The significance of safety and space to the primary prevention of female sexual offending

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Female sexual offending has generated much less concern than its male equivalent. There remains a societal disbelief of women’s propensity to commit sexual offences, because of the female nurturing role (Cortoni et al., 2017). Less concern may also be influenced by the glorification of sexual abuse perpetrated by females towards adolescent males (Bradbury & Martellozzo, 2021). The legal definition of rape involving “penile penetration” arguably reflects the male-dominated perception of sexual abuse (Sexual Offences Act, 2003), despite some public concern about this (UK Government and Parliament, 2020). There is evidence that this type of offending is also minimised by relevant professionals (Kite & Tyson, 2004; Clements et al., 2014). This is further demonstrated in disparate sentences given to female perpetrators of sexual abuse (Beeby et al., 2021). Christensen’s (2021) research, however, contends that professionals are aware of the severity and impact of sexual abuse perpetrated by women.

This article will explore the literature base regarding the scale and extent of this type of offending, followed by a critical exploration of co versus solo offenders. This distinction will be used to demonstrate the different issues of safety and space in female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Safety and space are imperative aspects of the primary prevention of sexual offending, which involves a wide-scale public health approach to prevent sexual abuse (Laws, 2000). Primary prevention has clear advocates (e.g., National Organisation for the Treatment of Abuse) and is especially lacking for child sexual abuse in the UK (Brown & Saied-Tessier, 2015).

Prevalence of Female Sexual Offending

Female sexual offenders (FSOs) represent a small proportion of all sexual offenders. In 2019, 2% of those found guilty of sexual offences were women (MoJ, 2020). In contradiction to official statistics, research suggests that FSOs are responsible for up to 5% of all sexual offences committed against children (Bunting, 2005). In fact, the largest available meta-analysis of 17 samples from 12 countries suggests there are 2-5% female sexual offenders in official figures. This is argued to rise to 12% in victimisation data (Cortoni et al., 2017). This disparity between official statistics, research and victim surveys is endemic within the field of sexual offending.

In terms of re-offending, male sexual offenders are evidenced as having five-year sexual recidivism rates of roughly 10-15% (Hanson & Bussière, 1998), as opposed to 1-3% for FSOs (Cortoni et al., 2010). It appears that the sexual recidivism rates of FSOs are low and if financially motivated offences are discounted, they may be as low as 1% (Cortoni et al., 2010). FSOs may be accountable for less crime than their male counterparts, but this does not mean
primary prevention is not needed. This is especially because victims experience significant long-term trauma (Bradbury & Martellozzo, 2021). Overall, FSOs are a heterogeneous group. They are not only different to male sexual offenders, but also have specific motivations and characteristics within their own population. They require a gender-responsive approach, so typologies have been devised in order to further explore FSOs’ characteristics and motivations.

**Typologies**

Within the literature there are a number of accepted typologies for FSOs. Matthews et al. (1991) are credited with creating the first typologies through undertaking qualitative interviews with 16 FSOs. Their *teacher/lover* fell in love with an adolescent male who they abused acting alone. Vandiver & Kercher’s (2004) study of 471 FSOs extended this typology to involve other mentoring and care-taking roles. The *Intergenerationally Predisposed Offender* had been sexually abused within a familial context, which had featured generational sexual abuse. They therefore perceived sex as a part of love and targeted family members, acting alone. Finally, the *male-coerced offender* represented a passive woman who, motivated by fear, engaged in sexual offending to fulfill her husband’s demands (Matthews et al., 1991).

Vandiver & Kercher’s (2004) further typologies suggest motivations for FSOs which include a desire for intimacy, economic gain and fear of domestic violence. Nathan and Ward (2002) additionally found motivations including rejection, attempting to placate the male co-offender and seeking to establish power. Although this article does not seek to suggest FSOs can be neatly fitted into categories, which is an established difficulty with typologies (Robertiluo & Terry, 2007), these have begun to illustrate key characteristics and motivations for FSOs. Matthews et al.’s (1991) original typology separated solo offenders and co-offenders, which has led to further exploration of their differences. The largest available meta-analysis suggests that solo offenders represent approximately two thirds of the FSO population (Colson et al., 2013).

