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# Female Offenders in Child Sexual Abuse

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## Abstract

In the United States criminal justice system, female sexual offenders are among the most unrepresented groups of individuals, and they have evaded detection and/or prosecution for many reasons. This chapter explores the characteristics and patterns of female sexual offenders based on the collection of available literature. We will discuss how personal trauma histories, mental health, substance abuse, and motivations of female sexual offenders differ from their male counterparts. Additionally, we cover how social perception presents female sexual offenders in a light that adversely impacts their interactions with the social systems and explore empirically validated myths, risks, and interventions for this population.

**Keywords:** Female Sexual Offenders, Criminal Justice, Adverse Childhood Experience, Mental Health, Substance Abuse

## 1. Introduction

Female sexual offenders [FSO] are among the most radically unrepresented sexual offenders in the criminal justice system. Some studies suggest that anywhere from 15 to 20% of sexual offenses are committed by females [1, 2]. Among the studies of female sexual offenders, one accepted explanation was that female sexual offenders might have more significant personal abuse histories than their male counterparts [3]. The CDC's Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study revealed that nearly 25% of females and 16% of males who reported being abused as a child advised that at least one of their sexual offenders was female [4]. FSOs tend to offend across genders and with a wide range of ages [5]. Also, female sexual offenders tend to have young victims, compared to male offenders, which causes a very particular set of problems for these victims, including neurological, behavioral, and other significant outcomes [5, 6]. The impact of female-specific sexual offending is a phenomenon related to, but different from, that generated by male child sexual offenders—the purpose of this chapter to explore to understand female sexual offenders' characteristics in the literature.

## 2. Origins of research in the area

Perhaps the first formal and scientific mention of female sexual deviancy was in *Psychopatia Sexualis* by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in 1886. Standing as a reference in

law and psychiatry by classifying case studies regarding sexually related psychopathology, this work popularized terms such as sadism and masochism. It introduced satyriasis, which is the idea that females sought sexual contact with males of all ages, including children [7]. This case-based work started the conversation about female child sexual offending. When focused on the topic of pedophilia, von Krafft-Ebing only mentioned one case involving a female who sent her children away out of fear she would molest them [7].

It is important to note that this discussion began in the Victorian Era, which was known for socially imposed perspectives on gender and sexuality. As the research progressed, some suggested that female perversions were related to mental disease or defect. Women could be “sexual criminals” who could sexually abuse and exploit children [8, 9]. Due to the emerging popularity and support of psychoanalytic approaches, it was not until the introduction of Freud’s work that understanding the patterns and motivations of female sexual offending began to change [10].

### **3. Prominent theoretical influence**

The most prominent theoretical influences in female sex offender research are *Behaviorist* and *Psychodynamic*, and both are prominent throughout modern literature. Together, these theoretical perspectives prove helpful when investigating this phenomenon.

The Freudian concept of the Oedipal complex might have served as a source of confusion and a reason for the lack of investigation in female sexual offending cases for many years [10]. With that said, psychodynamics’ positive contribution is much more evident in the more recent literature. The application of psychodynamic theory in exploring female sexual offenders focuses on the offender herself and the personal deficits that may drive the sexual offending behavior [11]. This approach emphasizes how the subconscious mind stimulates behavior and how deficits are a product of a failure to resolve earlier life problems [11].

Exploring female sexual offending behaviors through the behaviorist lens that tends to describe a person’s behavior as a byproduct of life events or antecedents focuses on the behavior itself rather than the deficits of the individual [11]. In opposition to the conventional psychodynamic view, some suggest a separation of behavior and the mind [12]. Put simply, behaviorist approaches focus on how an individual has been conditioned to behave in a particular manner due to trauma and other life events. As opposed to an internalized developmental deficit, the individual’s behavior can be conceptualized as a byproduct of their conditioning [11].

### **4. Who are female sexual offenders?**

Most modern research on female sexual offenders is related to the description of who they are and how they compare to their male perpetrator counterparts. In addition to the offense characteristics they display, this description also sheds light on the differences in their motivations, personal trauma histories, mental health, and substance use. Empirical classification and typology have emerged in the literature to separate the female offender from the established norms of the male offender. Discussions of each of these classifications are included in this chapter, with a summary of the literature exploring the impact of perpetrator gender.

