not specify what form the abuse took. She told me she had experienced periodic incidents of severe depression ever since the episode. She attempted suicide at the age of seventeen. She attempted it twice more during our acquaintance. After one of those later attempts, a sympathetic bishop placed her in the care of LDS social services and reactivated her to the point where she was able to receive her temple endowment, though her husband remained inactive.

She had moved out of town at this point, but we maintained our acquaintance. About a year later I met with her again, at which time she said she had stopped going to church because "those people expect too much of me." (This same sense of guilt and inferiority will be seen in the next two case studies as well.) She continues to have problems with depression, which affect both her marriage and her career. Her current bishop was unwilling (according to her) to allow her continuing access to the LDS therapists in her new location (her problems were "all in the past," as he understood it, although of course such problems can never be "all in the past") until I contacted him by phone and urged him to do so. I have since learned from her husband that she never revealed the sexual abuse to him and that he was at a loss to explain her behavior until I unwittingly let the information slip. They were in the process of a divorce

when I last heard from either of them.

Sarah. Sarah is an older, single sister whom I visited every month for five years. She joined the church as an adult. She had been married and divorced twice, both times to abusive, alcoholic men. She was abused as a child over a long period of time by a male relative (I believe it was her uncle) who visited her secretly at night. As a result, she is terrified of the dark, even as a middle-aged adult. She became an alcoholic herself but overcame that through Alcoholics Anonymous shortly before I began visiting her; she gave up smoking about the same time. She has three adult children, one of whom is an active member of the church, but the others are drug and alcohol addicts.

She is an intelligent, deeply spiritual woman. We had many deep gospel discussions during our visits, some of which lasted for hours. When I repeatedly urged her to come back to church, she always gave me the same answer: "They make me feel too guilty there" or "They're all so perfect." Yet she pays her tithing fully and refuses to consider her non-member children's urgings to leave the church. Everything positive which she has accomplished in her life was done without the help of church programs or resources.

Jill. Jill is thirty-ish, a lovely, articulate, intelligent woman, married to a non-member, with two children. She grew up in the church but attributes her later disaffection and poor life choices (including a teenage abortion) directly to her childhood abuse experience: At the age of thirteen she was molested by an uncle who had just been married in the temple.

"It happened in my grandparents' old dilapidated garage," she writes.

I remember the box elder bugs crawling all over the rotten wood, the feel of the Chevy Impala against my back. Later I wore an "Orchid" dress as a flower girl in the reception line (it was my grandfather's favorite color), but it never was the same after that—I lost the innocence of a flower girl. The next day we ate watermelon under the clothes line next to the garage. I made sure to stay away from my uncle.

You see, he led me to believe that because of what had happened, if I told anyone I couldn't have what he had received just the day before—a temple marriage. I didn't need the threats—I was too ashamed and scared to tell anyone. I even let myself forget for many years.

Shortly after this incident, Jill participated in baptisms for the dead at the local temple. A "kind little lady" pulled her aside and told her to keep herself clean and pure so that some day she could return to the temple. "[A]t the time it felt like she could see through me. . . . I knew that she knew—I wasn't clean and pure and I could never come back."

Jill then decided that her "chances were over." She began drinking and using drugs. Her grade point average dropped drastically. At age nineteen she became pregnant and felt she had no choice but to abort the child. "The visual image I had at the time was of taking the values I had been taught, putting it far, far away from where I didn't have to think about it anymore. It was a sad, empty feeling."

She developed hypertension and began to have migraine headaches. She had problems with intimacy, sexuality, and compulsive behaviors. Jill knew that something was missing from her life and continued searching for that something, in college, in literature, and particularly at the Catholic hospital where she eventually found work.

It took her fifteen years to develop the courage to return to the LDS church, where an understanding bishop allowed her to progress on her own timetable. She has since served in the Young Women's program, which has brought her both pleasure and pain. For example:

We decided to focus an entire month on temple marriage in the Young Women's Program. . . . It was a tough month. I cried through the lessons. We had the girls make ceramic temples and talked to them throughout the process of cleaning, glazing, etc., about the preparation required for a temple marriage. I couldn't bring myself to make one for me. You see, I still don't see myself as worthy. I did find a temple in the greenware state with a hole in it. I worked on preparing it for someone else—not for me.

Jill now serves in a community leadership role as an activist on childhood sexual abuse issues. Her poignant story leads us to this question: How different would her life have been if one, just *ONE* person in the church—perhaps her YW teacher or a bishop—had mentioned during Jill's youth that victims of sexual abuse are not at fault for their loss of virginity, that chastity is a state of mind, not a physical condition, and that unconditional love and confidential help were available to those who needed it?

