

# LIMBO MEN

- Ireland's Disempowered Dads

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The work submitted is the work of the author alone

# Acknowledgements

Eddie Holt, for his support and advice

**For the fathers**  
who trusted me with their stories

(and in no particular order)

Mary T. Cleary, Eddie Herson, Ray Kelly, Kieran McKeown,  
Peter Coleman, John, Finola, Aidan, Rene, Joe, Mick and Annette.

LIMBO MEN is a collection of articles dedicated to the problem of fatherhood for the many men who's relationships with their children are under threat from the Irish legal and sociological system. The term 'limbo men' describes fathers, who are in 'limbo', trying to fight for access to their kids. These men describe themselves as being torn away from their lives, and continue to fight.

There is another meaning for the word 'limbo'. It's a West Indian dance, where the dancer bends backwards to get under a horizontal bar. Each time the dancer passes under it, the bar gets placed lower. This process aptly describes the frustration experienced by disempowered dads. The longer a man goes without seeing his child, the more difficult the struggle becomes.

# Concept and Methodology

Here's a new term: 'educated bias'. When there is a over-riding belief within society and you happen to take a different stance on it, when you challenge it, it might be called bias. But, if you actually know more than the average member of that society your bias is an 'educated bias'. The pendulum of comprehension swings and you realise that the all-powerful assumptions held by the majority are actually biased, and rather than being biased, you are, in fact, balanced. There is always a possibility that the rest of the world could be wrong. This new term identifies a fundamental problem with objectivity. The possibility that it is subjective.

When I tell my friends that I'm off to my weekly 'men's meeting' they laugh. Because it's funny. Perhaps even a bit ridiculous. But the most telling comments come from people who are not involved in Father's Rights, people who's understanding and knowledge of the dilemmas facing fathers is average: practically non-existent. It is presumed that my 'father's rights' group is an aggression control group, a therapy group for violent, abusive fathers who at best deserve never to see their children again.

When I leave my house to meet with these men, some of whom may have been accused of sexually abusing their children, my mother winces. I write down all the details of where I'm going, 'in case something happens'. If I'm late, I call. It is better to be safe than sorry, and why oh why do I have to go to these places? Why oh why do I have to meet these people in person.

I have to go to these places, and meet these people face to face for the exact reason why I shouldn't. I live in a society where, by law, people are innocent until proven guilty. Unless, it seems, the term 'child abuse' is uttered, and guilt is presumed.

This series of articles is not about feminism gone mad, nor is it supposed to be a defense for men. Rather it looks at the ways in which fathers seem to be coming disposed of. It investigates the laws governing fatherhood, at the system that decides the fate of fatherhood. Most of all, it looks at the lives of men who have lost their children.

When the men arrive to the meeting for the first time, they will invariably have had a telephone conversation with Ray. They walk in wide-eyed and maybe a little embarrassed. The girl with the notepad is a curiosity, an oddity. She must be Ray's secretary, they think. One man actually perked up courageously and asked me directly, mid-meeting, what must I make of this whole thing, me being the only female present. He didn't realise I was asking myself the same question. 'That's D' says Ray 'she loves us'. And I guess in a way I do. It's difficult not to.

It's difficult to coldly take notes as a grown man expresses his wish to die rather than be ostracised from his children. It's not easy to remain 'objective' when documenting the crumbling desperation in so many men's lives. But then again, my willingness to listen, my assumption of innocence rather than guilt turned out to be one of the most useful tools I had. Men trusted me with their stories, they gave me insights into a world that is sometimes held back.

My tutor in DCU, Eddie Holt, drew the analogy of the journalist as being a kind of midwife bringing the story from its mother's womb out into the world. It is a difficult thing to turn to the mother and tell her it's an ugly child. In this instance, I am bringing to the world a child who is not perfect. I have studied it for a long time and know its strengths and its weakness'. Wearing the journalistic cap, I am duty bound to tell it as I see it, even if my knowledge may harm egos, and hurt feelings. But there is an up-side, I believe that any problems I've encountered can be fixed. That's up to those whom I write about to do.