#### **4.1 The impact of perpetrator gender**

Utilizing 2010 data from the National Child Abuse Neglect Data System (NCANDS), McLeod conducted secondary data analysis to investigate the impact of perpetrator gender [13]. Of the 66,765 substantiated child sexual abuse cases, 13,492, or 20.9%, had females as the primary perpetrator. In 19.9% of the confirmed cases, male perpetrators offended male victims, compared to 80.5% of the cases where male perpetrators offended female victims. In 31.8% of the substantiated cases, female perpetrators offended male victims, compared to 68.2% of the cases where female perpetrators offended against female victims. The victims of female and male perpetrators ranged in age from newborn to 18 years of age, while the female offenders were found to have a greater prevalence of victims ranging from 5 to 9 years of age. Overall, these perpetrators of child sexual abuse were four and a half times more likely to be female if the perpetrator was the child's biological parent and three times more likely to be female if the child was adopted. If the child was experiencing drug-related problems, had a disability, or had prior reports of being sexually abused, the perpetrator was also more likely to be female. If the perpetrator was a stepparent of the abused child, or if the child victim had a cognitive disability or behavioral problems, then the perpetrator was more likely to be male. With male and female perpetrators ranging in age from 18 to 70 years of age, female perpetrators tended to offend between 27 and 39 years of age, and male perpetrators tended to offend between 20 and 42 years of age [13].

Referring to the same NCANDS data set, another secondary analysis was conducted to analyze gender differences and the ways child protective and criminal justice systems responded to male and female perpetrators of child sexual abuse [14]. Compared to the male perpetrators, the female perpetrators were more likely to be involved in the child welfare system at the time of the abuse, to be receiving higher levels of mental health, substance abuse, family-centered, and economic services, and to be referred to the police following a substantiated report of child abuse. However, female perpetrators ultimately represented only 1% of the sex offenders incarcerated for their sexually abusive crimes because, after this initial referral, they were subject to farther-reaching diversion practices [14].

#### **4.2 Personal history**

A significant risk marker for the likelihood of abuse against others in adulthood is a personal history of sexual abuse [10]. When focusing on reducing the cyclical nature of this phenomenon, this is important to keep in mind. Furthermore, numerous studies have shown that female sexual offenders demonstrate a significantly higher likelihood of their victimization in childhood [15–25]. Additionally, female sexual offenders are also more likely to have experienced parental or sibling physical and emotional abuse and, compared to nonsexual offending incarcerated females, are more likely to have below a twelfth-grade education [18]. Furthermore, female sex offenders are more likely to be involved in ongoing physical victimization (i.e., domestic abuse, intimate partner sexual assault), bringing up the dual nature of this phenomenon; female sexual offenders are often both victims and victimizers [19, 23].

Female and male sex offenders are similar in that they share a typical history of sexual victimization. Still, the female sex offender is more likely to have been abused at an earlier age, been molested by multiple individuals over an extended period, been molested by both female and male sexual offenders, been sexually aroused during one of their victimizations [16]. Also, they have had the onset of their sexual offending behavior begin within five years of their first sexual

victimization [16]. Compared to a group of nonsexual offending females, sexual offending females more frequently report instances of childhood sexual abuse in their history and for a longer duration, which replicates earlier similar findings [16, 17, 20].

### **4.3 Mental health and substance abuse**

One can imagine that the prevalence of histories of personal abuse and trauma among female sex offenders is likely to have had a significant emotional impact on them during development as children or young adults. One study reported over 70% of female sexual offenders in their sample met full diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder [26]. Another finding over one-third of their sample had a history of inpatient psychiatric hospitalization, most of which were non-paraphilic [26, 27]. More broadly, research from numerous unique disciplines (i.e., social work, criminal justice, psychiatry, and psychology) have shown that female sex offenders more often experience issues related to mental health, developmental disability, and substance use [2, 15, 19–22, 25, 28–33].

The search for answers related to what kinds of mental health issues female sexual offenders may specifically face is a relatively new pursuit; however, a handful of studies have helped lead the way for future research. In one study, solo-offending female sexual offenders, those who commit offenses on children without the participation, influence, or coercion of another offender, were more likely to have diagnosable mental health and substance abuse disorders, and those who co-offended were more likely to have personality disorders [31]. Interestingly, no statistical difference was found between female sexual offender cohorts (solo-offender or co-offender) when diagnoses were split into substance abuse disorders and psychotic disorders [28]. Other studies have shown some diagnoses associated with female sexual offenders may include developmental disability, drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety, and depression [2, 18, 19, 28, 29, 34]. Specifically, another author found that up to 22% of their female sexual offender sample to have some sort of developmental disability, and at the time in 1995 would have met the DSM diagnostic criteria for at least mild mental retardation [2]. Referring to diagnoses, Borderline Personality Disorder appears to be one most mentioned in the female sex offender literature. Among a sample of female sexual offenders, Borderline Personality Disorder is significantly associated with personal victimization histories [15].

