

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Unmasking the Scourge of Sexual Abuse in the U.S. Virgin Islands: A Closer Look

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Over the past twelve months, the [Consortium](#) has [reported](#) on at least 9 [criminal](#) matters [involving](#) the [alleged](#) sexual [abuse](#) of [minors](#) in the US Virgin Islands, four of which occurred this year alone. In one of the cases [three men](#) were arrested, accused of preying on the same 13-year old girl multiple times over several months.

This shocking statistic only serves to shed light on the extent of sex crimes against minor children, which by their nature are understood to be underreported to law enforcement.

Having published in recent weeks and months these reports containing disturbing allegations of predatory behavior against vulnerable children and teens in the territory,

Consortium journalists wanted a better understanding of the nature of this type of crime.

We spoke to Dr. Sheena Walker, a licensed clinical psychologist based on St. Thomas, about some of the prevailing perceptions and misconceptions about this scourge on the community.

A common thread in several of the matters on which we reported was the idea — suggested by some of the suspects and repeated even by some commenters on the articles that are published — that the minors involved have consented, either through word or deed, to the sexual activity that has allegedly taken place.

Dr. Walker says that laws banning adults from having sexual contact with minors are based on a scientific understanding of human brain development, which hold that people below a certain age are not fully capable of coming to rational conclusions about consequential decisions for their lives.

“The prefrontal cortex is still developing within the brains of minors and will not be fully developed until the age of 26; therefore, this leaves minors very susceptible to manipulation and falling victim,” Dr. Walker explained. “While there may be situations where the minor appears or seems willing and even initiates the sexual encounter, it is important to remember that minors are not capable of fully understanding the consequences of their actions.”

The responsibility always lies with the adult, Dr. Walker argues. “There is no grey area when it comes to sexual activity between adults and minors. It is illegal and unethical, regardless of whether the minor appears to be willing.”

It is this cognitive underdevelopment, Dr. Walker says, that sometimes leads minors to act in ways that are at first glance at odds with the idea of being the victim of sexual abuse. In one matter that recently came before the courts, the child in question reportedly initiated contact with her suspected abuser even as she was identifying him and others in a photo line-up. Dr. Walker explained that people observing this behavior should not jump to conclusions, especially given the legal and scientific view that children are incapable of consenting to sexual activity.

“Minors who have experienced sexual abuse may have difficulty processing their emotions and may feel conflicted about their abuser. The abuser may have established a relationship of trust or emotional dependence with the minor, which can make it difficult for the minor to come to terms with what has happened. This can sometimes lead to the minor engaging in behaviors that seem to be contradictory, such as making overtures to the abuser,” Dr. Walker said.

Societal attitudes and taboos surrounding sex, particularly for women, can lead to a less than optimal response to survivors of sexual abuse, even when it is perpetrated against minors. During the [sentencing hearing](#) of John Jackson, the former Olympic boxer convicted of sexually abusing multiple teen girls, the mother of one of his victims admitted in court, “I said some really bad things to her....I owe my daughter the biggest apology that I can.”

Dr. Walker says that parents, instead of being a source of strength and support during a traumatic time for their children, can sometimes find it difficult to navigate a frightening,

stressful situation.

“Parents may feel a sense of disbelief or denial when their child discloses sexual abuse,” Dr. Walker said. “They may find it difficult to accept that someone they know and trust, or even a stranger, could have perpetrated such an act. This can lead to a delay in taking appropriate action to protect the child and seek justice.”

Misplaced guilt and shame can also impact caregivers. “Parents may also feel guilty or responsible for the abuse, even if they had no direct involvement. They may feel that they could have done more to prevent the abuse or that they failed to protect their child adequately,” Dr. Walker explained. “This can lead to feelings of shame or inadequacy, which may cause the parent to react negatively or withdraw emotionally.”

As society seeks to root out the scourge of sexual predation in the community, especially against minors, Dr. Walker argues that it is imperative to remember that children are especially in need of our care and protection. “Children who have experienced sexual abuse need a safe and supportive environment in which to heal and recover.”