

Child sexual abuse (CSA): Its possible consequences for male childcare workers¹

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Abstract

The number of men suspected of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in preschools is on the increase in Sweden. This is a concern for children, but also raises concern that the current trend of reporting suspicions of perceived CSA will lead to males hesitating to work in or even visit preschools. This trend may be explained by a paedophile scandal in 2014, when men's presence in preschools was publicly questioned. This has happened in the 1990s when men also began to avoid preschools for the same reasons. They fear being accused of CSA. This is, according to some, the main reasons for difficulties in recruiting and retaining men in early child education. In a recent research review of this complex issue with a particular focus on preschool professionals (Bergström, Westberg-Boström & Eidevald 2016), we identified the tensions involved in the preschool teacher as both a safeguard and also a potential abuser, as well as the importance of preventing CSA and providing qualitative care of children. The fear of becoming a suspect is now an obstacle for men to be close to children, to provide care and develop their professional position. An interview study with 25 men currently working, or who have been working, in Swedish preschools, suggested the need for more knowledge and better procedures for handling the sensitive issues of CSA. Such are needed for men to feel safe(er) in their professional role (Eidevald, 2014). We wish to discuss whether routines and preventive work are able to make preschools a safer place for both men and children.

Background

In the mid-1990s Sweden was shocked by several paedophile scandals in a number of preschools. These scandals triggered an increase in reporting suspicions of men working in ECEC as possibly being paedophiles but who were, in fact, innocent. Some men who were never perceived as 'suspicious' nevertheless decided to leave the profession anyway. Both media and the public voiced strong concerns about allowing men to be at all considered for ECEC as a profession. It was suggested, sometimes quite abruptly, that the only reason for men to be interested in working with children was a possible sexual interest. In the aftermath of a more recent scandal (in 2014) the same arguments have been heard yet again and raised suspicions have become commonplace.

Sweden and equality

Sweden has frequently been described as a model of equality for other nations to follow. However, this quest for equality has had a few unexpected results for men working in preschools. This is particularly true of individuals professing ECEC (which I myself do). ECEC is a theoretical stance on gender equality paramount to Swedish policy-making.

One such policy document was instigated by the *Commission for Equality in Preschools* in 2006. Its mission was to suggest strategies on how to increase the number of males working professionally in preschools. However, the delegation consisting of politicians,

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researchers and activists challenged the proposed policy directives on the basis of Third Wave Feminism assumptions that gender is socially constructed. The final policy document, therefore, became a compromise stating that if full gender equality is to be reached gender itself must *not* be given any significance. Instead of making an effort to increase the number of men in the profession, which was the direction taken by the Norwegian government, a decision was made to rather train so-called Gender Tutors (Sw. Genuspedagoger: gender pedagogues) whose remit it would be to educate on the issues and construction of gender.

Equality can, in this sense, be understood as an attitude; how to relate to children, and therefore it also becomes a matter of *knowledge*, which staff can acquire. If so, gender equality never becomes a question of numbers of who belongs to which gender. An effort to make more men interested in the profession was even seen by some as counterproductive to the general objective of making preschools and society as a whole fully equal. The general objective is now therefore stated in neutral terms in relation to gender since 'unreflected efforts' might actually strengthen stereotypical gender roles that the policy aims at nullifying.

This means, paradoxically, that at times it is perhaps better if men do *not* seek to work in preschools if, in their professional work, they continue to embrace and demonstrate traditionally male roles. If only a female staff, the argument goes, children can at least model the many roles of a woman. Men are only welcomed to the profession if they accept equality as essential and proceed professionally from a basis of challenging and counteracting traditional gender roles.

This policy is interesting since equality tends to be assessed according to representation: the higher the percentage of women in a certain group the better the perceived equality; as based on Gender Power Order, which assuming the greater value of males. By women taking on traditionally perceived male positions this power order is challenged. Since the 1960s considerable efforts have been made in Sweden to persuade women to make such power-order challenging work choices. Similar efforts for men is almost entirely missing. Only a few have seen the light of day and none has been particularly significant.

