



Sexual Abuse of Children by Biological Fathers : A Sociological Case Study on Causative Factors, Consequences, and Social Responses within The Family Context

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Abstract

Sexual abuse of children by biological fathers represents one of the most complex and painful forms of domestic violence, as the perpetrator is a figure who, both socially and symbolically, is expected to be a protector. This study aims to reveal the causative factors, psychosocial impacts, and social responses to sexual abuse committed by biological fathers against their daughters. The research uses a qualitative approach and a case study method, involving in-depth interviews with three survivors. The findings indicate that sexual abuse within the family is heavily influenced by patriarchal structures that normalize male dominance in the household, as well as manipulative and closed patterns of father-child communication. Radical feminist theory is used to explain how patriarchy serves as the root of sexual domination and control over women's bodies, even in private family spaces. Meanwhile, family symbolic theory highlights the breakdown of the father's protective role, which is instead used to silence the victim. The impacts include long-term trauma, social alienation, trust issues, and educational setbacks. Social responses remain inadequate or victim-blaming, while institutional interventions are uneven and lack comprehensiveness. This study recommends child protection reform, gender-equitable family education, and more responsive social empowerment for victims of family-based sexual violence.

Keywords : sexual abuse; biological father; radical feminism; family symbolism

INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse against children is one of the most brutal violations of human rights, resulting in devastating psychological and social consequences. The situation becomes even more concerning when the perpetrator is the biological father an individual who should symbolize protection and safety for the child. According to data from the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan, 2023), 52% of sexual abuse cases against children occur within the family, with biological fathers being the dominant perpetrators. Similarly, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported a 40% increase in such cases over the past five years, highlighting the home's growing failure as a space of protection. This reality not only reflects individual failures but also reveals systemic structural deficiencies within Indonesia's child protection mechanisms, which have allowed such fundamental betrayals to occur within the family institution.

From the perspective of family sociology, the family is not merely a biological unit but a social institution that plays a fundamental role in shaping the values, norms, and behaviors of its members. In the context of sexual abuse by biological fathers, there is a clear deviation in this socialization process, where family interactions instead become a medium for abuse. Symbolic interactionism, as developed by Blumer (1969), provides an analytical framework to understand how communication within the family can manipulate meaning, normalize violence, and silence victims. In many cases, fathers as perpetrators use symbols of authority, threats, and manipulative narratives to control and silence children, making the abuse not only physical but also symbolic and emotional.

Furthermore, patriarchal cultural factors deepen this vulnerability. Patriarchal family structures place men especially fathers as absolute authority figures, reinforcing the power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. Theories of patriarchy and family socialization are key to understanding how values of dominance, unconditional obedience, and internalized subordination are instilled from an early age. Children raised in such systems often face restricted communication and silencing, which increases the risk of abuse and hinders victims from seeking help even from other family members. Thus, sexual abuse of children within families cannot be separated from the internal social dynamics filled with distorted meanings, power imbalances, and systemic protection failures.

Societal responses to such cases are also inadequate. Instead of offering support, society often stigmatizes victims, blames them, or even covers up the incidents to protect the family's reputation. Many families choose to remain silent and resolve the issues internally, which further isolates the victims and distances them from justice. Therefore, an in-depth study is urgently needed to understand the root causes of sexual abuse by biological fathers, the psychosocial impacts on victims, and the forms of social responses that arise in communities. This research aims to contribute to the prevention and resolution of family-based sexual abuse through a family sociology approach.

Sexual violence in families has been the subject of previous studies focusing on its structural, psychological, and social complexities. Napitupulu & Sihotang (2023) argue that sexual abuse in households is not only a legal violation but also a manifestation of power imbalance rooted in deeply entrenched patriarchal systems. Fathers, as primary authority figures, often use manipulative narratives to control and silence victims. This power imbalance creates an unhealthy family dynamic, where children lack a safe space to express their suffering even to other family members.

