

Female Sex Offenders: Double Standards

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Abstract

This paper will discuss female pedophiles, rapists, and sex offenders, also known as female sex criminals, the double standards, of how they are viewed in the criminal justice system, how the medical fields view them, the psychological effects of their actions on their victims, and how the public views them. Unlike male pedophiles, rapists, and sex offenders of that gender; female pedophiles are not as readily identified as male pedophiles. Since female sex criminals do not always conform and fit the stereotypes that are more commonly found in male sex criminals, it is much more difficult for authorities to detain them. The gender stereotypes that influence the disbelief that a female can be convicted of a sex crime, lessens the possibility and seriousness of reports of their crimes. The added possibility that both male and female victims of female sex criminals are less likely to report their victimization at the hands of a female abuser adds to this difficulty.

Keywords: *sex offenders, female population, double standards*

Female Sex Offenders and their gender stereotype

A sex crime is a criminal offense that involves knowingly forcing another person to participate in unwanted sexual activity, whether by force or threat. Rape and pedophilia fall into this category as well. On the topic of pedophilia, according to Mosby's Medical Dictionary (2009), pedophilia is a psychosexual disorder in which the fantasy or act of engaging in sexual activity with prepubertal children is the preferred or exclusive means of achieving sexual excitement and gratification. (p.199). The perpetrators may be heterosexual or homosexual. This disorder is indiscriminate; males and females can be pedophiles. Female pedophiles are often overlooked because there is an unwillingness to explore the possibilities of female sex abusers. Whenever the victim is a male, the male is not usually encouraged to report victimization due to the negative stigma. Authorities are confounded by their physical reactions when it comes to consent.

Female victims of female sex criminals also have a difficult time convincing others that women can be abusive and that they can sexualize others. In regards to the negative stigma of accusing female sex offenders, authors Ferguson and Meehan (2005) reference Schwartz and Cellini (1995) on the stereotypes of women as sex criminals stating that “ cultural stereotypes of women as disinterested in sexual pleasure or non-violent may contribute to an unwillingness to explore the phenomenon of females perpetuated sexual acts against children of adults.” (p.76).

While the media portrays female sex offenders, as young, attractive high school teachers that had sexual relations with their teenage students, the reality is far from the stereotypical images portrayed. There is a heavy stigma with victims especially if the victims are males in this category. In regards to male adolescents that are abused sexually by women, the book *Female sexual Offenders: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment* by authors Theresa A. Gannon and France

Cortoni state that, “Many male adolescents sexually abused by women are considered by some in society to be ‘lucky’, to be experiencing an initiation, a rite of passage” (p.23).

This leaves male victims confused and most often ashamed as well as not being taken seriously. It also leads to psychological problems later on in life. Male victims of female sexual abuse feel like they are a joke in society if their abuser is female due to society refusing to see that females can also have a negative spotlight, especially where sexual abuse is concerned. There is also the “logic” that some activist groups (e.g:feminists), where if the male orgasms during this incident; then they technically “enjoyed” it, so therefore it cannot be considered sexual abuse or rape. This logic is flawed because the same terms can be applied to female victims of male rapists and sexual abusers. However, the double standard is that the female is always the victim, while the male is not. Another flaw in the argument is that biological reactions do not equal the mind's mental state. Regardless if the body orgasms, mentally the victim did not consent.

Males in society, more commonly in colleges as some studies have found, fall victim to these “rape myths” when they have been sexually abused. Most have even been forcibly raped. The dangers of female sex crimes are lessened due to gender stereotypes. Authors Stemple, Flores, and Meyer provide evidence by reporting that studies of ‘rape myths’ among college students have found that little has changed over the two decades (Turchik & Edwards, 2012). The majority of those surveyed do not believe that a ‘big, strong man can be raped by a woman,(Struckman-Johnson &StruckmanJohnson, 1992) nor do they think that a man who was raped by a woman would be ‘very upset’ (Chapleau, Osald, &Russell, 2008; Turchik & Edwards, 2012) (p.2). If in fact the female is the rapist and the male is the victim; the male is more likely to have the blame on him instead of the female who committed the act.