The results of earlier efforts

The results of previous gender-power challenging efforts are noticeable. There is now a majority of women studying previously and traditionally male training programmes, with one exception: technology. Policy documents are, however, in preparation to also remedy this. Currently about 15% of students in technology are women and this is increasing. In previously and traditionally female training programmes, however, the number of men is not increasing at all, and no efforts are made or even suggested how to change this. As far as preschools go this suggests also that the number of men working in them is not likely to increase in the future but will remain constant at 3-4% of the staff.

Needless to say, this is a simplified account of quite a complex context, since there are indeed also suggestions within ECEC that efforts should be made to increase the number of men in the profession. One previous Minister for Preschools and Equality Issues (representing a liberal-conservative coalition), for example, commissioned the Agency for

Schools to work towards attracting more men to preschools. The Agency realised that there was a void of available knowledge on the matter. I was therefore commissioned to interview men working in preschools to remedy this void.

The current cabinet being a left-green coalition has chosen *not* to address these issues at all. Efforts and policies initiated by an earlier government have come to a halt. There is now an ideological resistance towards involving an increased number of men both among policy-makers and also among researchers.

My own conclusion is that we have a considerable challenge ahead in order to prevent men leaving the profession (so-called 'drop-outs') and to simultaneously increase the number of men working within ECEC in Sweden. The situation is complex. Men are both encouraged and not at the same time. It is opportune to say that men are welcome but the ones who do lack knowledge of inherent structural obstacles for men to actually make the effort. Instead of providing such knowledge the message broadcast is merely that 'preschools are a good place to work in for men'. The term 'Glass door' is a first of its kind to demonstrate that there are indeed inherent structural, and therefore often invisible, obstacles. Several researchers in this group have devoted time and effort outlining and theorising about these obstacles.

The current situation

In addition to the challenges outlined above men working in preschools also face a general and public suspicion of having sexual interests in children. In this light, it is particularly worrying that another wave of reported suspicions of CSA against men working in ECEC is now emerging. In the Stockholm metropolitan area 50 male preschool teachers have been 'reported' during the period of three years. None of these suspicions were verified. But this increase in reporting suspected abuse signals, again, that it is actually 'dangerous' for a man to work with children professionally in a Swedish preschool.

In my experience, men's motive for wanting to work with children in, for example, Norway, are not questioned. If abuse occurs in Norway blame remains with the individual. It is not generalised to an entire group of men. Similarly, this is largely true also of men in Sweden working in sports. Perhaps because these are perceived as doing something 'manly' – in comparison to working with children which might be construed as 'feminine'.

Over the last few years I have encountered a number of men who were reported to the police as being 'suspicious.' Their lives were more or less destroyed because of this in spite of the fact that police found no substance to made allegations and therefore quickly cleared them of all charges. Some of these reported suspicions were very vague indeed. However, the name of these men and their addresses quickly spread in social media creating a most difficult situation for them and their families. Some have had to resign because of threats. Others have been offered severance pay being prompted by their employer to resign of their free will. Only a few have chosen to remain working with children after having been wrongly reported. Needless to say, risking this witch hunt of sorts frightens prospective male preschool teachers from seeking such a career—even if this is their preferred career choice.

I have been working with gender issues in preschools since 1997 and did at the outset separate gender issues from SCA. My strategy is now a different one. I argue that in order to remedy the male teachers dropping out of the profession and simultaneously make an effort to attract an increased number of men to choose the profession, gender issues, sadly, must also be addressed *together* with the issue of men and CSA. If not, every successful outcome risks another setback as soon as media and social media focus on a CSA event again.

Trying to make preschools a safe and attractive place to work for both women and men and simultaneously handle the issue of CSA to make preschools safe for children also is indeed a balancing act. This is beyond doubt the greatest challenge of my own professional career thus far. The risk of offending and being misunderstood is considerable. These are sensitive issues evoking passionate reactions in society (and most likely also in this group). These issues are also ideologically very potent and cause divisions in groups dealing with equality, scientific theory as well as feminist ideology. Unfortunately discussions and debate are not always based on facts but are mixed with fear and myth. Both are detrimental to men working in preschools.

Of the men I have interviewed most have experience of the fact that parents to the children they care for will not even allow them to change diapers when needed, especially not if girls. The interviewees were surprised I asked such a question, but so was their female colleagues. The men in the interview study had to handle posed questions in the moment of the interview. The gained knowledge from this may offer some support for other men in preschools in similar situations. Hopefully it may contribute towards an environment where men can work safely without having to always act 'unsuspiciously', which most likely deprives them of work satisfaction and to further developing a professional attitude.