Towards the end of carrying out this project, I felt I needed to find some objectivity. So I went back to my feminist roots. I feared that perhaps, I had become too involved, too intertwined in the whole issue of male injustice, so I tried to consult the kinds of literature that I, as a woman, once found empowering and fair. Something very strange happened to me, as I leafed through the Irish Journalist of feminist Studies, my stomach began to churn. I had reached a new plateau of understanding of the whole universe of feminism. It is a strange sensation to be a woman and feel cheated by feminism. The only mention of men that I could find was Diana Tietjens Meyers article in SIGNS, Spring 2001 who boldly stated that "since the current (albeit outmoded) paradigm of the family is a social unit comprised of a heterosexual couple and their children..." I read on, looking for anything, any mention of a father's role in this 'outmoded' family structure. It wasn't there. And that upset me.

When embarking on this project, my idea was to get 'two sides' to the story. It came to the point where I had to ask myself 'who can I talk to, to get this 'other side', to retrieve balance and objectivity. I interviewed all kinds of women, women who had been abused by men, single mothers, feminists. The problem was that their stories did not add anything to the package. They went off the point. I didn't want to structure the project in such a way that on one side of the page was an interview with a beaten man, on the opposite side a story of a beaten woman, the bottom of the page a comparison, a contest of 'who is the worst victim'. I thought that would be ridiculous.

I guess, the trouble with this project is that I felt, given the space constraints, I had to decide which points deserved to be highlighted. I had to take control and decide where I wanted the thing to go. So I opted for the vastly untold, largely ignored issues. For instance, my interview with 'Fergal', who was a victim of domestic violence is backed up by the latest figures: 'Where there is domestic violence in heterosexual relationships 33% inflict violence on each other, 41 % is perpetrated by the woman, and 26% is perpetrated by the man'. Even though society tends to give out a rather different message, the cold objective fact is that male victims are in the *majority*.

But this project is not an exercise in objectivity, it is an attempt to give a voice to the voiceless. I cannot deny that in a way I have become swept up in a kind of campaign.

The trouble with this is that I am left somewhat vulnerable. After reading all the reports from Ireland and abroad, after meeting with so many people, hearing so many stories, I have to try my best to get the message across to the reader. The reader has not worked hard to find the story, the reader has not seen the faces, looked into the eyes and lives of the people I want to share with them. I have tried to keep the articles simple. 'Let the readers come up with their own conclusions, you just write the facts',

ring the voices of the college lecturers. The line between fact and opinion is a blurry one.

I struggled with descriptions. If I say 'he was visibly heartbroken' - is that opinion? Of course it is. Somebody else may have interpreted what I saw as something else. But I have to say more than 'He was there', right? Well, I've done my best to sell my 'educated bias', I have done my utmost to tell the truth. As I saw it.

I guess if the object of this exercise is to question objectivity and opinion, then the exercise has worked. The word objective has begun appearing in my dreams. I hate that word. Cause and passion are far more attractive. And I begin my journalism career armed with the healthy skepticism of a term that has been beaten to death.

I hand this work over to you now, here is your baby. My midwifery job is done.

## EFFECTS ON THE CHILDREN

### Research from the U.S

Children from fatherless homes account for:

63% of youth suicides

71% of pregnant teenagers

90% of all homeless and runaway children

60% of juveniles in state-operated institutions

(Source: US Dept. of Health & Human Services, Bureau of the Census)

85% of all children that exhibit behavioural disorders (Source: Centre for Disease Control)

80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger (Source: Criminal Justice & Behaviour)

71% of high school dropouts (Source: National Principals Association Report on the State of High Schools)

75% of adolescent patients in chemical abuse centres (Source: Rainbows for all God's Children)

85% of all youths sitting in prisons (Source: Fulton Co. Georgia jail populations, Texas Dept. of Corrections 1992)

# Domestic Abuse- One Man's Scars

(The names of the people in this article have been changed.)