**Solo Offenders**

Solo FSOs tend to be younger and perpetrate sexual offences against predominantly male victims (Ten Bensel et al., 2019; Wijkman & da Silva, 2021; Miller & Marshall, 2019). This reflects the infamous case studies of women in positions of trust convicted of sexual abuse against adolescent males, who appear to reflect the *teacher/lover* typology. A key example of this type of case is Debra Lafave in the United States (Goldenberg, 2006). Motivation for solo offenders is therefore entangled within entitlement and a perception that their needs are more important than their victim’s (Elliot et al., 2010).

The *teacher/lover* typology has an explicit implication on safety. In the Western world, there are prevailing stereotypes of adolescent males (Hassett-Walker et al., 2014), including their sex drive, which can lead to minimisation of their status as victims of sexual abuse. The continued glorification of sexual abuse perpetrated by women towards adolescent males (Oliver, 2007), further demonstrates this issue. Unless the severity of female sexual offending is recognised, this has significant implications for the safety of former and potential victims of this type of FSO. The spaces relevant to these types of offences include women in positions of trust. These spaces have been confronted by prevention efforts, following the significant implications of historic allegations of child abuse during the previous decade (NSPCC, 2021).
Arguably, primary prevention needs to address the missing dialogue around the risks of sexual abuse committed by women in these spaces.

Overall, the research base is larger on the subject of co-offenders, as a significant amount of studies have involved a larger proportion of them. The literature is especially limited on the Intergenerationally Predisposed Offender, despite its clear implications on safety in domestic spaces. This theme will instead be considered using the research base on co-offenders.

Co-offenders
Women who commit sexual abuse with a male typically target female victims, who are commonly a familial relation or their own children (Wijkman & da Silva 2021; Muskens et al., 2011; Budd et al., 2015; Majeed-Ariss et al., 2021). This immediately highlights concerns about safety in specific spaces, namely domestic settings. These settings are particularly conducive to longer-term child sexual abuse, due to being private spaces with less outside scrutiny (McKillop et al., 2021). The complexity of domestic life makes it more difficult to distinguish illegitimate caregiving behaviours. This difficulty is further influenced by guardianship, which in this context relates to a caregivers’ capability or confidence to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse (McKillop et al., 2021).

It appears that a significant amount of co-offenders commit offences with their intimate partner (Gannon et al., 2014; Majeed-Ariss et al., 2021). These relationships are commonly characterised by domestic abuse (Elliot et al 2010; Saradjian & Hanks, 1996), which results in some co-offenders being motivated by fear (Vandiver, 2006). Other co-offenders are much younger than the male and have been potentially groomed by them (Wijkman et al., 2011). This has led to the suggestion that victims of co-offenders are chosen by the male perpetrator, resulting in predominantly female victims (Williams et al., 2019). Domestic abuse and coercion are issues of safety in the domestic setting generally. Within co-offending, this is likely to impact on the female’s perceived capability and confidence to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse.

However, coercion is not the sole explanation or motivating factor for co-offenders. Gillespie et al. (2015) found that co-offenders were more likely to be in an intimate relationship with a registered sex offender and have peers who were known offenders. This may be due to the impact of trauma and abuse which characterise female offenders’ lives generally (Corston, 2007). Or, this may suggest co-offenders are not necessarily passive actors. The latter suggestion is evidenced by a small-scale study which found some co-offenders are sexually motivated, even when coercion was apparent (Beech et al., 2009).

Nathan and Ward (2002) extended this debate by implementing an additional typology of male accompanied: the rejected/revengeful due to the significant levels of anger and jealousy they found. Thereafter, co-offenders are now separated into those who are coerced and those who are accompanied by their male counterparts. The accompanied co-offender reflects similar issues of safety in the domestic setting for child abuse already discussed, which emphasises the importance of primary prevention in this area.

Conclusion
This article has argued for the need for primary prevention efforts to address sexual abuse perpetrated by women. There is a missing public dialogue about FSOs, despite this becoming
increasingly established about men who commit sexual abuse. Primary prevention could address safety regarding the potential for women in positions of trust to commit sexual offences against adolescent males, and their possible role as co-offenders within their families. Primary prevention could also prioritise relevant spaces for FSOs including establishments (e.g., schools) and the domestic setting. Guardians have been identified as inherently important in navigating the complex domestic setting to prevent child sexual abuse (McKillop et al., 2021). Without education and a public dialogue, they are not equipped with the required knowledge about female sexual offending. However, this article does not seek to escalate anxiety around female sexual offending and has highlighted its overall low prevalence.

References


NSPCC. (2021). *Protecting children from abuse by someone in a position of trust or authority*.