In Marla's and Sarah's cases, a difference could also have been made by a show of compassion on the part of church members, who sometimes give the impression in their lessons and talks that we have to be "perfect" to be accepted by the Lord and by the church. Even in adult discussions of sexual virtue, the emphasis is almost always on choices made consciously or deliberately, with no provision for those who may not have had a choice in matters of sexuality.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The church is beginning to pay more attention to sex abuse concerns. For example, prior to the publication of this essay, the church announced

the establishment of a sex abuse "hotline" for bishops to call when dealing specifically with problems of sex abuse. They will be legally advised about when confessions must be reported to police and when they are protected by the confidentiality of the clergy. In addition, there is a booklet available to church leaders regarding how to counsel sex abuse victims and offenders. In October 1994 general conference President Gordon B. Hinckley publicly and eloquently deplored the sexual abuse of children, as well as other violence against children.¹⁷

While the church has come far in recent years in acknowledging the existence of sexual abuse among its members, there is obviously still progress to be made. One important step is recognizing that existing data on premarital sex among LDS youth are flawed. To attack the problem of premarital sex without acknowledging the associated (but different) problem of childhood sex abuse can only have disastrous consequences. Victims will be forced to turn away from the church for help, instead of toward it.

A change in attitude among church members is needed. Indeed, such a change is already in motion, driven by the outside culture which is becoming more open to discussing problems of a sexual nature. Yet—while I am far from an expert in this area—one can't help but feel that if leaders of the church fail to mount a sensitive, loving campaign on this issue, they will be quickly upstaged by more radical influences, and indeed their motivations may ultimately come into question (i.e., are they trying to help the abuser—who may be a priesthood holder—more than the victim?). I am not suggesting that huge amounts of church time and effort be spent on this issue. Rather, it seems possible that just a few well-placed words of advice in lesson manuals and at leadership training meetings could make all the difference.

For example, one common teaching method used in Young Women programs and firesides throughout the U.S. (but probably not with official church sanction, I hasten to add) is what I call the "Half-Eaten Doughnut Method." Here, young women are presented with both a fresh doughnut and a half-eaten doughnut (or alternatively a piece of chewed-up gum) then asked to choose which they would rather eat. The half-eaten doughnut is likened to a girl who is sexually experienced, while the untouched doughnut represents a virgin. The message is that young men only want to marry virgins. Ignored here is the fact that sexually abused girls who are subjected to this analogy will view themselves as a less desirable "doughnut" even though they were not responsible for their sexual experience. The damage to self-esteem could be considerable. A young victim may perceive that a once-damaged "doughnut" can never

17. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Save the Children," *Ensign* 24 (Nov. 1994): 52-54.

be made whole again; she may then abandon all efforts to avoid premarital sex in the future, eventually alienating herself from the church, the very institution which should be the most helpful in assisting her recovery from abusive experiences. If church leaders allow the "Half-Eaten Doughnut Method" to continue in YW programs, they at least need to emphasize that the analogy does not apply to victims of sexual abuse.

Furthermore, church leaders should be aware that its women members may be more likely to blame *themselves* for coercive sexual experiences, even when an objective party may judge otherwise. In a recent study, only 27 percent of raped women whose experiences met an objectively classified, *legal* definition of rape had actually labeled themselves as victims.¹⁸ The rest perceived the experience as their own fault. Thus when a young woman enters a bishop's office to "confess" a sexual sin, the bishop should be advised to examine the incident—and possibly preceding incidents—before requiring the girl to follow the prescribed steps of repentance which could confound any misplaced self-blame.

Most helpful would be the inclusion in YM/YW manuals, as well as in Relief Society and priesthood manuals, of an occasional mention of sexual abuse, with particular emphasis on the church's compassionate attitude toward those who have experienced such problems and the willingness of church leaders to help the victimized member find counseling resources or therapy groups which could speed the recovery process.

Church leaders who are made aware of specific instances of sex abuse are probably responsive to the best of their ability. But even this may be too little, too late. Unfortunately, a negative message may have been unwittingly conveyed by leaders long before a member is ready to disclose the problem. What happens when a victim of sex abuse, young or old, is subject to a continuous stream of chastity sermons from the pulpit with no mention of sexual abuse and the specific exemption from blame that results therefrom? As our three women's stories showed, the member all too often stops coming to church. She feels guiltier than she did before, if possible. She feels that it's no use trying to be "good" anymore. She may even attempt suicide. (Although I am using the feminine example here, let us not forget that boys can also be negatively affected by a sex abuse experience but may hide their abuse more carefully.¹⁹)

Our lack of knowledge about the nature of premarital sexuality in Mormon culture—and, specifically, to what extent it is initiated by sexual abuse—has already harmed us as individuals, as families, and as a church, and will continue to harm us in the future. Church leaders should

18. Koss.

19. Leslie I. Risin and Mary P. Koss, "The Sexual Abuse of Boys: Childhood Victimization Reported by a National Sample," in *Rape and Sexual Assault II*, ed. Ann W. Burgess (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), 91-103.

hesitate to accept premarital sex statistics at face value, and particularly should not base church policy on them until they are more accurately established. Leaders at every level in the church should be made aware that a certain percentage of young people who are sexually active have been victims of sexual abuse. Such awareness will bring a greater sensitivity to lessons that are taught and counsel that is given.