Focusing on correlations like the one between Borderline Personality Disorder and child abuse, neuroscience has begun to elucidate the connection between traumatic events and the links and attachments individuals make later in their life. A few studies have detailed the impact of these types of events on neurodevelopment, and the debilitating effects childhood trauma can have on developing appropriate behaviors and connections. These studies suggest childhood trauma can cause a significant physical impact on the brain, altering the typical development of neuropathways, which can lead to substantial disturbances for individuals [35, 36]. Childhood trauma is almost exclusively how they can or cannot develop healthy and appropriate relationships, personal positive mental health, and appropriate boundaries with others [35, 36].

### **4.4 Offense patterns**

While the literature suggests that female sex offenders are not a homogenous group, looking for similarities in offense patterns could prove helpful when analyzing large amounts of data [22, 37]. Compared to male sexual offenders, multiple



studies suggest that female sex offenders are more likely to use higher levels of coercion, which may indicate a higher level of emotional or intellectual manipulation connected to their approach [22, 24]. However, this does not necessarily mean that these female sexual offenders believe what they are doing is moral or right. According to at least one author, their decision-making process did not appear to be affected by cognitive distortions about the offense, unlike male sexual offenders [37].

Moreover, female sexual offenders who offend by themselves are more likely to have a single victim compared to those who act with another offender who is more likely to have multiple victims, to have both female and male victims, to be related to the victim, and to have a history of nonsexual offenses [38]. With that said, very few female sexual offenders seem to be coerced into their offending behavior or motivated by fear related to a co-offender [39].

One must also have caution when putting too much weight on a single study related to recidivism, which is difficult to measure when relying solely on data reported by the criminal justice system. For example, one author suggested that recidivism related to female sexual offending may be closer to 28% [40]. This is substantially more than the recidivism rate of 17% of female sexual offenders charged with subsequent sexual offenses after the initial primary offense [40].

Highly documented and accepted within the female sex offender literature, research has repeatedly shown that female sex offenders are more likely than male sexual offenders to offend their biological children, close relatives, and children in their care [19, 24, 25, 33, 41]. One apparent absence in the literature relates to what degree access to children may place into the dynamics of female sexual offenders and their victims and whether these differences would still hold true if male sexual offenders were in consistent caregiving roles.

Another highly documented finding in the female sex offender literature is the lack of discrimination when it comes to victim gender, with numerous studies suggesting that female sex offenders are far less discriminant about victim gender compared to male sex offenders who tend to have an exclusive victim gender preference, typically female [27, 41–43]. Referring to these same studies, some suggested their female sexual offender samples may have a slight inclination toward male victims; however, others noted that female sex offenders in their sample were more likely to have male victims [27, 41–43]. Together, these studies still found that most female sexual offenders in their samples had both male and female victims [27, 41–43].

## **4.5 Empirical classifications and typologies**

While the literature suggests the little, we do know about female sexual offenders do not fit into the same typologies as male sexual offenders, many have set out over the past thirty years to categorize female sexual offenders and their behavioral types [44]. Below you will find a detailed list containing some of the most popular typologies across time and some more modern approaches, which is organized by whether the typology is a psychodynamic or behaviorally influenced theoretical position and organized chronologically after that.

### *4.5.1 Psychodynamic influence*

One of the first and most cited typologies of female sexual offenders was created by Matthews, Matthews, and Spitz in 1991 based on clinical interviews and psychometric testing within a female sexual offender treatment program [45]. The categories are as follows:

Typology	Traits
<i>The Teacher/Lover</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Views her victim as a partner</li> <li>Generally, intends no harm</li> <li>Substantial personal histories of physical and emotional abuse</li> <li>Considers their offending to be true romantic love</li> <li>Pursues adolescent victims with the intent of an egalitarian relationship.</li> <li>Has a hard time understanding that their acts are criminal</li> </ul>
<i>The Predisposed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Target's victims in their own biological family or other children to whom they have ready access.</li> <li>Typically isolated from adult contact</li> <li>Has substantial history of sexual abuse in childhood, particularly by family members and not unusually by multiple offenders, including others inside and outside the family</li> <li>Highly promiscuous during adolescence</li> <li>Claims that they do not enjoy sexual contact</li> </ul>
<i>The Male Coerced</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presents as submissive, passive, and powerless in their personal relationships</li> <li>Tends to endorse traditional, patriarchal, gender role ideations</li> <li>Views themselves differently when they are alone</li> <li>Describe the person they fell in love with as a different person than the abuse partner</li> </ul>

In 2004, Vandiver and Kercher created a female sex offender typology [43]. Vandiver and Kercher used hierarchical linear modeling and cluster analysis to assess the relationship between offender and victim characteristics heir based on a sample of 471 female sex offenders who had been convicted of a sexual crime in the state of Texas [43]. The categories are as follows:

Typology	Traits
<i>The Heterosexual Nurturer</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Largest group in the sample</li> <li>Females with an average age of 30 who were most likely to become involved with adolescent males, with an average age of 12</li> <li>Tended to seek emotional connection and more egalitarian relationships from their victims</li> </ul>
<i>The Noncriminal Homosexual</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Least likely to recidivate</li> <li>Same sex victims</li> <li>Average age of offenders was 32, and victims averaged 13 years of age</li> <li>Described their relationships with victims as mutually satisfying</li> <li>Least likely of all groups to commit forcible sexual assault</li> </ul>
<i>The Female Sexual Predator</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most likely to recidivate with sexual crimes</li> <li>Average offender was found to be 29 years of age, and the average victim was 11</li> <li>Victim profiles were 60% male and 40% female.</li> </ul>
<i>The Young Adult Child Exploiters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youngest average age (28)</li> <li>Fewest average number of arrests</li> <li>victims averaged seven years of age and were related to the offender approximately half of the time</li> <li>Included mothers who were molesting their own biological children alone and with co-offenders</li> </ul>

Typology	Traits
<i>The Homosexual Criminals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preference toward same-sex victims</li> <li>• Highly likely to re-offend</li> <li>• Highest average number of arrests (n10)</li> <li>• Average offender age was 32, and the average victim was 11</li> <li>• Crimes included high levels of “forcing behavior,” including sexual performance and child prostitution, and for at least a portion of these, the offender’s motivation appeared to be financial as opposed to sexually related</li> <li>• 73% of their victims were female.</li> </ul>
<i>The Aggressive Homosexual Offender</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Older offenders, who have a preference toward victims of the same sex, and an average [adult] victim age of 31 years</li> <li>• Commonly correlated with domestic violence</li> </ul>

In 2007, Sandler and Freeman sought to replicate the previously mentioned work with a sample of 390 registered female sexual offenders from New York State [46]. While they found their sample to be demographically similar to the one in Texas, the six distinct typologies they created were substantially different. The categories are as follows:

Typology	Traits
<i>The Criminally-Limited Hebeophile</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women with an average age of 32 who prefer adolescent victims, around 14 years of age</li> <li>• Victims are primarily male (70%).</li> <li>• Low likelihood of rearrest.</li> </ul>
<i>The Criminally-Prone Hebeophile</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average offender is 25 and the average victim age is just under 15.</li> <li>• Preference toward male victims 66% of the time</li> <li>• High likelihood for rearrest in not only sexually involved cases but also drug-related and other offenses</li> </ul>
<i>The Young Adult Child Molesters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average offender age is 28, and the average victim is four years of age.</li> <li>• Typically not previously arrested and selected female victims 52% of the time</li> </ul>
<i>The High-Risk Chronic Offenders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest number of arrests and rearrests</li> <li>• Average offender’s age was just under 31 years, and the average victim age was 5</li> <li>• Targeted female victims 56% of the time</li> <li>• Highest representation of non-white offenders of all 6 clusters (38%).</li> </ul>
<i>The Older Non-Habitual Offender</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little to no documented criminality outside the registration for their sexual offense</li> <li>• Average offender was 51 years of age, with an average victim age of 12.</li> </ul>
<i>The Homosexual Child Molester</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smallest cluster in this analysis.</li> <li>• Targeted female victims (91%), with an average victim age of 5 years old.</li> <li>• Average offender in this group was 44 years old, and they had a high rate of arrest for drug-related charges.</li> </ul>



