



## 'They deserve all they get'; thoughts on victim blaming

This piece was first published [here](#) in November 2012. Unfortunately it is still very relevant - thanks to author for permission to cross post.

The Guardian this weekend reports on one person's reaction to the disclosures from victims of Jimmy Savile. In referring to children at a residential, the interviewee states, "*They didn't tell me about Jimmy Savile, they deserve all they get. They should've reported him. They knew if they reported him to me I'd report him to the police*".

She then goes on to make the accusation that for some of the victims the motivation is monetary; that they are seeking compensation; "*They had an opportunity to tell anybody. But it suited them – some of them, not all of them – to wait 30 years. They're all looking for money ... they come out of the woodwork for money.... wild allegations by well-known delinquents.*"

In some ways this analysis of the abuse doesn't surprise me, I've heard variations of the same, albeit a minority view. What I find really telling and disturbing is that these are not the words of someone to whom child protection should be alien. [They are the words of the former headteacher of a residential school targeted by Savile in his abuse of children.](#)

Many people who know little of the dynamics of abuse may have questioned why victims didn't come forward sooner. I feel its a really dangerous stance to take. It sets up a dynamic of 'if its true you would have told' and that logic flies in the face of everything we know about how hard it is to talk about abuse. So why do people make this judgements on the responses of victims to abuse? I think its because we all like to think that if we became the target of abuse (and I'm thinking widely here; domestic, rape, sexual harassment workplace bullying etc.) we would do something to stop it.

We tell ourselves that if someone tried to jump us in an alleyway we'd do x,y and z and would walk away unharmed, or we'd speak out the moment someone acted inappropriately to us. We convince ourselves that we know what a risky situation looks like - believing we need to worry about the walk home through that dark alleyway whereas we probably should be more cautious about the casual work acquaintance who bought us lots of drinks at the works party and wanted to walk us home - and because we think we know how abuse 'happens' we think we know our reactions. And I'm sure this extends to how we think our children would react. We assure ourselves that our children would tell us if anything happened to them.

Its about control. Its about telling ourselves that we are so in control of what happens to us, we can never be a victim. Because the reality, the truth of it, that most people do not act in the way they might have imagined, is really hard to live with. It takes us to a scary place when we realise that we don't actually the control we like to think we have to be able to carry on our lives without constantly worrying about how vulnerable we are.

I believe its the same psychological process that leads people to draw attention to what a victim



of rape was wearing or how much they were drinking or the fact they walked home alone as some kind of explanation for what happened. The subtext is 'I wouldn't wear that/I wouldn't get that drunk/I wouldn't walk home therefore I am safe. It cannot happen to me. It happened to her because of her decisions and I make different ones'. In trying to 'explain' what's happened many people look for answers in the behaviour of the victim and not the perpetrator. And explanation becomes blame. We place responsibility at the door of the victim and blame them for what has happened to them.

The headteacher does this very blatantly in her interview '*They didn't tell me about Jimmy Savile, they deserve all they get*'. She actually sees children as deserving abuse or mistreatment if they do not take steps to stop it. No responsibility on the adult offender making an informed choice to use their power to abuse children, all the responsibility on the child to understand it and stop it happening. If someone mugs you at knife point, they have power and you don't, you do not get asked why you didn't try to stop them taking your bag. Power does not always take the form of a knife or a gun. In this case the weapon was the 'adoration' of the nation, fundraising for charities, the connections to celebrity and royalty, the tools to groom vulnerable girls with promises of a different life.

To ask why someone has not reported or disclosed abuse against them, be that child abuse, domestic abuse or sexual violence, implies that the baseline 'normal' response would be to tell someone. It sets up an expectation that everyone reports abuse and that if you don't, this is odd or worse, suspicious. It would be much healthier if we shifted our expectations to assume that the majority of people will not tell and to concentrate on what society can do to change that. Instead of asking 'why didn't you tell?' how about asking 'what helped you to tell us now?'. Maybe by asking that we'll get better at identifying and nurturing the conditions that need to be in place for people to speak out about abuse.