'My loved one spat at me, punched me, kicked me, threatened to kick me out into the streets, to take my children away from me'. Fergal's voice trails off. He has three children, all boys, aging from eight to four. 'They're brilliant kids' he smiles, 'really brilliant'. And that's why he wants to be with them. That's why he carried on putting his body and his mind through hell for eight years. He couldn't leave, he had thought about it, but realised he could never walk away and leave his children at the mercy of their mother. He sees himself as some sort of a protection barrier between them and her. 'She's not well, she suffers from that thing where a mother can't bond with her children, she has tried, but even when they were born she just couldn't connect with them.' Fergal was different, loving his children came naturally him.

On one occasion, when Jack (the youngest son) was only a baby, Moira threw a mug of coffee over Fergal's head, while the child was in his arms. He shouted at her, and called her an evil bitch. She retorted by kicking him in the testicles. He fell on his knees, clutching Jack in his arms. 'I never shouted at her again' he said. 'I learned that lesson pretty quick. I could've dropped Jack on to the floor, shit I could've killed him'.

And there it is, the mentality of a man who is the victim of domestic abuse. Had the baby fallen from the safety of his arms, it would've been his fault. It's the old cliché of the woman who walked into doors, or the woman who felt she somehow 'deserved it'. But Fergal is a man, one of the growing number of men who is finally speaking out. But society is not yet really armed to deal with men like him, 'male victim' is not a term that rolls off the tongue, despite the recent statistics indicating that men are more likely to be victims of domestic violence than women.

Fergal is hardly a Hollywood-typical victim, he is over six-foot tall, he is well-built, his voice is enormous, as is almost every feature on his face. Big smile, big arms, Fergal is the epitome of 'big'. Somewhere in the distance I hear an imaginary girlie whisper 'All the better to accuse you with'.

The gardai, were called to his house six times in the past ten years. Twice he called them himself, and on four occasions it was the neighbours who alerted them of fighting and smashing noises from Fergal's home. Two gardai arrived on one occasion and Fergal was visibly hurt. 'My forehead was bleeding, she had thrown my rugby trophy at me in one of her fits, I took six stitches'. He pulls back his fringe with a hand almost devoid of any nails, and displays a neat scar in the shape of an arrow above his right eyebrow. 'Cute isn't it? Don't girls go mad for scars?'. He laughs a little. 'Well, the gardai were great, they made a bee-line for her, sat her down, asked her if she was okay. Thankfully she didn't make up something on the spot about me hitting her, or I'm sure they would have carted me away. I just stood there, blood dripping down my face, I was thinking 'should I tell them to watch her while I go upstairs and get the kids?'" But that wasn't the atmosphere. They were completely on her side, asking her more than once if Fergal had hit her. It was pretty obvious it was Fergal that was hurt. 'They left as soon as they were happy enough that she wasn't hurt.' Towards the end she was becoming more abusive to the kids. That's when Fergal felt, finally, that enough was enough.

Five months ago, in a fit of bravery, Fergal packed up a bag for himself and the kids. He took them to his mother's house. But Moira found them, easily enough. She reported her children kidnapped and took out a barring order against Fergal. The district court awarded her a three month 'interim barring order' on account of her story that Fergal was abusive and had kidnapped her children. The gardai called to his mother's house, retrieved the children, and he has not seen them since.

Although both Fergal and Moira cried in court, her tears were more effective, as was her story. She said that the man she had married was violent, abusive and mean. Fergal said that he didn't want to leave his children in the house without him to protect them. The judge awarded Moira an extended barring order and decided that Fergal was to pay LLLL 80 a week maintenance. He was denied any access to his boys until a section 20 report was carried out, to discover whether granting him access would put the children in danger.