Conclusions

To work towards a greater number of men in preschools and to counteract drop-outs I see two main challenges, at least in Sweden:

- 1) We need knowledge of CSA to avoid that current debate is governed by myth and prejudice. Men need to be allowed to prepare and receive tools by which to face fears and preconceptions. However, also women working in preschools need these tools lest men stand alone possibly causing suspicions to reemerge yet again. One effect of this would be that CSA prevention would be facilitated.
- 2) Sweden, without being quite aware of this, has a lot to learn from other countries used to working with the issue of men in ECEC. It is a misconception that Sweden is forward-thinking also when it comes to men in ECEC just because Sweden is to a degree a model to follow when it comes to other gender equality issues. Policy-makers somehow believed that the problem would take care of itself by rendering gender identity unimportant and introducing gender education instead.

My own contribution to the field is 1) to focus on these issues in teacher training by arranging workshops for students based on appropriate texts, and 2) author books and articles and also to lecture frequently all over Sweden.

Scholarly works thus far

Fler män i förskolan En sammanställning av intervjustudier med män som arbetar i förskolan [More men in preschools. A summary of interviews with men working in Swedish preschools] (2014)

In this study, commissioned by the Swedish Agency for Schools, in 2013 to 2014, I interviewed 24 men who either worked or who had been working in preschools in different parts of Sweden. These men accounted for their worries of being suspected of sexual interests in children as they cared for children professionally and did so with professional interest and joy.

Child sexual abuse at preschools – a research review of a complex issue for preschool professionals (2016)

This is an article co-authored with Helena Bergström and Anna Westberg-Broström, which reviews relevant research published between 2000 and 2015 focussing on child sexual abuse, preschool and preschool teachers (especially on men).

Omsorg om flickor och pojkar – kvinnligt, manligt och närhet [Caring for boys and girls – on feminine, masculine and closeness] (2016)

This is a chapter from the anthology *Omsorg i en förskola på vetenskaplig grund* [Caring on scientific grounds in preschools]. I outline the notions of masculine and feminine in preschools and discuss men as caregivers. The objective is to motivate the need for a national strategy towards understanding how natural it is for also men to care for children.

Förskolan – en trygg plats för barn och pedagoger? Sexuella övergrepp och förebyggande arbete [Preschools: a safe place for children and teachers? On sexual abuse and preventive work] (2016)

This is a monograph outlining preschools as work for both men and women emphasising the inadequacy of information directed only towards men in an effort to motivate them to choose this profession as well as to remain in it. I discuss the need for a structural discussion similar to the one we have had for so long on how to convince women to take on traditionally male jobs. In the second part of this book, together with Helena Bergström and Anna Westberg-Broström, we overview available research on CSA, discuss how preschools are currently dealing with the issue and how this creates safety for both men and children.

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Background

- In the mid-1990s – several paedophile scandals in a number of preschools
- Both media and the public voiced strong concerns about men in ECEC
- In the aftermath of a more recent scandal (in 2014) the same arguments have been heard yet again

Sweden and equality

- The quest for equality has had a few unexpected results for men working in preschools
- Third Wave Feminism assumptions that gender is socially constructed
- Full gender equality is to be reached gender itself must *not* be given any significance
- Instead of making an effort to increase the number of men in the profession, a decision was made to rather train so-called Gender Tutors (Sw. Genuspedagoger: gender pedagogues)

The results of earlier efforts

- There is a majority of women studying previously and traditionally male training programmes
- As far as preschools go the number of men working in them is not likely to increase in the future but will remain constant at 3-4%
- There is an ideological resistance towards involving an increased number of men both among policy-makers and also among researchers

The current situation

- Another wave of reported suspicions of CSA against men working in ECEC is now emerging
- This signals, again, that it is actually 'dangerous' for a man to work with children professionally in a Swedish preschool

Conclusions

- We need knowledge of CSA to avoid that current debate is governed by myth and prejudice
- Sweden, without being quite aware of this, has a lot to learn from other countries used to working with the issue of men in ECEC. (Policy-makers somehow believed that the problem would take care of itself by rendering gender identity unimportant and introducing gender education instead)