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**Film Review: *All that I Am*, 75-minute documentary, (2020) in May 2021. The Norwegian film with English subtitles was directed and written by Tone Grøttjord-Glenne. Produced by Anita Rehoff, Larsen. Distributed by Good Docs.**

By Susan Eliason<sup>1</sup>

The documentary, *All that I am*, is a valuable professional development tool; a stimulating discussion prompt for use with high school or college students; as well as a beneficial resource for families. *All That I Am* premiered in the Hot Docs 2020 competition and was then released in Norwegian cinemas. It won awards and enabled thousands of viewers to see the film and learn about child abuse from Emilie's voice and other professionals featured in the film. Viewers experience how a brave victim of child abuse reclaims her voice and begins the long journey of healing from trauma.

The film documents eighteen-year-old, Emilie Andrea Franklin Dahl's return home after five years in the foster system. She took the extraordinary step of reporting her sexual abuse when she was only 12. For 6 years, her stepfather sexually abused her in her bedroom while her mother was home. The film centered around Emilie gathering the courage to reveal to her half-siblings the reason their father was imprisoned.

While gathering the courage for this difficult conversation, she seemed to wrestle with the dilemma of belonging or fitting-in. Emilie's mother discourages her from talking with her younger siblings about the abuse and everything that happened. "The family would fall apart if you said anything," her mother said. At this point, Emilie was pressured to fit-in to the family by keeping her secret. She wants to talk about the abuse. For example, she said, "It's hard living with people who can't identify with your situation. It would be nice to have a network." She seems to want to belong. Emilie seemed guarded with her mother, parent-like with her siblings, and enjoyed her most consistent bond in the house with the cat.

The film chronicles Emilie's experience in the legal system. During the civil case for compensation for sexual abuse, Emilie needs to provide the evidence for her claim that her childhood and adolescence were ruined, and that she needs long-term mental health services for post-traumatic stress syndrome. While presenting her case, she sat facing the perpetrator, her nameless stepfather, who never appears onscreen. She commented: "It feels like his life will be easier than mine." The film makes the point that the perpetrator is free and thus a threat and stress to Emilie.

About an hour into the film, we see Emilie and her mother engage in an affirming and honest conversation. Perhaps this is the start of belonging in the family. The film clearly states that a child can never consent to sex and that adults should avoid focusing exclusively on "stranger danger." Most children are abused by someone they know and trust, including family members. *Darkness to Light* (2015) report that about 30% of sexual abuse is by family members (p.2).

At the end of the film, Emilie tells her siblings about the abuse. The conversation was not filmed. Emilie was robbed of her childhood and yet exemplifies the concept of resilience and moving forward. Her courage as she emerged from the shadows of shame is admirable.

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According to the [GOOD DOCS website](#), Grøttjord-Glenne filmed Emilie for 28 days over a two-year period. The time shifts are unclear, which encourages the viewer to become sensitive to Emilie's thinking and feelings. The documentary includes several instances of silence which seem to emphasize either hope or disappointment. The companion [Study Guide created by the Support Center Against Incest and Sexual Abuse in Oslo](#) (SMISO) would effectively support discussion of the film and highlights the need for these discussions. For example, the guide included this information "When a child experiences sexual abuse, the average time from when the first abuse occurs until they tell someone about it, is 17.5 years" (p. 3). This is the reason that Emilie's disclosure was extraordinary.

The film would effectively serve as a tool to convey the importance of sharing secrets with a trusted adult. Victims need help and the adults around them are responsible to provide guidance and support.

Because adult education is critical to preventing child sexual abuse, it is essential to be aware of the statistics. Childhood sexual abuse is global, crosses all cultural and socioeconomic status boundaries, and impacts children daily. The [Darkness to Light organization](#) (2015) reported:

- Child sexual abuse is likely the most prevalent health problem children face with the most serious array of consequences.<sup>2</sup>
- About one in 10 children will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday.<sup>3</sup>
- About one in seven girls and one in 25 boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18.
- Only about 38% of child victims disclose the fact that they have been sexually abused.<sup>4</sup>
- The children who experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), including racism and systemic oppression are most vulnerable to child sexual abuse.