'I could just die' says Fergal, 'but I just keep focusing on them, the boys, I imagine how upset they must be, I'll keep myself alive until I can see them, Jesus, can you believe this?' he sits up in his chair, towering down at me. 'Can you believe that this kind of thing could even happen?, I don't believe it myself. There she stood telling all these lies, under oath, shur' it doesn't mean anything, does it? I'm fucked aren't I?' Fergal apologizes for his language and dives into a sympathetic explanation of his wife's behaviour. 'She wasn't loved at all as a child' he says. Her father was a bully, Fergal tells me that she had been abused as a child. 'When we got married he thanked me for taking her off his hands. I really felt so sorry for her. You know, she did try so hard, and she does love the boys in her own way. It's was more difficult for her than most women. It's just not in her, that mothering gene or whatever, It was hard for her to see how much the kids enjoyed being around me. How easy it was for me and them.'

Fergal is living with his parents. He is 29. His mother wonders why she brought her son up to be such a noble person. She feels somehow to blame. "When the beatings started, after the first baby was born, I thought it was her hormones, depression. I always urged him to stay, I remember saying 'you can take a little bit more, you can put up with a little bit more. I let my own baby get hurt, because he was the man'" She misses her grandchildren, and will fight through the courts to see them again. 'For now, all we can do is wait'. Fergal rests an enormous hand on his mother's narrow shoulder. She takes a deep breath. 'Those children are being denied a wonderful father, and grandparents, cousins, uncles, aunts. They are being robbed, and the courts have made a terrible mistake letting them stay with her'.

The section 20 report is due to back next month (May 2001). Fergal and his family wait hopefully for a positive result, granting sole custody of the three children and the family home to Fergal.

#### **UPDATE (June 2001)**

The section 20 report, as well as a sworn affidavit by Fergal's wife found that she was more abusive than her husband. The children remain in their family home, under the custody of their mother. Fergal has six hours of access to his boys every Saturday, and one weekend a month. Fergal claims he still loves his wife and hopes that she will go for counseling to help her control her temper and deal with her problems.



## WOMEN'S AID 'HEROINES' SPEAK UP FOR THE MEN

Erin Pizzey is *the* expert in domestic violence. She founded the first refuge in the world for women and children victims of domestic violence, Chiswick Women's Aid. Thirty years on, at an AMEN conference in Ireland, she said 'We were all caught up in a huge movement that said all problems - all family and relationship problems - were the fault of men. The tragedy is that we have wasted 30 years denigrating men'.

From a very early stage Pizzey noticed that male and female 'domestic terrorists' use different tactics to abuse. She noticed that women 'created a circle around their lives and their children. It was very hard for anyone to actually grasp what was going on. A woman would come in with legal documents - she would move from lawyer to lawyer - the law becomes the theatre. The appearances in court became a theatre. She was always seen as the victim. Going to lawyers offices, going to court, going to hospitals, going to social workers, going to probation officers - the circle around her in absolute chaos and she sat in the middle and orchestrated it'.

Shortly after setting up Chiswick Women's Aid, Pizzey recognised a need for a refuge for men. But the response to this was disappointing, and as Women's Aid grew in strength across the world, the issue of male-victimhood was largely ignored.

Advocates for Women's Aid in Ireland point out that, although they now receive substantial government funding (€8.4million this year), the services and facilities started from, and have mainly been provided by voluntary organisations.

Pizzey attempted to set up a voluntary organisation to help men, using the same formula that had been so successful for the women's cause. But the response for male victims was different: 'To my great surprise the men who were wealthy, and who were more than willing to put their hands in their pockets to help battered women and children, would not give a penny to help other men'.

For whatever reason, women who advocate men's rights seem to be more convincing than their male counterparts. Mary T. Cleary is the founding director of AMEN (a voluntary organisation for abused men). She says she is 'a beggar woman'. And to date her begging skills have managed to secure enough money to keep AMEN going. AMEN has an office in Navan. AMEN has three staff members, AMEN has bumper stickers and a web-site. They have carried out research into the world of male-victimhood, and have held two powerful conferences on the topic with speakers from around the world. Last year they received €20,000 through a Millennium Recognition Award. Mary Cleary claims she 'practically stalked Micheal Martin' after his refusal to meet with her, and managed to get €15,000 for the cause. Pale in comparison to the €8.4 million awarded this year alone to women's groups, but rather impressive considering the difficulties of promoting awareness for male victims.