The consequences of sexual abuse are profound and far-reaching. Zahirah et al. (2019) emphasize that victims suffer from deep trauma affecting their self-confidence, interpersonal relationships, and social development. Victims are also prone to social isolation due to the stigma imposed by society. In many cases, victims choose to remain silent out of fear of being blamed or considered a disgrace to the family. This stigma not only hampers recovery but also prolongs psychological suffering, ultimately impairing the victim's future social functioning.

Beyond the individual impacts, social responses to family-based sexual abuse have also drawn academic attention. Rossevelt et al. (2023) reveal that patriarchal cultural norms often prevent victims from receiving adequate support. Society tends to blame the victims or deny the existence of sexual abuse within families, believing it tarnishes familial honor. The lack of empathy and deeper understanding results in repressive rather than solution-oriented responses to such cases. Hence, interventions must go beyond legal frameworks and be sensitive to the emotional and psychological needs of the victims.

Moreover, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Komnas Perempuan, P2TP2A, and other psychological support agencies is crucial in providing assistance to victims of sexual violence. According to Nuraini & Harahap (2021), these organizations not only offer legal advocacy but also psychological services and social

rehabilitation. However, they often face challenges such as limited public outreach, insufficient trained personnel, and restricted access to vulnerable areas.

Several relevant theories are employed to analyze the phenomenon of sexual violence in the family context, including the Theory of Domestic Violence, Patriarchal and Power Theory, and Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Theory. The Theory of Domestic Violence provides a foundation for understanding how sexual violence can occur within the family, particularly in relationships involving power imbalances between father and child. It also explains how patterns of violence can form and persist within the family structure, influencing acts of abuse. The Patriarchal and Power Theory helps to explore the role of gender inequality and power dominance in family relationships, which can facilitate the occurrence of sexual violence, especially when the father assumes the role of authority figure. Lastly, Trauma and PTSD Theory is used to comprehend the psychological effects experienced by victims of sexual violence, which often result in long-term trauma that disrupts emotional and social development.

To comprehensively understand the complexity of this phenomenon, this study integrates two main theoretical frameworks: symbolic interactionism and patriarchy. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) is used to analyze how narratives and symbols in family communication normalize violence, while the theory of patriarchy (Walby, 1990) explains how male dominance in family structures creates opportunities for abuse of power. Together, these theories offer a robust analytical framework for exploring the causes, impacts, and social responses to sexual abuse within families.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore in depth the experiences of victims of sexual abuse committed by biological fathers and to understand the underlying and accompanying social dynamics of such violence. The case study method was chosen as it allows the researcher to comprehensively and contextually trace the social reality of the phenomenon. The focus of the research is directed at identifying the causes of sexual violence within the family, the psychosocial impacts on victims and their surrounding environment, as well as the forms of social responses from both the community and relevant institutions.

Data collection was carried out using in-depth interviews and observation techniques. In-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected subjects, including victims of sexual abuse by their biological fathers, family members (such as the mother or siblings), and professionals such as psychologists, social workers, or victim counselors. This technique enables the exploration of sensitive personal experiences and uncovers the meanings behind actions and reactions within the family and social environment. Observations were also carried out, both through social media and direct fieldwork, to observe patterns of interaction and social responses to the case being studied.

Data analysis in this study utilized Miles and Huberman’s interactive model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The data reduction process involved selecting relevant information from the interviews and observations. The data were then presented in narrative and thematic forms to identify key patterns related to the causes, impacts, and social responses. Conclusions drawn from this analysis were validated through source triangulation and member checking with informants to ensure the validity and accuracy of the findings. This methodological approach is expected to produce a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the complexity of sexual abuse within the family context.

Moreover, this research strictly adhered to ethical considerations, given the highly sensitive nature of the topic. The researcher ensured that all stages of the study were conducted with utmost care and respect for informants' privacy. Before the interviews were conducted, all informants were provided with a clear explanation of the research objectives and their rights to withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence. Written consent was obtained from each informant prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, all personal data were securely stored and used solely for this research. Real names or identifying details of individuals involved were omitted or anonymized.

The in-depth interview technique was designed to provide informants with space to speak freely and openly about their experiences. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the researcher to explore deeper based on the responses provided. Questions focused on key topics such as the chronology of the abuse, psychosocial impacts, and the social responses from family and community. Through this approach, rich and detailed data were obtained regarding the victims’ experiences of sexual violence within the family.