The film included many of the core concepts in childhood studies and supports interdisciplinary social justice work. The film could be used for teaching and learning in the disciplines of Psychology [counseling], Law [public policy and advocacy], Health, Social Work, Sociology, Education, Anthropology, English/communication [representations of childhood], and philosophy [ethics]. An interdisciplinary approach is beneficial to understanding the lives of children and youth; because it enables investigators to gain information from varied sources and compare the ways children are viewed, understood, and taken care of in different parts of the world.

The film highlights many of core concepts from the field of Childhood Studies. These are some of the concepts found in *All That I Am*:

- Best Interest, which is the standard for decision-making related to children and their rights
- Children's voices
- Family defined as the people that live together who love and care for each other
- Children share similar experiences of childhood all over the world or global childhood
- Neglect

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<sup>2</sup> Townsend, C. (2013). Prevalence and consequences of child sexual abuse compared with other childhood experiences. Charleston, S.C., Darkness to Light. Retrieved from [www.D2L.org](http://www.D2L.org).

<sup>3</sup> Townsend, C., & Rheingold, A.A., (2013). Estimating a child sexual abuse prevalence rate for practitioners: studies. Charleston, S.C., Darkness to Light. Retrieved from [www.D2L.org](http://www.D2L.org).

<sup>4</sup> London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S., & Shuman, D. (2003) Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell? *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 11(1), 194-226.

Ullman, S. E. (2007). Relationship to perpetrator, disclosure, social reactions, and PTSD symptoms in child sexual abuse survivors. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 16(1), 19-36.

- Protection
- Resilience or the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress
- Rights as defined by the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) and
- Vulnerability

The UNCRC defines the rights of all children. *All That I Am* highlights several of the UNCRC articles. Article 12 provides the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child. Emilie spoke at her civil case for compensation. Article 39 was evident as the theme of the movie, “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). A lingering question to discuss would be: How did Emilie’s reintegration foster her health, self-respect, and dignity?

One of the major influences on childhood is families. The family is the principal institution responsible for childrearing, so that a society can be more passive with the commitments and costs connected to childhood. The UNCRC gives all children the right to a family. The right to a family allows children to be connected to their history, and it offers a protective perimeter against violation of their rights. However, sometimes the family which should be protecting the child is in fact inflicting the abuse. This is the dilemma presented in the film.

Emilie seemed to struggle with fitting-in or belonging, especially with her family. Brown (2010) states “One of the biggest surprises in this research was learning that fitting in and belonging are not the same thing, and in fact, fitting in gets in the way of belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn’t require us to change who are: it requires us to be who we are.” p.25. Belonging is essential for meaningful connected interpersonal relationships. Viewers are left wondering if Emilie eventually feels the sense of belonging in her family.

The documentary has the potential to spark a discussion of the racial, ethnic, and gender differences seen in childhood sexual abuse. Gray and Rarick (2018) report 2012 data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The child abuse rates were comprised of 21% African American, 1.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0.8% Asian, 21.8% Hispanic, 4.7% Pacific Islander, 8.2% White, and 10.8% multiracial children. Gray and Rarick studied how racial, ethnic, and gender related factors influence coping. Coping was defined by behaviors such as self-harming, substance abuse, hypersexuality, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative disorders, anxiety, and conduct problems. Emilie was diagnosed with PTSD. This study found that gender most strongly influences the type of coping mechanism the victim uses. As stated early, there is a higher incidence of child abuse for girls. The study invites further investigation of methods to support prevention and social change.

Emilie’s mother seemed distant and unapproachable for most of the film. Her behavior seemed to exemplify behaviors characteristic of non-offending maternal (NOM) support as described by McCarthy, A., Cyr, M., Fernet, M., & Hébert, M. (2019). They state, “Mother’s experience insecurity and uncertainty in responding to their child’s new emotional needs” (p. 266). The researchers wonder if maternal support evolves over time, which the film seemed to suggest.

Grøttjord-Glenne offers the viewer a window into child sexual abuse. Reflecting on the content and themes, the film provides opportunities to advocate for the prevention of child abuse. It is timely as Tener, Marmor, Katz, Newman, Silovsky, Shields, & Taylor (2021) report that the COVID-19 pandemic damaged the environments in which children live. They highlighted the impact of social isolation and economic stress on children and families in the United States and Israel. There is the potential for more secrets and tragic opportunities for abuse. Viewers can use the film as a springboard for social change to advocate for the provision of adequate socioemotional and concrete, tangible supports for children and families.

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