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Key Words

Female sex offender; Victimization;
Sexual abuse; Pornography; Adverse
childhood experiences

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Behavioral Evidences of Female Sex Offenders: Victim or Co-Author?

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Abstract

The investigation about the behavioral evidences of female sex offenders is scarce, partly because of society's own stigma about a woman being an aggressor rather than a victim. Nevertheless, there is an increasing amount of research demonstrating women's involvement in sexual abuse, pornography and child prostitution. This review article aims to explore the differences between the behavioral evidences that defines solo- and co-offenders female sex offenders and their specific motivations for committing these crimes, which have implications for intervention. The results show different motivations when the crimes are committed on a solo basis, motivated by sexual attraction to children or involving a co-offender, motivated by the female sex offender desire to give pleasure to the co-offender. In this perspective, it would be important that other review articles continue to explore these differences and, in parallel, study the relationship between the female sex offender and the co-aggressor. The study of these two fields would be fundamental for new prevention strategies and intervention tools with these female sex offenders.

Study Design

Over the past few decades, the number of studies examining female sex offenders has increased significantly [1,2], whose crimes include sexual stalking, sexual assault, rape, child sexual abuse, molestation [3], child pornography [4] and child prostitution [5]. The research gap on female sex offenders is justified by [6] as a result of the social incapacity of perceive women as capable of engaging in such behaviors. The role of caretakers and nurturers is inconsistent with those crimes and, for that, perceptions of women as abusers are denied, minimized or reconstructed to fit societal norms [6-9]. One of the examples is minimizing female responsibility by placing the blame on male coercive and manipulative accomplices [10]. Nevertheless, according to [10], "females who sexually assaulted with accomplices victimized younger children, who were often their own family members, making them just as predatory as their solo counterparts". This review article, with recourse to investigations about the specificities of the crimes and life history of the female sex offenders, has as objective to explore the differences between the behavioral evidences that defines solo- and co-offenders female sex offenders and their specific motivations for committing these crimes.

First of all, it is important to understand the history of these offenders. Investigations with female sex offenders, particularly in the world of child pornography, have revealed the presence of higher rates of abusive experiences in their biographies, as sexual and physical abuse in childhood [9,11,12] and adulthood [13] perpetrated by multiple social network offenders [14]. These intense experiences of abuse [11], accompanied by the existence of parental neglect [15] seem to be at the origin of the weaknesses in the mental health of these women, such as low self-esteem [34] and relationships of dependency [15], history of suicide attempts and substance abuse [4], weak social skills [9], antisocial characteristics [16] and trauma-related mental disorders [17,14,18]. Also, regarding the female offenders involved in the world of child pornography, studies point to a history of development with rates of child sexual abuse between 50% and 80% [11,9,12]. Most experiences of abuse of these offenders started at an early age and with multiple perpetrators, often people related [9,14]. Likewise, these experiences involved violent abuse, which in many cases often occurred over a long period of time [9,14]. When asked about their adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), only 20% of these women reported no adverse events, while 41% reported four or more, including child physical and emotional abuse [13]. Some researchers reported that not only are victimization rates higher among women convicted of sex crimes, but also the level of violence and the intensity of their victimization are more severe than those of other women in the prison system [19,20].

Second, it is important to understand that there are different female sex offenders, namely solo female sex offenders and co-female sex offenders. But the question is What behavioral characteristics distinguish these aggressors? From the limited comparative studies, these female sex offenders differ in their victim propensities, the nature of sexual assaults, and place of victimization [21,22,2,23]. Concerning to solo female sex offenders, they are more likely to have male and unrelated victims [21,22,25]. According to [2] sexual assault with an object, forcible fondling, and statutory rape are more prevalent among solo offenders. Investigations indicate that solo offenders tend to be employed and held a position of trust and some type of authority over the victim, as for example teachers. As mentioned by [10], a female offender in the position of teacher usually targets adolescent boys with the intention of teaching them about sex and denies the abusive nature of their behaviors. The majority of solo offenders viewed their criminal sexual activity as consensual, however, the victims tend not to be in a position to give legal consent [10]. In the study of the previous authors, solo female offenders in an authoritative position claimed to have feelings for or relationships with their victims.