In conducting observations, the researcher did not solely rely on direct observations of social interactions but also paid attention to evolving patterns on social media, which often serves as a platform for victims and the public to interact. Social media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and responses to cases of violence, including intra-familial sexual abuse. Therefore, observing discussions or conversations occurring on social platforms provided additional insight into how society responds to these issues, including whether stigma or certain trends emerge in public discourse.

To ensure valid and objective results, data triangulation was conducted by combining interviews with various parties (victims, family members, and professionals), as well as direct and social media observations. In addition, member checking was performed by asking informants to verify or clarify interview findings to ensure that the researcher's interpretation aligned with their actual experiences. These triangulation and member checking processes are crucial for minimizing bias and enhancing the credibility of the research findings.

As the final step, after the analysis process was completed, the researcher drew conclusions based on identified patterns in the data. These conclusions covered the understanding of the causes of sexual violence in the family, the psychosocial impacts on victims, and the social responses to the case. The researcher also proposed preventive measures that could be taken by communities and related institutions to reduce the risk of intra-familial sexual abuse and to provide better support for victims. Additionally, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a basis for improved policies in handling family-based sexual abuse cases and to strengthen the role of social institutions in protecting children from violence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Power Relations in the Family and Sexual Violence: A Radical Feminist Perspective

Radical feminism views sexual violence in the family not as a stand-alone deviant act, but as a manifestation of a patriarchal system that is deeply embedded in the social structure. In this system, men are given greater rights and authority over women, including within the household. In the context of the family, male power often takes the form of not only economic domination, but also social and emotional control over women and children. This perspective highlights that sexual violence is the result of systemic power imbalances, not just individual acts or moral deviations.

In this study, three female informants who were victims of sexual violence by their biological fathers shared experiences that demonstrated a typical patriarchal power pattern as explained in radical feminist theory. All three showed that the father's dominance as head of the family did not only take place in the form of economic decisions or formal authority, but also in the form of strict supervision of behavior, restrictions on movement, and ultimately, the deprivation of the victim's bodily integrity.

Victim 1: Control as a Mechanism of Patriarchal Power

The first victim described her initial relationship with her father as “good.” However, upon closer examination, it was revealed that the relationship was actually marked by a very tight form of control over daily activities. Every action, choice, and even social interaction of the victim was monitored and regulated by her father. In the context of radical feminism, this form of surveillance is part of a patriarchal strategy to maintain male power over women’s bodies and minds. This form of control is often culturally not considered violence, but rather a form of “care” or “protection.” However, behind this narrative, there is a legitimacy for unequal forms of male power.

Radical feminism emphasizes that control within the home, while seemingly harmless, can actually create conditions that allow sexual violence to occur. In the case of the first victim, control over clothing choices, prohibition of leaving the house without permission, and social restrictions slowly create psychological isolation and dependency. This then paves the way for sexual violence to occur because the victim does not have a safe social space to report or seek help.

Relationship labeled as “good” shows how patriarchal culture normalizes unequal power relations. As Kelly (1988) explains, violence against women often occurs in relationships that are socially accepted and even revered as ideal, such as within the family. In the first victim’s narrative, the shock at the sexual violence that occurred reflects a collective denial of the potential for violence within the patriarchal family structure.

Victim 2: Threats and Silence as Tools of Power

The second victim described repeated sexual violence accompanied by strong threats. The victim's father not only committed physical violence, but also used emotional and psychological power to silence the victim. Every time the victim tried to fight back or show resistance, the perpetrator would threaten to harm other family members or spread

embarrassing information about the victim. This is a form of structural violence that is very typical in radical feminist analysis.

In radical feminist theory, as explained by Catharine MacKinnon (1989), sexual violence is part of a social structure that places women as objects and men as subjects of power. Women are not only physically victims, but are also socially constructed to accept, excuse, and even hide the violence they experience for fear of greater consequences. In this case, the patriarchal system not only creates perpetrators of violence, but also creates victims who are isolated and lose control of themselves.