While women face many stereotypes in society, the stereotypes of sex offenses do not connect as easily as they do for males. Authors Lara Stemple, et al, confirm this by stating, “Stereotypes about women, which reflect gender and heterosexist biases, include the notion that women are nurturing, submissive helpmates to men. The idea that women can be sexually manipulative, dominant, and even violent runs counter to these stereotypes (Bysers, 1996; Pflugradt & Allen, 2012)” (p.2). Evidence suggests the contrary when there are violent women in society (ex: the famous serial killer Aileen Wuornos, who was also a rapist as well); though their crimes differ, sex offenses and pedophilia is no doubt among the many crimes that they commit just like their male counterparts.

The same authors go on to state that “studies have documented female perpetuated acts that span a wide spectrum of sexual abuse, which include even severe harms such as nonconsensual sex, vaginal and anal penetration with a finger or object, and intercourse (Hetherington, 1999; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2011; Pflugradt & Allen, 2012)” (p.2). These indicate that while stereotypes attempt to persist and minimize the actions and crimes of female sex criminals, there are documentations that challenge those stereotypes about women.

As with many sex criminals, there is a point to consider: the possibility of childhood trauma and abuse that these criminals have endured, which then was carried on into their adolescent and adult lives, resulting in them committing the very same crimes. Taking note of the past female sex criminals, the very same article states some curious studies that were done with both female and male juvenile sex criminals. The study gathered information about the abusers childhood traumas and whether or not their actions were linked to their pasts.

The same authors go to state, “One study found that juvenile female offenders had a notably higher number of past sexual abusers (4.5) compared to male juvenile sex offenders (1.4) (Matthews, Hunter, & Vuz, 1997). Female perpetrators also reported to earlier sexual abuse (64% were first victimized before age six, as opposed to 26% of male sexual offenders) (Matthews et al., 1997)” (pg. 2). These findings indicate that trauma from past sexual abuse may be the stimuli of their current actions of sex related crimes, and it seems that female perpetrators have had a higher amount of encounters with sexual abusers in their past.

A second study conducted with both juvenile and adult sex criminals of both genders, compared female criminals of sexual and non-sexual crimes. This study stated, “Another study of adult and juvenile sex offenders found that females were more likely to be victims of incest (33%) than male offenders (135); female perpetrators were also more likely to report having been raped (39%) as compared to males (males) (Miccio-Fonseca, 2000) (Although unduly limited definitions of “rape” sometimes undercount even severe sexual victimization of men and boys (Stemple & Meyer, 2014, p.2-3).

This further contributes to the negative stigma of males not being able to report being victims of rape, unlike females who are able to since society views female victims as more “fragile” due to trauma of rape, rather than males. This also adds to the gender stereotyping of glossing over male victims of rape, and dismissing their claims of victimization due to the concept of masculinity. This is the possibility that many reports from victims of female sex crimes go unreported: the reactions of disbelief that a woman could be the cause of these crimes.

In regards to the definition of rape, changes have been made to the word according to the FBI:UCR. The original definition only focused on the female victim, which completely ignored

the possibility of a male being the victim of rape, and only focused on the penetration of a female. The new definition of rape, according to the FBI website, is as follows, “Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim” (“Rape Addendum” 2017). The newly updated definition included rape victims of both genders, along with acts of sexual assault and usage of objects to penetrate.

How the Criminal Justice system views female sex criminals

The book *Perspectives on Female Sex Offending: A culture of denial* by author Myriam S. Denov includes a study of how the criminal justice system (in this case: the police) viewed female sex criminals when given reports about them. The study was done on Canadian police about sexual assault and the topic of gender. The questions for their training focused only on male-on-female sexual violence but nothing about female sex criminals. The author mentions that when asked about sex related crimes committed by females. (in the interviews case: sexual assault) the author stated that, “Female perpetrators were never mentioned. During the training the topic never came up. We were never presented with the possibility that a woman would be the perpetrator (M-DC15)” (p.200).