It is very odd that people have an expectation that victims of abuse will disclose. How many friends have you heard talking about bullying in the workplace, but who won't make a formal complaint. People are very aware and nervous of the possible consequences of making an allegation. The reality is, if you've experienced some form of abuse, your primary concern is for that to stop. Once it has stopped many people's next priority is to try and move on and forget about what's happened. This is completely normal and its to be applauded when victims decide to make a complaint, but it shouldn't be expected as the only marker of a true victim.

Add to this, being a child when the abuse started. It is ridiculous to place an expectation on a child to speak out about an adult and even more ridiculous to hold them accountable if they do not. The headteacher says '*They had an opportunity to tell anybody*'. but in answer to her own unspoken question adds '*They're all looking for money ... they come out of the woodwork for money.... wild allegations by well-known delinquents.*' There are several reasons in that sentence alone why they did not tell!

These were children labelled as 'delinquents' and whose allegations are being described as 'wild' and who are being accused of being motivated by money. If these are the views she holds now, after everything that has been revealed, I can only guess at her attitude back then and how she would have reacted to a disclosure. She even dehumanises and reduces the victims to



worms in her metaphor 'come out the woodwork'. This is how little she thinks of them.

Children are worried enough about being believed but these children were even more vulnerable given the institution they were placed in. And why were they in this institution? I'm sure there were a range of factors that led to the girls being in that school and I have no doubt that some of them would have previously experienced abuse. How much confidence would you have in disclosing if you'd not been able to talk about past abuse (or you had and hadn't been believed)? We've all got memories of things we heard or saw as children that now with adult eyes we see very differently. There are several children I went to school with who now I realise were showing indications of abuse.

One child in particular whose house I played at and never wanted to go back to again because of her mum and mum's boyfriend and how nervous I felt about what they said and did. When she called again to ask me over to play I begged my mum to lie and say I wasn't allowed. I didn't tell her the real reason because I didn't have the language to explain my discomfort. I knew that there was something 'wrong' about - what I now know to be pornography - strewn about the house and I felt embarrassed and worried that I would be in trouble if I said anything. Of course I wouldn't have, my parents would never have reacted negatively to me. But as a child your default is that adults are right. I didn't yet hold the concept that you could say no because something didn't feel right, less so you could say no to an adult. In my young mind things were much more concrete; you had to have a reason to say no, you couldn't just say you didn't want to. Children cannot be blamed for not being able to speak up about an adult when they do not possess the language, the concepts or the power to do so.

So why wait 30 years? Well that some of them didn't is now becoming clear. Some did tell and nothing dramatic happened. Nothing to signal to others that it was okay to tell, that they would be listened to. I'm also not convinced that victims 'waited' 30 years. I'm sure many of them didn't think that they would ever tell, that they wouldn't get the chance to talk about what had happened. It's really common for victims of childhood sexual abuse to disclose much later in life; perhaps they see something on TV which reawakens the trauma of what happened and for the first time they have the language, concepts and power to make sense of it and to want to disclose.

For others it may be that the abuser dies and the fear they felt lessens. They are no longer scared of what the abuser may do or say, they no longer have to confront them in a court and so feel safe to tell. It may be when their own loved ones die; parents, grandparents or siblings, anyone who they wanted to protect from knowing what had happened to them. Some victims will say that when their own children reached the age which they themselves had been abused, they saw it for what it really was. An adult taking advantage of a powerless, blameless child and not what they have held on to for years; an overwhelming guilt and shame and feeling that they invited the abuse, that it was their own fault.

And as for Margaret's Jones suggestion that there is a monetary motivation for disclosure.

Offensive? Absolutely, but to her I would say, do they not deserve that? No money in the world can compensate for being abused as a child. But I have no issue with victims given compensation if they ask for it. I feel much more comfortable with this than the thought of how



## Everyday Victim Blaming

challenging institutional disbelief around domestic & sexual violence and abuse  
<http://everydayvictimblaming.com>

---

much Margaret Jones was paid to look after and keep safe vulnerable girls, and who now after everything, doesn't have the humility to say for her part, she is sorry.