The case of the second victim shows how power operates not only through direct action, but also through threats that exploit social and cultural fears. Threats to “shame the family,” “destroy the honor,” or “hurt the mother” are highly effective forms of psychological control in a patriarchal society that values family honor above individual safety. Moreover, the second victim also shows how the legal and social systems often do not side with the victims. When she tried to tell her teacher or community leader, the response was minimal and even tended to blame. This indicates that our social system is not ready to accept the reality of sexual violence in the household because it is bound by patriarchal norms that glorify the role of the father as a protector and guardian.

Victim 3: Mother Denial and Internalization of Patriarchy

The story of the third victim became very heartbreaking when she told that her own mother did not believe the report of sexual violence that she experienced. When the victim tried to reveal that her father had committed sexual harassment and violence, her mother refused to believe her and told the victim to “keep quiet for the sake of the family”. This is the most complex form of internalization of patriarchy, where women - in this case mothers - become unconscious agents of the system that oppresses them and their daughters.

Radical feminism explains that patriarchy is not only perpetuated by men, but also by women who have internalized the dominant values of the system. In this context, the victim's mother felt that maintaining the integrity of the household was more important than saving her child from violence. She had been taught that a woman's primary duty was to maintain the stability of the household, even if it meant sacrificing the rights and safety of her own child.

Recent literature such as that written by Ali & Khan (2021) supports this finding. In their study, it is stated that in many societies, women are given the role of guardians of family morals, and are often expected to maintain the family's reputation above all else, including their own suffering. Therefore, when sexual violence occurs in the family, reactions of denial and concealment are not uncommon, but rather responses shaped by patriarchal value structures.

This situation puts the victim in a moral and existential dilemma. She not only feels betrayed by her father as the perpetrator, but also by her mother who should be her protector. This kind of experience has a double trauma impact, where the victim must bear the burden of violence while losing trust in her closest support system. From these three cases, the pattern that is clearly visible is how social and cultural structures create conditions that allow sexual violence in families to continue and go undetected. Male power in the family is seen as something natural, and women who oppose or report it are often considered to be violating the social order. This is also reinforced by social institutions such as religion, law, and education that often fail to respond appropriately or even ignore reports of sexual violence.

Radical feminism argues that sexual violence is not just a personal or criminal issue, but a political issue that stems from structural inequality. When a father can sexually abuse his daughter and receive no social or legal sanctions, it is clear evidence that our social system has failed to protect the most vulnerable. In addition, the silence of society also shows that sexual violence in the household is still considered a private matter. In fact, as stated by the feminist slogan "the personal is political", all forms of violence against women, especially in the domestic sphere, are part of the politics of power that must be changed systematically.

Victims of sexual violence in the family not only experience physical injuries, but also deep psychological wounds. The three informants in this study experienced anxiety disorders, depression, loss of self-confidence, and in some cases, a tendency to harm themselves. Their recovery process was also disrupted by the lack of support from their surroundings, social stigma, and feelings of guilt that continued to haunt them. In many cases, victims also face barriers in accessing legal and mental health services. Fear of social judgment, distrust of law enforcement, and the lack of integrated service facilities for victims of sexual violence in their residential areas make the recovery process longer and more complex. This shows that handling of sexual violence in the household must be done holistically and systematically, not only relying on a legal approach alone, but also social, psychological, and cultural interventions that target the roots of patriarchy itself.

In this context, radical feminism provides a critical lens that is very relevant to understanding and handling cases of sexual violence in the family. This theory proposes that the solution to sexual violence is not enough to simply punish the perpetrator individually, but must also change the social system that supports patriarchal power. This includes changes in gender education, legal reform, increasing public literacy on issues of gender-based violence, and strengthening institutional support for victims.