Investigations demonstrate that solo offenders were more likely to exhibit stronger indication of depression, sexual dissatisfaction, substance abuse, borderline personality disorder and other mood disorders; scored significantly higher on measures of negative mood states, abusive fantasies, aggression, and a need for power and dominance [25,21]. According to [10] solo offenders may have issues of self-worth, lack of confidence, sexual dissatisfaction and antisocial behaviors that prevent them from seeking healthy relationships with other adults. With respect to female sex co-offenders, they have been viewed as being victims themselves [35,36], since they tend to be victims of domestic, sexual, and emotional abuse by a significant other who forced them to participate in sexually criminal behaviors [26]. In the investigation of [27], co-offending females reported significantly higher adult victimization at the hands of their male partner (e.g., sexual abuse). In many cases, female offenders and their accomplices are married or romantically involved [36,37], but the majority of these relationships are abusive and coercive [28]. According to [22], females who have children are chosen by their male co-offenders, with the aim of making victims more accessible. This author explains that after the male gains the confidence of the female, he begins forcing her to



participate in the sexual behavior with the children, which tend to participate motivated by fear or willingness to please the male co-offender.

In the study of [10], 52% of the co-offenses were mothers who victimized their children, what is congruent with previous investigations which indicate that the victims are normally a family member or the couple's child [29,30]. In the study of [4], with woman involved in the crime of child pornography, 66% committed the offenses with a male co-offender and 71% of the victims were the children of these women. In this sense, [24] reported that co-offenders were significantly more likely to cause more injury, and use weapons in their sexual offense, most of the time, with female victims [22]. The authors [25] found a significantly higher number of environmental offense-preceding factors for co-offenders, such as having current partners who were sex offenders [25]. Other risk factors are the prevalence of dependent personalities and antisocial behaviors among the co-offenders [21]. The crime of child pornography is representative of the power of coercion, since this crime tend to involve three actors: man motivated to acquire pornography, a child victim, and a person who gives access to that victim-not infrequently, his own mother. In this domain, [31] suggest that women are more likely to be driven by an effort to maintain the perpetrator's emotional involvement than by the monetary or exchange value of child pornography. The world of child abuse involves not only the production and distribution of child pornography or sexual offenders, but also practices such as child prostitution. In the investigation of [32] the authors reinforce that women convicted of promoting prostitution of a minor distinguished themselves from those convicted of traditional sexual offenses. This study revealed those women have more general antisocial features and criminal histories more consistent with general criminality (e.g., violence, drug abuse, exploitation) than women convicted of traditional sexual offenses (e.g., rape), as well as higher recidivism rates. According to the authors, these women should be considered criminals and distinguish themselves from sexual abusers who commit crimes for reasons other than criminal life, but for example sexual attraction to children.

Final Considerations

It is imperative that research on female sex offenders integrates the study of factors such as the history of development and victimization in childhood and the motivations for sexual abuse of children in adult life, with the aim of outlining more appropriate prevention and intervention plans. Take, for instance, the perpetrators involved in the world of prostitution, who are motivated by money and not by sexual interest in children, although both female sex offenders, these groups have distinct needs for intervention [32]. The same applies to women who are offenders by themselves and those who are co-offenders in crimes and inevitably present different stories, behavioral evidences and risk factors for abuse. The needs for intervention and prevention measures are equally distinct for these two groups.

Conclusion

The authors [33] summarize that sexual abuse cases tends to occur at home and to be perpetrated by acquaintances. Since, in majority of the situations, these offenders have experienced themselves abusive situations, perpetuating their histories of abuse in adulthood, it is fundamental for psychology to identifying risk factors and promoting prevention activities and public health interventions.

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