

Double standard can add to pain of abuse

■ Although people often treat molestation of young men by women as a joke, victims say it can do long-term damage

By Robert Tanner
ASSOCIATED PRESS

A 17-year-old girl in upstate New York is forced into sex by a male teacher. Instead of sympathy, the student gets harassed for causing trouble for a popular teacher, threatened and pushed around by other girls. Just six weeks before graduation, she quits school.

A 17-year-old boy in Colorado is seduced by his attractive female teacher. A neighbor tells the teen's mom it was a sexual conquest like "climbing Mount Everest." He has to hide from the crush of media attention.

They are crimes and abuses, but often they're treated as entertainment. Girls are pressed into the role of seducer or naive

victim. Boys are seen as studs.

Sexual misconduct by teachers is remarkably common in American schools, an Associated Press investigation found. But how Americans react to it is deeply split depending on the victim's gender.

"Hollywood, they think it's such a hot thing when a guy gets laid at a young age. I tell you, it's not a hot thing," said Jeff Pickthorn, who speaks from experience.

He was 12 when he began having sex with his seventh-grade teacher, who was 24. "They say that guy's lucky. I say, 'No, he's not lucky at all.'"

At the time, Pickthorn might have agreed with them. For several months, he had sex with his teacher until his parents found out and the teacher was pressured to resign.

It left him "with no boundaries," he says now at age 54, his life marred by affairs, gambling and ruined marriages.

The AP's survey of five years of state disciplinary actions

against teachers found that 2,570 educators were punished for sexual misconduct.

In the cases in which the victim's gender was clear, the large proportion were female. Almost nine out of 10 of the offenders were male.

But the boys who are drawn into sexual relationships with their female teachers get an overwhelming amount of attention, especially when the woman is attractive. They're the subject of heavy news coverage, jokes from late-night TV comics and Web sites with photos, videos and more.

What's more likely to be described as rape or sexual abuse when the victim is female turns into a "tryst" or a "sexual liaison" when the perpetrator is female and the victim is male.

"Prosecutors try hard not to treat these cases differently and not to apply any kind of double standard. But there are some

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TIM LARSEN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

JASON EICKMEYER of Hammonton, N.J., is suing a female high school teacher, saying she sexually assaulted him and violated his civil rights.

Abuse

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very real double standards in society that affect how these cases will be accepted by jurors and judges," said Michael Sinacore, an assistant state attorney in Tampa, Fla.

He prosecuted Debra LaFave, a former Florida middle school teacher who admitted to having sex with a 14-year-old male student.

Public attention paid to the 25-year-old blond newlywed quickly went "off the charts," Sinacore said, after photos surfaced on the Internet of her on a motorcycle in a bikini.

"There's something wrong with making a celebrity out of someone accused of a sex crime," he said.

Ultimately, the victim's family sought to avoid a trial because of the media attention. LaFave pleaded guilty to lewd and lascivious battery and got house arrest and probation.

The earlier case of Mary Kay Letourneau mesmerized tabloids and television. A married mother of four, she had two children by a student. She went to prison but later married the student, by then 21, after she got out.

Colorado high school teacher Carrie McCandless got 45 days behind bars for unlawful sexual contact with a 17-year-old male student.

Not knowing the victim was her son, a friend remarked to the teen's mother that having sex with McCandless would be like "climbing Mount Everest" for any boy.

In contrast, the case of teacher Kevin Poppleton in upstate New York got almost no media attention.

His 17-year-old victim, identified as Amanda C. in state records, said Poppleton threatened to kill her if she talked and "other girls would scream and yell at her and push her around the locker room." His license was revoked.

Students are traumatized by abuse cases, communities shaken. Yet the public imagination seizes on the idea.

Look at the way pop culture presents teacher-student sex with a wink and a nod: the 1984 Van Halen song "Hot for Teacher"; the 1998 trash-noir movie "Wild Things" about a male high school teacher with two manipulative female students; this year's hit cable TV show "Entourage," in which one of the male characters brags about having sex with a high school teacher.

Approving attitudes can even be found in the courts.

"It's just something between two people that clicked beyond the teacher-student relationship," a New Jersey judge said as he dismissed prison time for a teacher who admitted having sex with a 13-year-old student. "I really don't see the harm that was done, and certainly society doesn't need to be worried."

Judge Bruce Gaeta was later reprimanded, but at least one academic report found that his view is common.

A 2004 University of Buffalo study gauged perceptions of teacher-student sex. It found that a female teacher with a male student was most often seen as a "normal part of growing up" and respondents were less likely to conclude that the teacher should lose her license.

But male respondents, in marked contrast from women, were more likely to see positive aspects in these relationships and less likely to see long-term damage.

Psychologists who treat boys say they suffer doubly — from the abuse itself, and from the view that they were lucky.

"A boy is likely, with a female teacher, to claim that it wasn't a problem, it wasn't molestation, it wasn't abuse, he wasn't hurt by it," said Richard Gartner, a New York psychologist and author of "Beyond Betrayal: Taking Charge of Your Life After Boyhood Sexual Abuse."

Boy or girl, victims often end up with relationships framed in terms of power and control, not affection.

But boys' pain is overlooked.

"In our society, we're socialized to think that men aren't victims, that that's the province of women," Gartner said. "To say that you are a victim and particularly a sexual victim, for many boys and men, is to say that you're not entirely a man."