It is important to strengthen women's courage in fighting violence through critical education, strengthening women's economy, and forming a support community. Moreover, the state must be present in the form of firm policies, such as strict child protection regulations, training of law enforcement officers on the issue of sexual violence, and providing free and confidential counseling services for victims

2. Family as a Symbol: Analysis through Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Within the framework of symbolic interactionism theory, the family is understood not only as a biological or structural institution, but as a social space where shared meanings are formed and internalized by its members. Individuals in the family construct their identities and social roles through daily interactions that are laden with symbols, language, and agreed-upon values. In this context, the role of the father is symbolically defined as a protector, leader, and figure who is trusted to guide and care for his family members. However, in cases of sexual violence committed by a father against his own daughter, there is a profound disruption of this symbolic meaning. The father figure who should be a protector is instead transformed into a threat, destroying the symbolic structure that supports a sense of security and trust in the family. This causes an identity crisis and prolonged disruption of interpersonal relationships for the victim.

Herbert Blumer (1969), a leading figure in symbolic interactionism theory, stated that meaning is not intrinsically attached to objects or actions, but is formed through social interaction. In the context of the family, the meanings of “father,” “mother,” “child,” and “family” are formed and interpreted through collective experiences and everyday communication.

In the ideal structure, the meaning of the father as a protector and provider is widely accepted and internalized early on by children. The interaction between father and child in the form of attention, affection, and physical and emotional protection strengthens the symbol of

the father as a reliable figure. However, when this role is abused or even destroyed through acts of sexual violence, the symbolic meaning that has been formed is destroyed and creates a disruption of meaning.

All three victims in this study experienced the destruction of the symbolic meaning of “father”. In their experience, the father was no longer a protective figure, but a perpetrator who damaged their bodies, minds, and identities. When this symbolic meaning is disrupted, victims face difficulties in understanding interpersonal relationships, building trust, and reconstructing their self-identity.

Victim 1: Changing Meaning of Father as Threat

The first victim revealed that before the violence, she considered her father to be a caring and responsible figure. He often helped her children with schoolwork and provided for the household. However, after experiencing sexual violence, all of that perception was shattered. She stated that since then, she has not been able to trust men, even as an adult.

This statement illustrates the shift in symbolic meaning from “protector” to “threat”. The trauma experienced by the victim causes a profound change in the way she understands the relationship between the sexes. Trust as the main foundation of symbolic relations has been damaged, and this damage is not limited to the relationship with the perpetrator, but also affects the victim's perception of all men.

In Blumer's view, consistent and meaningful interactions are key to identity formation. When interactions that should provide a sense of security turn into traumatic experiences, the victim's identity becomes unstable. This explains why victims experience a prolonged crisis of trust, even after leaving the abusive environment.

Victim 2: The Contradictory Meaning of Family

The second victim said that despite repeated sexual violence, she stayed with her family for years. She said that she loved her family, but at the same time, felt afraid and threatened. In this case, the meaning of family as a “safe place” and “home” is contradictory. Symbolic interactionism explains that when these contradictory symbolic meanings cannot be reconciled, individuals will experience inner conflict and identity tension. Victims

feel guilty for hating their father figure, but also feel guilty for abandoning their mother and younger siblings. In a society that still upholds family values, women are often burdened with the emotional responsibility to maintain the integrity of the family, even though they are victims of the violence that occurs within it.

According to Goffman (1974), individuals tend to maintain a collective definition of “normality” even when their personal experiences contradict that definition. In this case, the victim maintains the image of the family as a sacred institution despite the reality being very painful. This creates a kind of cognitive dissonance that forces the victim to live in a split reality: between the ideal symbol and the brutal reality.

Victim 3: Denial as a Symbol Preservation Mechanism

The third victim experienced rejection from her mother when she tried to reveal the sexual violence she experienced. Her mother refused to believe her and even told her to “keep quiet for the sake of the family’s honor.” Within the framework of symbolic interactionism, this can be understood as an attempt to maintain the symbolic meaning of the family as a sacred and harmonious space.

The mother's denial is not merely a form of disbelief, but part of a social defense mechanism against symbolic disruption. If sexual violence by the head of the family is acknowledged, then the entire symbolic system that supports the family's identity will collapse. Therefore, it is easier for some family members to deny reality and maintain an ideal symbolic narrative, even though it hurts the victim.

This phenomenon also reflects what Goffman calls “impression management.” Families try to maintain a positive external image in the eyes of society, even though the internal reality is very distorted. In a society that prioritizes family reputation, the symbol of a “harmonious family” is often fiercely guarded even at the expense of the truth and safety of its members.