# Fathers and the Law

‘What are Access Orders?’ shouts Peter Coleman, the crowd roar ‘Judges Lies’. It’s the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2001, Father’s Day. And the dispossessed dads have taken to the streets of Dublin in protest of Family Law.

Is a bad mother really better than a good father? Should we really have to choose? According to research in Washington D.C., denying a child of one parent is extremely harmful. They call it Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), and as we speak the research foundation, dedicated entirely to this subject, is coming up with reams of evidence of the types of damage inflicted to a child denied contact with one parent. Pamela S. Stuart Mills, the Executive Director of the PAS Research Foundation says that “Children are the most damaged, with the ‘lost’ or ‘hated’ parent coming in a close second. Between PAS and the latest statistics indicating that women are more likely to be domestically violent than men, is it just a matter of time before the Irish family courts begin changing the trend of automatically preferring the mother as custodial parent?”

‘We should be with our kids today’ says Peter, who has organized the protest march ‘we call this building, this so called family court the child snatching court’, with this he throws his access order into a steel plate in the middle of the street, and sets it on fire. Although a judge has awarded him access to his child, his ex-partner has refused to let him see his child. It would seem that, regardless of a court order, women across the country are breaking the law, and are not being punished.

Access Orders are like winning lotto tickets for many men. They are the best possible result of an emotional, grueling, often expensive legal process in the courts to convince a judge that they should be allowed to see their children. The times of access are specified, but not enforced. Henry says ‘I haven’t seen my daughter for over three years even though I have a court order stating my times. My ex-wife refuses to comply. So I made a complaint, it took three months to get a further hearing, my partner argued that my daughter doesn’t know me any more and it would be in her best interest to deny me any further contact with her.’

If a mother allows the father’s name be entered on the child’s birth cert., then he has what is called ‘guardianship’. This allows him access to medical and schooling information concerning his child. It does not automatically allow him to ever see his child. Visitation Rights and Court Orders allowing a father ‘access’ are not granted easily, a man must prove perfection.

Donogh McGowan, who has dealt with hundreds of family law cases confirms that mothers ‘generally get the kids’. A mother is enshrined within our Constitution as the custodial parent, the court cannot interfere with her arrangements. A father, however, is judged under the scrutiny of the law. ‘he must prove perfection, his house, his car, his dress, it’s all up for scrutiny’. This actually breaks the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says every child has the right “to know and be cared for by his or her parents” (Article 7, paragraph 1).

The family courts may be breaking a UN Convention, but who is to know? Because of the ‘in camera’ rule, there are no records kept of the hearings. A judge can decide

whatever he decides without any interference or public scrutiny. There is no stenographer, and the outcomes of cases are written in a way that it is impossible to determine the gender of the parent awarded custody of their children. In 1995, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, replying to a Council of Europe questionnaire on the rights of fathers, stated that “In cases where parents separate, custody can be awarded to either parent. In practice, it is far more common to be awarded to the mother than the father.”

And so the men march. They pick up their banners and they take to the streets. ‘Give us back our children’ they roar ‘Denying a child of a dad is child abuse’.

Although the fathers say they are petitioning for the rights of their children, they are also fighting for themselves. The Samaritans are inundated with calls from fathers who are depressed and sometimes suicidal over losing their children. Tell that to a judge and you might actually (literally) end up hanging yourself. Because, you see, fathers must *prove* themselves in court. Fathers must prove that they can care for their child. Mothers have automatic custody of their children. Fathers have only a right to apply for a court hearing to plead for access. By law, a man can be denied the sight of his own child.