In 2011, Wijkman, Bijleveld, and Hendricks created a three-tier typology of female sexual offender behavior based solely on the types and frequency of offenses in their Dutch sample [47]. The categories are as follows:

Typology	Traits
<i>The Once-Only Offender</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Only one known offense</li> <li>• No priors or recidivism</li> </ul>
<i>The Generalists</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criminally diverse</li> <li>• Typical history of violent and drug related crimes</li> <li>• Currently charged with sex crime</li> <li>• Likely to <i>generally</i> recidivate</li> </ul>
<i>The Specialists</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely to have committed multiple sexual offenses</li> <li>• Tend to have limited nonsexual criminal behavior</li> </ul>

#### 4.5.2 Behavioral influence

In 2005, Ferguson and Meehan used hierarchal linear modeling and cluster analysis to develop female sexual offending behavior typologies based on three distinct patterns related to perpetrator characteristics, victim age, and use of force [48]. These typologies are organized by the size of a group membership. The categories are as follows:

Typology	Traits
<i>Cluster 1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average offender age of 26</li> <li>• More likely to choose victims under the age of 12</li> <li>• More likely to use verbal coercion rather than physical force</li> <li>• While it happens rarely, this is the group of female offenders most likely to murder their victims</li> </ul>
<i>Cluster 2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Average offender age is 30</li> <li>• Highest rate of prior criminal convictions</li> <li>• Most likely to use physical force</li> </ul>
<i>Cluster 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mixed results with high diversity in use of force patterns</li> <li>• More likely to pursue victims between the ages of 12 and 16</li> </ul>

One of the most important findings of this study is that the authors suggest there to be an escalation in the use of force over the timespan, where younger offenders are more likely to use coercion where older offenders may become more physically forceful [48].

In 2010, Gannon, Rose, and Ward utilized Gannon's earlier Descriptive Model of Sexual offending to examine a twenty-two-person sample and come up with three primary pathways to female sexual offending [49, 50]. The categories are as follows:

Typology	Traits
<i>The Explicit Approach</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Largest group (50% of sample)</li> <li>• Offenders who intend to offend and explicitly develop their plan of attack, directing their behaviors accordingly</li> <li>• Goals include sexual gratification, intimacy, revenge or humiliation, and financial motivation</li> </ul>

Typology	Traits
<i>The Directly Avoidant</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women who may not initiate a sexual offense but were directed, coerced, or manipulated into the offense by a male accomplice or co-offender</li> <li>• Offenders present as passive or dependent and reported to have been groomed for the crime</li> <li>• Physically and/or emotionally abused by their co-offender</li> <li>• Present with cognitive distortions related to their co-offenders and victims, as well as their own participation and offending behaviors</li> </ul>
<i>The Disorganized Offender</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No intention of offending and engaged in minimal planning for the offense</li> <li>• Offending is related to impulsivity and a severe self-regulatory failure</li> <li>• Spontaneous</li> <li>• Goals more closely related to intimacy</li> </ul>

#### 4.5.3 Typology conclusion

While some of these typologies are similar and others approach the subject from a different perspective, together, they help us recognize the diversity present in this phenomenon. Specifically, they provide insight into the mental health, behavioral, and offense characteristics of female sexual offenders. To reiterate a prior point, female sexual offenders are not a homogenous group, and it is vitally important to examine this phenomenon with empirical complexity and precision.

We must also examine how these typologies are constructed. The typologies mentioned in this chapter have been built from incarcerated, registered, or otherwise legally identified offenders while keeping in mind there is reason to believe most sexual offenses go unreported. There may be other typologies that could do a better job of describing populations of female sexual offenders who evade detection from our child protective and legal systems.

#### 4.6 Motivation & belief systems

Many of the previously discussed typologies examine the idea of motivation with female sexual offenders, which is something that is highly influenced by psychodynamic perspectives. A deeper and more vivid understanding of motivation could have significant impacts on the identification of offenders and treatment and intervention development. While female and male child sexual offenders are radically different, some of their specific offending belief patterns may be similar [51]. Building on this finding, when authors examined the gendered similarities and differences in implicit theory development regarding sexual offending, authors found that females shared four of the five earlier identified belief schemas associated with the phenomenon [52]. The female sexual offenders in this study identified the following belief systems: they viewed children as sexual objects; believing that children were capable of enjoying and desiring sex; they shared the dangerous world implicit theory, viewing the world as a threatening place; they believed in the uncontrollability of the world and viewed events as things that happen to people who have no ability to shape their lives; they shared the belief system that the nature of harm as related to sexual offenses was scalable in that some sexual acts are beneficial to children and do not cause harm. As mentioned previously, there was one implicit theory that the female sexual offenders did not share with the male sex offenders, and that was an entitlement, or a belief that some people were superior to others and by virtue possess a right to having their sexual desires met. Together, these findings may have significant utility in understanding the motivations behind female sexual offending [52].

