

When a man is accused of bad behavior, what's it like for the wife?

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By Paula Reed Ward, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It seems like an all too common sight.

Some male politician or celebrity must face allegations of doing something immoral -- and sometimes criminal as well -- and there, standing behind him and off to the side of the lectern, is his wife.

Quiet and taciturn and broken.

It may be something as ridiculous as photographing his own body and Tweeting the images to the world, or something as horrific as being accused of sexually assaulting children.

In either instance, the viewing audience will watch the display and think to themselves, "Oh my. Why does she stay with him?"

Or worse, "How could she not have known?"

Or even worse, "How could she have known and done nothing?"

As the Penn State sex scandal continues to unravel at a frenetic pace, those questions are swirling around Dorothy Sandusky, the wife of the former football defensive coordinator accused of 40 counts involving eight boys over several years.



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Mrs. Sandusky has not spoken publicly about the charges filed against her husband last month. Instead, the only message coming from her was filtered through his attorney, Joseph Amendola.

In an interview last week, Mr. Amendola said that the woman known as "Dottie" is "standing with Jerry. She is behind him 100 percent."

Darlene Ellison, a writer and speaker on child sexual abuse issues, pointed out: "She hasn't said anything. Nobody has seen her," Ms. Ellison said. "Silence is just that. Don't read into it."

Whatever her stance on the charges against her husband, Mrs. Sandusky is likely overwhelmed, Ms. Ellison said.

"She may be in so much shock and awe and sickness. She's in this numbing, white-noise world right now."

Ms. Ellison knows all about that world.

Seven years ago -- about a year after she and her husband, Phillip Todd Calvin, divorced -- Mr. Calvin was arrested by the FBI and charged in the Southern District of California with sexually abusing young boys.

Not only was the man she had been with for 12 years a pedophile, he was on the board of directors for the North American Man/Boy Love Association.

"These guys know what they're doing. We were completely compartmentalized," Ms. Ellison said. "He created a perfect little facade."

After her husband's arrest -- and the national news it made because of the number of people arrested in the sting -- Ms. Ellison went into a cocoon, able to cope only by talking to family and raising her two children, at the time 8 and 10 years old.

"I wasn't functioning. You're dealing with the lies and the betrayal."

But then, Ms. Ellison continued, for her, there was doubt.

"It can't be him.' A little piece of you says, 'Are you sure? There's no way the FBI was right. I knew him. I slept with him. I had children with him.'"

But then her ex-husband confessed. It was true.

Ms. Ellison spent years sifting through her memories to see if there was something she should have noticed.

"Not one thing screamed out, 'My gosh, he's a pedophile.' There was nothing there."

He was a dentist and traveled a lot, she thought, to attend conventions and to do dental mission trips to help children in underserved areas of the world.

Instead, she said, he was using those trips to have sex with young boys.

Ms. Ellison said her ex-husband's family and friends were in the dark, too.

"Everybody was fooled. The betrayal and the lies are so immense, it's unfathomable."

Jessica LeRoy, a psychotherapist in Los Angeles who specializes in treating women, said deceiving those around him is to be expected of a man living a secret, criminal life.

"This is a man who is incredibly manipulative -- and good at it," she said.

There could have been things the man said or did that should have been red flags, but the wife or girlfriend didn't pick up on them. Those might seem clear to outsiders, or after the fact, but it's more complex, Ms. LeRoy said.

Ms. LeRoy compared the situation to that of women who are victims of domestic violence.

"We don't know what's going on behind closed doors. What's he telling her? Is he threatening her?"

Ms. LeRoy continued, "I really feel sympathetic to these women. These men are not following typical societal protocols. So who knows what they're doing to their wives."

And if a woman doesn't accept allegations against her spouse, Ms. LeRoy said, it could be a type of defense mechanism.

"Why wouldn't you want to believe that [he's innocent] over 'your husband did these heinous acts,'" Ms. LeRoy said. "It puts into question your entire life -- everything you've known as your reality."

Twenty years ago, Jennifer Freyd, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon, posited something she calls Betrayal Trauma Theory.

She has been studying it ever since.

The idea behind the theory is that people who are betrayed by a loved one or institution remain unaware of the betrayal to protect a relationship upon which they depend.

"The signs were all around them, and they managed to not see it even when others did," Ms. Freyd said.

This is called "dissociation" -- when a person takes information in and fails to integrate it with conscious awareness, she said.

"They are able to partition the information off," Ms. Freyd said. "The mind is an amazing thing."

This is especially common for people whose spouses cheat on them.

"If they see the infidelity, it threatens the relationship, and they may need it," she said.

A spouse not heavily dependent on the relationship is more likely to confront the cheater or withdraw.

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But, if the spouse is dependent on the relationship, she (or he) may develop what Ms. Freyd calls Betrayal Blindness.

"It keeps a crucial relationship intact," she said. "If you can remain unaware, it's easier to maintain the relationship.

"The motivation to not see it is not necessarily a conscious awareness."

She uses as an example children who are abused by their parents. Even though a child may recognize that what is happening to him is wrong, the child may also recognize that losing that parent may put him at even greater risk.

From her research, Ms. Freyd has concluded that women are the most likely to have Betrayal Blindness.

It's not due to weakness, she said. "You're likely to see more blindness in women because they get more exposure to [betrayal]."

Women, too, are raised differently, Ms. LeRoy said.

"We're socialized to be empathetic. To be caring. Don't rock the boat," she said. "I think that lends itself to this. We can understand, even in these situations."

Ms. Freyd agreed that women's roles in society are different.

"We're expected to be obedient in close relationships," Ms. Freyd said. This can be especially true of older women who have been in the marriage all their adult lives.

"If you're talking about her leaving her husband at this age, at this stage in her life, she might not have anything to fall back on, ... That might be scarier to her than thinking her husband might have done this.

"I think, in some ways, it's beyond unconditional love. It's your life."

Or, Ms. Freyd said, it could be a conscious, rational decision.

"Financial dependence is huge. Their lives have been completely destroyed by this. They're losing their husbands, their homes, their lifestyles," Ms. LeRoy said. "It's a lot of loss. It's a lot to take on."

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