The argument for the ‘in camera’ rule is that it protects the identity of those involved. The argument against the ‘in camera rule’ is that it stops any form of reform, at its worst it is compared to the closed doors of an oppressive wicked system who can freely abuse justice and citizens in absolute safety.

When Brian Hayes, a local Fine Gael T.D. for Dublin South, visited the Unmarried and Separated Fathers group, he agreed that it might be time to employ an independent researcher to study the family court hearings. It could be done, keeping the identities of the people involved out of the public domain. Because the first step is to prove that a bias exists. For now, there is actually no hard evidence of it.

## HER WORD AGAINST HIS

*'Man's most valuable trait is a judicious sense of what not to believe'*  
-Euripides, 412 BC

'You know it's the easiest thing in the world these days, to do away with a man, you say they hit you, they were abusive, the strongest accusation of course is that they sexually abused your children, that's a sure winner'. Mary T. Cleary of AMEN has seen some of the worst cases of male victims of domestic violence. But the worst thing a woman can do is to falsely accuse a man of child sexual abuse. It ruins their reputation, their earning potential, their self-esteem. It is the strongest weapon a woman can use to kill a man's chance to be a father.

It happens on a world-wide scale. Divorce is relatively new in Ireland, but in countries such as America, the business of false accusations is well established.

Thirteen years ago, in a letter to the New Jersey Law Journal, Thomas Kiernan (author of Citizen Murdoch) reported his experience attending four different seminars for wives contemplating divorce. He reported in all four cases, a female lawyer conducted the seminar and "recommended, with knowing winks and smirks, the 'advantages' of 'establishing or 'creating' a 'record' of spousal violence, whether true or not, prior to the filing of a divorce complaint (Thomas Kiernan in the "Voice of the Bar", the letter-to-the-editor section of the New Law Journal, April 21, 1988, p.6. Kiernan said "these events were advertised under such titles as 'Women's Strategies for Divorce' and 'Women: Know Your Rights In Divorce'".

The false accusation allows the woman to obtain the children - thus depriving children of dads and giving them to their mothers who are false accusers.

Kiernan was mostly astonished by "the number of women who smugly - indeed boastfully - announced that they had already sworn false or grossly exaggerated domestic-violence complaints against their hapless husbands, and that device worked! To add amazement to my astonishment, the lawyer-lecturers invariably congratulated the self-confessed miscreants".

Ireland is catching up. Sean's wife wanted him out of the house. He refused to leave. 'I was mother and father to my two kids' he says. 'She tried everything to get me out, but I wouldn't leave the kids, no way'. All she had to do was go down to her district court and got an ex-parte barring order, and he was out. No trial, no investigation, just a smart little piece of paper saying he was not to come within a certain distance of his children. 'Those things are given out to women like they were smarties' argue the men. 'And once you're out, that's it, it's back to the family courts to beg for some sort of access to your children'.

In March, three months after Sean was thrown out of his home, he was still in shock. His wife had accused him of sexually abusing his daughter. But he was optimistic. 'It ludicrous, a judge will see that a mother who thinks her husband has molested her child would not react by giving the child to him to put to bed. She wouldn't leave the child in his care afterwards. A judge will see that'. The judge ordered a section 20 report, which is a report compiled of various interviews and investigations into the welfare of a child. It carried out by social workers and child psychologists. Pressures on staff and resources within social welfare account for the long waiting lists, but Sean was lucky. He called into the offices of St. Clare's to ask if there was anything he could do to speed up the process. In an unusual move, the social workers agreed to

begin the investigation there and then by interviewing him. While the report was being compiled, Sean volunteered to comply with an extended barring order until his case is back up in the courts. Ray Kelly of Unmarried and Separated Fathers of Ireland (USFI) argues that 'when you walk out of the house you are abandoning the children'. Sean looks blankly back at him 'what was I supposed to do?'. He couldn't stay, he had been legally barred from being anywhere near his children since his wife got an ex-parte barring order. 'I want to show that I'm complying with all the rules' says Sean.