Furthermore, five motivational typologies related to the motivations behind female sexual offense patterns have been developed [10]. The *Forbidden Lover* offender may superficially appear to be connected to the innocence of romantic love. However, these are typically situations where an older female has become romantically involved with a young individual. The core beliefs behind this motivation are the feelings of weariness about the responsibilities in their life. The offender typically commits the offense in the act of sexual boundary crossing, which is usually connected to the traumatic and abusive issues in the offender's childhood. The idea of consent here is difficult to mediate as it is not uncommon for some of the victims to feel complex feelings of mutual benefit, satisfaction, or even power, although these experiences could prove incredibly disruptive to their adult lives.

Continuing with the motivational typologies discussed in the previous paragraph, the authors describe the *Facilitator* as a female who assists a co-offender with the grooming of the victim, the location, and in the facilitation of the offense itself [10]. This may be motivated by fear of physical or sexual abuse, torture, or abandonment, but this may not be the only motivation. The facilitating offender is often in proximity, if not actively engaging, due to a possible desire or willingness to participate in the offense. This suggests that the deviant sexual fantasy of the male may have become sexually stimulating for females.

Continuing, the *Instigator* is described as a female who wishes to offend against a child, adolescent, or adult and follows through on her desires alone or with the assistance of a co-offender [10]. The motivations of the female sex offender may be driven by a desire for power, revenge, dominance, or control. This offender may typically be more psychopathic by nature, and their motivation may have less to do with eroticism and more to do with sexual violence related to manipulation and exploitation of others.

The *Psychotic Offender's* motivations are based on psychosis and, specifically, are based on a variety of manifestations of hallucinations and delusions [10].

They describe the fifth category as *Munchausen by Proxy* [10]. This motivation could also be perceived as being heavily influenced by mental health conditions. However, in this case, we are talking less about psychosis and more about anxiety, obsession, or paranoia. These cases involve a parent or caretaker motivated by an irrefutable belief system that their child has been offended. Therefore, subjects the child to increasingly invasive physical and psychological examinations to find their beliefs founded, all the while disregarding the findings and advice of the professionals to whom they are entrusting their child's care.

If one may think that research on female sexual offending is scarce, then it might also be safe to say that the specificity of topics such as motivation in these offenses is non-existent. However, what we do have, as seen throughout this chapter thus far, is based primarily on case studies and small qualitative projects. With that said, the need for further research in this area is apparent.

## 5. Social perception

One reason for the dearth of literature related to female sexual offenders may be associated with the social perception of the invitation of the phenomenon. Many authors suggest, in comparison to the readily documented nature of male sexual offending, female sexual offending has been all but ignored since females are typically viewed as caring nurturers who are incapable of such heinous, offensive, and socially unacceptable acts [45, 53–60]. This social perception could very well explain how nearly 20% of sexual offenders in our population avoid detection and or prosecution.

At least one author argues that our culture may typically allow for a broader range of acceptable behaviors from females [53]. This may be especially true in the case of varying levels of affection, which may have been contributing to a cultural bias rejecting the possibility of female sexual offending [53]. Others have suggested western society views females as passive, harmless and that these views have been strong enough to infiltrate our legal systems, victim-reporting practices, and professional and clinical responses dramatically contributing to the under-reporting and under-identification of female sexual offenders [61]. Additionally, these social beliefs have also permeated child protective and police services where individuals within these systems discount disclosures, allegations, and reports of child sexual abuse that involve female offenders [62]. One study pointed out that being female does significantly reduce the likelihood of incarceration for offenders convicted of sexual offenses, but sex does not appear to have any significant impact on criminal conviction rates [63]. With all of that said, victim disclosures may have just as much to do with female sexual offending as do biases within our legal systems. Many studies have documented this underreporting of cases involving female sexual offenders [24, 53, 64]. When focusing on male victims, part of the problem could be social perception. People tend to believe that sexual abuse involving a male offender and a female victim is worse than that involving a female offender and a male victim [65]. It is likely that these deep-rooted and highly perpetuated societal gender role norms affect the decision-making process of victims as they attempt to make sense of their own experiences. One author hypothesized about why male victims may choose not to disclose their sexual abuse experiences [66]. Some of these possible explanations include:

- Males do not get pregnant, and evidence of sexual abuse has not been present;
- A double standard in belief systems has existed in which fathers have the potential for evil and mothers are 'all good';
- Adult males have been too embarrassed to reveal their sexual activity with and arousal by their mothers;
- Male children have been presumed to be unaffected by sexual abuse, and reports by sons have been ignored;
- Patients and therapists alike have been unaware of the connection between the sexual abuse of males and the later interpersonal relationship problems.

## 5.1 Myths

Lending from a societal perception that is disconnected from fact and actual incidence prevalence rates, many myths exist regarding female sexual offending. One author pieced together a list of commonly accepted myths that they argue are a source of victim alienation, which can result in limited protection from professionals, the public, or their own support systems [57]. These myths commonly cited in the literature include:

- Females do not sexually abuse;
- Females only abuse if coerced or accompanied by a male;



- If females sexually abuse, it is gentle, loving, or misguided ‘motherly love’;
- Females only abuse males;
- If you are a female and you were abused by a female, then you will be lesbian; if [you are] male [you will be] gay or misogynist;
- If you were sexually abused as a child, then you will sexually abuse as an adult;
- People who say they were abused by a female are fantasizing or lying. If you are male and you have sexual fantasies, and if the perpetrator was your mother, you have incestuous wishes. If you are female, you are muddled, and it was a man who really abused you;
- Females only abuse adolescents;
- If a thirty-year-old female were to seduce a thirteen-year-old male, it would not be sexual abuse. If a thirty-year-old male were to seduce a thirteen-year-old female, it would undoubtedly be so;
- If a mother has an incestuous relationship with their son in his late teens/the early twenties, it is sex between two consenting adults and not sexual abuse;
- It is worse to be sexually abused by a female than a male.

## **5.2 Risk**

In reference to prevalence and incidence and the subjugation of the victim to psychological harm, the data show evidence for the contrary of these previously mentioned myths. At least one author suggests that sexual abuse by a female perpetrator is just as psychologically harmful as that of a male offender [67]. This brings up the idea of female sexual offender risk assessment and treatment. This is an area in dire need of further research, and the dearth of empirically validated treatment approaches validated targeted instrumentation, which makes the practice of risk assessment and treatment incredibly problematic [68]. Acknowledging the literature that suggests female sexual offenders can be just as sexually aggressive as male sexual offenders, there exists a lack of psychometric measures specifically developed and validated to consider the developmental uniqueness, which has proven to complicate prosecution, civil commitment, and public protection [69, 70].

## **5.3 Intervention**

While myths appear to permeate social perception and calls for more research and nuanced risk assessment reverberate in the literature, one request seems to rise above the rest. Despite the dearth of attention and literature focused on female sexual offenders, there is no interest and need that seems to rise to the surface more than others; the continued and active call for the development of female-specific sex offender treatment programming. We have repeatedly reiterated that female sex offenders are a heterogeneous group with many unique and radically different characteristics when compared to male sexual offenders. We see this clearly through the examination of the typologies discussed in this chapter.



Addressing the dual nature of victim and offender that so many of these women face is a huge need when developing treatment approaches [23]. However, these treatment approaches must also balance and reflect the idea that female sexual offenders are serious offenders of sexual crimes against children and not solely victims of their own childhood circumstances [39]. Some have suggested the adaptation of existing treatment modalities for male sexual offenders to attempt to meet the specific needs of this group [50]. Nonetheless, the need for the development of empirically validated interventions that can embrace the needs of this population. The cyclical nature of the phenomenon and the importance of addressing myths and social perceptions that could hinder their effectiveness should be clear.

## 6. Conclusion

Female sexual offending is a newer area of interest, and more research is needed. It is vital to decrease violence when we understand the development of criminal behaviors. Understanding issues specific to female offenders and the typologies they display is essential for us to explore the nuances of the female sexual offender population. The focus of this chapter has been to explore phenomenon specific to female sexual offending and the life circumstances of the females who offend. Additionally, discussion of the impact of social perception of the phenomenon, myths, and appropriate risk assessment and intervention are important to explore further in the literature. The information provided in this chapter aims to inform professionals about female sexual offenders' characteristics.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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