Female Sexual Offenders: Prevalence, Child Maltreatment Offending Behavior and Offending-Pathways

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Female sexual offenders continue to be an understudied population and many questions remain unanswered. The majority of the studies which were conducted the last couple of years focused on describing characteristics, developing typologies and thus these studies often had a descriptive nature. Questions focusing on the prevalence of female sexual offending by using a meta-analytic methodology are scarce. This is also the case for studies which try to unravel and explain the mechanisms underlying the women’s offending behavior. In efforts to improve our empirical knowledge of female sexual offenders as well as our approaches to their assessment and treatment, this symposium proposes three presentations that focus on the prevalence of, and criminal factors among female sexual offenders.

The first presentation will present the results of a meta-analysis of police data, court data and of findings from victimization surveys that indicate the gender of the sexual offender. The second presentation discusses the link between female sexual offending, parenting stress, and non-sexual abuse of minors. The third and last presentation will present the results of a study in which the offending pathways of female sexual offenders were studied by using a more quantitative approach instead of interviews.

The Proportion of Sexual Offenders who are Female is Higher than Thought: A Meta-Analysis

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It is now well recognized that women commit sexual offenses but the proportion of sexual offenders who are female continues to be the subject of debate. Estimates about the extent of this problem are typically based on non-representative samples, such as clinical and forensic samples (Saradjian, 2010). Selected samples, however, are not ideal for estimating prevalence rates of a phenomenon. A more accurate estimate of the proportion of sexual offenders who are female would permit a better understanding of
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this phenomenon and the development of appropriately adapted criminal justice policies for the assessment and management of these women.

To examine the proportion of sexual offenders who are female, we conducted a meta-analysis of official rates (police or court data) that indicate the gender of the sexual offender, and of findings from victimization surveys. Only large scale victimization surveys (developed across countries) or rates based on official data (with at least a total of 10 sexual offenders) were included in the current meta-analysis. In all, 17 samples with relevant data were identified from 12 countries (Australia, Belgium, Canada, England and Wales, France, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland, and United States). Eleven samples were based on official records (i.e., arrests, charges, and/or convictions) and six were based on victimization surveys. Most samples based on official rates used convictions (k = 5) or arrests (k = 4); two samples were based on accusations by tangible parties (e.g., police reported crime). Eight samples reported the rates separately for juvenile and adult offenders, three samples presented data for both juveniles and adults pooled into one sample, two samples only presented information on adult offenders, and four samples did not report the age category of the offenders. Official rates samples were government reports. Victimization surveys were either government or public agencies reports. All studies were published between 2003 and 2013 (Median = 2012).

Results show that the proportion of sexual offenders who are female is six times higher in victimisation surveys than in official rates. Findings also show that there is a slightly higher proportion of adolescent sexual offenders who are female than found in adult samples. We also found a higher rate of males than females who report having been sexually victimized by a female. The current study provides a robust estimate of the prevalence of female sexual offending, using a large sample of sexual offences across diverse countries. Implications for the criminal justice system will be discussed.

Learning Goals and Objectives:
- Develop a better understanding of methodological issues involved in estimating the proportion of sexual offenders who are female.
- Learn the official proportions of sexual offenders who are female.
- Learn the proportion of sexual offenders who are female as reported by victims in anonymous victimization surveys.
- Examine differences in proportion of sexual offenders who are female for adult and juvenile offenders.
- Identify the implications of these findings for the criminal justice system.
Is Female Sexual Abuse Linked to Parenting Stress and General Child Maltreatment?

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Very little is known about whether female sexual offending is linked to other forms of child maltreatment or parenting deficiency. In this study, the link between female sexual offending, parenting stress, and non-sexual abuse of minors was examined. It was hypothesized that female sexual offenders, relative to females convicted of non-sexual offences, would report high levels of parental stress and non-sexual child abuse propensity. We recruited 21 imprisoned females who had sexually abused children and 21 imprisoned females with no history of sexual convictions for this study. All participants were parents. Participants were asked to complete scales examining parental stress, propensity to non-sexually abuse minors, a parenting social desirability scale, and measures of sexual functioning. We discuss these results and explore the motivations underlying female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Learning Goals and Objectives:
- To understand the range of explanations for female perpetrated abuse.
- To understand how explanations for female perpetrated abuse might differ from explanations for male perpetrated abuse.
- To understand research examining the link between parenting stress and female perpetrated sexual abuse.
- To understand research examining the link between sexual functioning and female perpetrated sexual abuse.
- To understand research examining the link between general child maltreatment and female perpetrated sexual abuse.
Offending Styles of Female Sexual Offenders: A Quantitative Approach

Miriam Wijkman, PhD, LLM., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

As far as known only Gannon et al (2008) have developed a model outlining the offense process of female sexual offenders, called the Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending. This model explains the offense process and its parts, such as the planning process and particular offending styles. It pays a lot of attention to how the offense occurs and what factors influence this process. Incarcerated female sexual offenders in the United Kingdom (N=22) were interviewed and a model from the narrative experiences of these women drawn to build the model. In a follow-up study, Gannon et al (2010) identified three distinct and stable pathways to female sexual offending, based on interviews with 18 female sexual offenders originating from the 2008-study. The majority of the offenders followed an 'explicit approach', the two other pathways were 'directed-avoidant' and 'implicitly disorganized'.

These three pathways were also identified in a North- American replication study (Gannon et al, 2014). One of the recommendations of the authors was that future studies might want to examine whether the pathway items could be more easily obtained by using a quantitative approach which may less vulnerable to social desirability bias.

We studied all (N=306) convicted adult hands-on female sex offenders who became known to the criminal justice authorities in the Netherlands between 1993 and 2011. As such, the research group comprises a - in a statistical sense - population. Criminal records were analyzed, as well as their court files that often contain psychiatric and psychological screenings, that also contained detailed descriptions of the sexual offenses committed. One in three women had an IQ below 85. About 36% had an Axis I and/or II disorder. Sexual victimization was reported by 22%. More than 65% had committed the offense together with a co-perpetrator who was often their romantic partner. Two thirds of victims were female. Over a third (35%) of the women followed an explicit-approach, 31% the directed-avoidant pathway and 24% the implicit-disorganized pathway. For 10% of the women it was unclear which pathway they followed because there was not enough information available. Women who followed the directed-avoidant pathway had significantly more often disorders and a low self-esteem than women who followed the other two pathways. They also offended significantly more against male victims and were more often victimized themselves in childhood. Women who followed the implicit pathway offended significantly more often against an unknown victim. No differences were found regarding IQ, ethnic background and whether the women had a romantic relationship during the offense.

Results suggest that the three existing pathways of the DMSFO represent a reasonable description of offense pathways for Dutch convicted female sexual offenders. Implications for assessment and treatment will be discussed.
Learning Goals and Objectives:

- Identify the pros and cons of using quantitative and qualitative methods for examining offending pathways.
- Learn the proportion of female sexual offenders who follow different pathways of sexual offending.
- Examine differentiation of pathways on demographic and personal factors.
- Examine differentiation of pathways on offense factors.
- Identify the implications of the findings of this study for assessment and treatment.