Sean was as optimistic as ever. He believed that the social workers had listened to him, and could clearly see that he was innocent. He was quite sure that the children's input into the investigation would clear him. In June, the section 20 report was complete. The findings were inconclusive.

In a move that sent the entire membership of USFI into outrage, Sean also agreed to go to 'sex offenders counseling'. His solicitor advised it, and Sean hopes that this will strengthen his case. After the disappointment of the section 20 report coming out inconclusive, Sean still clings on to a belief that, if he complies with everything, he will eventually be found innocent of the allegations. The men in the group think that going to the counseling is an admission of guilt, 'what's the judge going to think?' asks Ray Kelly, visibly frustrated with Sean's blind trust. Sean is jumping through every hoop he is shown. But where will this lead him? Sean says he is doing the right thing. With the idea of full custody a long forgotten dream, all he can hope for now is some sort of access. Of course, it is improbable that he will ever have over-night access. Maybe he could settle for a couple of hours a week. If he's lucky.

On a recent (supervised) visit his daughter told him 'we know mom doesn't want you home, she told us 'no way you'll ever be allowed home' 'But it's okay mom will soon get sick of us and we'll come and live with you'. His six year old son is currently trying to invent a 'brain-waver', so he can make the judge let daddy back into the house.

'I would rather see ten fathers wrongly accused than one child sent back into what could be an abusive situation' Court Psychologist, Auckland, 1989. (source: p. 107 First Do No Harm, The Sexual Abuse Industry, Felicity Goodyear-Smith)

Recent years have seen a tidal wave of sex scandals concerning children. The words 'paedophile, child molester, rape, incest' have seeped into everyday life. Children are precious, they are small, vulnerable and trusting. Those who abuse children are the most despised class of criminal. What about those who *might* be child molesters, fathers who *could very well* have abused their children? Do we lock them up too, just in case? Or do we give them unrestrained, unsupervised access to the children they might harm? This is the dilemma of any judge who must decide one way or the other. The mother says the father was abusive, the mother says she fears for the safety of her child. The father is begging for access. The investigation into child abuse is inconclusive. Nobody knows for sure.

# From the Mouths of Babes

## False Child Abuse Scandals

Dr. Moira Woods is currently awaiting the verdict of an Inquiry into 60 counts of alleged professional misconduct in her role as the senior doctor in the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit at the Rotunda Hospital (1987-1996). The controversy involves 11 children from five families, who claim that Dr. Woods misdiagnosed sexual abuse.

There seems to have been a wave of child sexual abuse scandals around the world in the 1980's. Studies by Ralph Underwager and Hollida Wakefield from 1989-1991 concluded that 60% of the interviewing behaviors of trained examiners in the field of child sexual abuse cases were seriously flawed. They involved potentially leading questions, closed questions (yes/no answers). Examining tapes of interviews (audio and visual), statements, transcripts and psychological reports in America and other Western countries, they found that officials assuming that abuse has certainly happened certainly bias the interview and the resulting outcome. The questionable methods over-enthusiastic interviewers are called 'priming'. The inquiry into Dr. Woods' practice included allegations that she had orchestrated flawed methods of 'priming' the children in her interviews with them.

Examples of questionable methods used in the interviewing of children are not restricted to Ireland. Confusion has surrounded the issue of child sexual abuse in cases of misdiagnoses, and mass-hysteria regarding the safety of children on a world-wide scale. The mid-late eighties seems to have been a particularly bad time for false allegations, with a growing social consciousness and mass publicising of child abuse cases.

In April 1985, a four year old boy was having his temperature taken rectally by a nurse. He commented that his preschool teacher in The Wee Day Care Nursery, New Jersey did the same thing at nap time. He was referring to the fact that Kelly Michaels, the teacher's aide, took his temperature at preschool, with a plastic strip placed on his forehead. However, the conversation prompted the boy's mother to bring him to the Child Abuse Unit. He also named two other boys who had their temperatures taken. They were brought in for questioning, and allegations escalated. Kelly Michaels was arrested in May 1985. She was alleged to have sexually abused all of the fifty-one children who had passed through her care.