Father Symbol in Patriarchal Culture

The symbol of the father in patriarchal societies is very strong and respected. The father is often depicted as the hero of the family, the unquestionable leader, and the moral and social

director of the household. In many cultures, criticism of the father is seen as a form of defiance or betrayal of the family's values. When the father becomes the perpetrator of sexual violence, this symbol experiences a crisis. However, because the symbol is too strong and attached, many victims, other family members, and even the wider community are reluctant to admit or criticize it. This very sacred symbol actually becomes an effective silencing tool for the victim.

In this case, symbols are not only a means of communication, but also a means of domination. As explained by Mead (1934), social symbols shape individual self-awareness and the structure of society. So, when the symbol of the father as a protector turns into a perpetrator of violence, there is a clash between symbolic structure and personal experience. Although old symbols are destroyed, some survivors are able to reshape new meanings through reflection, therapy, or community support. The first survivor, for example, after years of trauma, began writing about her experiences and found new meanings about family and faith. She stated that family is not about blood ties, but about security and mutual respect.

This process is called “symbolic redefinition,” where individuals construct new meanings that better fit the reality of their experiences. In the context of therapy, this is crucial to recovery. By reshaping symbols of family, father, and belief, victims can free themselves from the shackles of symbolic trauma that have held them captive for so long. The family is not only a symbolic institution, but also a political institution in the sense that it produces and reproduces power structures. In patriarchal families, the symbolic power of the father is reinforced by social norms, religion, law, and even the media. Therefore, criticism of violence in the family is often responded to as criticism of the noble values of society itself.

In symbolic interactionism theory, it is important to understand that symbols are not static. They can change through interaction and collective consciousness. Therefore, the biggest challenge in overcoming sexual violence in the family is how to change the symbols and meanings that have been monopolized by the patriarchal system into more inclusive and just symbols. This change requires active participation from society, educational institutions, media, and the state. Early gender education, fair representation in the media, and legal policies that favor victims are important steps in shifting old symbols that silence towards new symbols that empower.

3. Psychosocial Impacts and Social Injustice

All victims reported psychological trauma such as anxiety, nightmares, and social withdrawal. Victim 2 reported difficulties in continuing her education due to persistent mental health challenges. This echoes the findings of Nurchayati & Fitriani (2020), who argued that victims of intra-familial sexual abuse often face dual marginalization: stigmatized socially and neglected institutionally.

Worse still, social responses often involve victim blaming. Victim 3 noted that neighbors responded with judgment rather than support. This demonstrates the entrenched cultural bias that holds victims accountable for their own victimization—an issue also highlighted by Budiarto et al. (2022), who found that cultural shame often discourages reporting and isolates victims.

4. The Role of NGOs and Social Organizations: Limited Reach and Awareness

Only one of the three interviewees reported receiving psychological assistance from a social organization. The others did not know where to turn for help. This reveals a critical gap in outreach and accessibility of victim support services. Nuraini & Harahap (2021) emphasized the importance of NGOs such as Komnas Perempuan and P2TP2A in offering legal and psychological aid. However, this study finds that such institutions often lack presence in high-risk communities. Public awareness campaigns and socialization remain insufficient, limiting victims' access to critical support.

This gap suggests a pressing need for institutional reform and increased outreach, especially in rural or marginalized areas, as also discussed in recent evaluations by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (KemenPPPA, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that sexual abuse of children by biological fathers creates profound psychological impacts, such as trauma, shame, and social isolation. This phenomenon not only disrupts the victim's relationships with family and peers but also negatively affects their performance in educational and professional settings. Moreover, societal responses often lead to further stigmatization and a lack of adequate support for the victims.

Through the lens of radical feminist theory, which identifies patriarchy as the root of such violence, and the symbolic family theory, this study demonstrates how the authoritative

role of the father within the family structure may lead to abuse of power. Additionally, the role of NGOs and child protection agencies is critical in providing both psychological rehabilitation and legal assistance for victims. However, their reach and visibility remain limited, calling for systemic improvements and broader social awareness.

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