The jury was asked to ignore the inconsistencies of the interviews including one child claiming Kelly had been turned him into a mouse for a while. Eileen Tracy, a child abuse expert, explained that the way that the children denied being abused at first, giving 'no, no, no' answers was proof of the 'suppression phase'. Despite the evidence of defense psychologist Ralph Underwager, who explained that the ongoing interviewing trains the child to give the answers expected of them, Kelly was found guilty of 115 counts of sexual abuse against twenty children. (The jury found her not guilty of the very charge that provoked the entire investigation - anally penetrating the little boy whose temperature she had taken.) Kelly's appeal found that the evidence did not support her conviction, and she was freed from prison in 1993.

The Virginia McMartin Preschool, California, (1984) is well-known scandal which escalated into one of the macro-cases of child-sex-abuse allegations in the Western World. Peggy Buckley, owner of the pre-school, was charged with ritualistic abuse of

360 children over 5 years. However, the only evidence was children's 'disclosure interviews' (an analysis of the video tapes show very clearly how these children were systematically manipulated to admit abuse by bribes, threats and tricks.) The trial cost \$15 million, and all the defendants were acquitted. But by this stage, Ray Buckley (Peggy's son) had spent 5 years in jail, Peggy and her daughter had been jailed for 2 years awaiting their trial.

Other examples of similar stories can be found around the world, Jordan Minnesota (1983), Oude Pekela, the Netherlands (1988), The Orkney Islands (1990), Rochdale, Manchester (1990). These cases illustrate how easy it is to believe a false accusation. In a society swamped with terrible stories of child sexual abuse, it is a natural reaction for a caring parent to develop a very sensitive radar-system armed with super-sensitive alarm-bells. Mistakes may be inevitable, with innocent victims being accused of child abuse. It is the responsibility of the experts, in whom the courts and the public trust, to determine the facts.

# ADVICE TO A YOUNG MOTHER FALLEN OUT OF LOVE

(It's *your* size that matters)

How does a small country defeat its oppressor? Terrorist tactics. Smaller dogs are more aggressive than big ones. If men are physically stronger, then women are cuter. And if there is a war of the sexes going on, then women are winning. At least if the battle is being fought by parents, mothers have all the weaponry and fathers are unarmed. If the child is the country then they are in trouble. The scars on the landscape of a war zone are ugly. Banished fathers and estranged paternal relations fade in the memory of the child like the scattered corpses of forgotten soldiers rotting in the killing fields. And we if rely on the victors to write history, then mothers are heroes and fathers are nothing more than obstacles to heroism.

The government made it easy, and the law is on your side. So is Hollywood, advertising companies, and society in general.

Young mothers are supported. Fathers are becoming redundant. The help is there - lone parents allowance, medical card, rent allowance, you can still work a twenty hour week, without being taxed. Council houses, or a private house for maybe thirty pounds. Why should you have someone around if you can still get maintenance from them? That's on top of pram allowance, cot allowance, book allowance, uniform allowance, free food, washing machine. It's made so easy.

The modern man shares child-rearing responsibilities. He changes nappies, he makes bottles, he hugs, he cries and he loves his children. But when the modern woman decides that she can survive quite well without a man thank you very much, what happens to the dispossessed dad? All of a sudden he is a different creature. No longer can he kiss his child (my God, no!), and if he wants to see his baby, is he better off carrying the child around in an unchanged nappy all day, for fear of any abuse allegations that might be made. Or is that what supervised access is for? Hand your daughter over mister, I'll do that, never mind your cribbing, did it a hundred times before you say?, modern man you say? *Your* child, you say. (mmm, you mean you supplied the sperm is it? Well done!) Yes, well, it didn't work out did it? I mean it's obviously *your* fault.

BONUS: If you get your man so depressed that he's suicidal, then you can use that against him in court.