Proof of sexual assault must be obtained for there to be any investigation of such an act occurring. If there is no evidence or ‘proof’ suggesting that such an act took place, the police will dismiss it. The author states that evidence from male sexual assaulters, “What were recognized as ‘proof’ were elements such as DNA, hair, saliva, or sperm samples to be obtained from the victim, or medical evidence of penetration” (p.201). All of these can be easily collected from a male suspect, especially considering the sperm samples. In the case of female suspects, the idea

of sperm is out of the question, for biological and obvious reasons. That however does not rule out the rest: DNA, hair, and saliva can be collected just as easily from a female sex criminal as well.

Public influence also plays a role in influencing the criminal justice system. When society brings gender stereotypes into play, then that influence is carried over into the criminal justice system. The Center for Sex Offender Management (2007) states that, “beliefs and perceptions at the macro level can, in turn, influence perspectives and responses at a more micro level. Indeed, there is evidence that broader cultural biases play a role in the willingness of various criminal justice and treatment professionals to acknowledge female sex offending (see, eg, Becker et al, 2001; Denov, 2004)” (p.3). The study and interview of Canadian police training proves this by having focused solely on males being the suspects and criminals of sex crimes. There was no mention ever of female sex criminals, or even the possibility that a female could have been a suspect of a sex crime.

Police training seems to solely revolve around males as perpetrators of sex crimes, leading to the disbelief when accusations of a female as being the cause of the sex crime has been brought to them. This plays well into the cultural denial and influence on the criminal justice system. The Center for Sex Offending Management confirms this by stating, “Specifically, the research revealed that police officers reacted with disbelief to allegations involving women, minimized the seriousness of the reports, viewed the female suspects as less dangerous and harmful, and were prone toward labelling the cases as ‘unfounded’ (Denov, 2004)” (pg.3). Victims can easily report a male of a sex crime, since it is much more believable and cultural influences make it much easier for males to be convicted of sex crimes, but females are much more difficult.

Medical and Psychological bias on Female Sex Criminals

Female sex criminals have been recognized in history alongside male sex criminals, despite the continuing denial of society that females cannot be convicted of sex crimes. In the book *Female sexual offenders: theory, assessment and treatment*, authors Therasa and France cite a study done by Tardieu in the 1800's and they state that, "Tardieu (1857), in the first formal text on child sexual abuse, recognized that whilst the majority of the perpetrators are men, women also committed such crimes" (pg.168). Despite societal views, there is historical evidence that females do indeed commit sexual crimes. The same authors mention another incident in France and state that, "Bernard (1886) reported that during a 10-year period in France (1874-1884), 181 women were convicted of sexually abusing children" (p(s). 168-169).

Despite this evidence, the denial still prevailed with Freud even denying the fact that women could be sex criminals. The authors confirm by stating, "Despite this information and the existence of other more formal prevalence studies, Freud and colleagues still stated 'pedophilia...does not exist at all in women' (Racansky & Glancy, 1984 p.193)" (p.169). This denial of the possibility of female sex criminals, despite the evidence proving contrary still prevails even now in the modern era, and is likely that influence from Freud that helped push this narrative that still persists today.

The DSM at that time did not even include the concept of diagnosing females with sexual disorders, and the authors state this by reporting, "Denov also comments that The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders states that 'Except for sexual masochism...paraphilia's are almost never diagnosed in females' (APA, 1994. P.524) (p.169) This denial could possibly be

the lack of capability for professionals to examine these issues in women due to gender stereotypes, even though paraphilia was now completely exclusive to only males.

In modern times, this bias still continues in the medical and mental health areas. The Center for Sex Offender Management confirm this by stating, “Similar patterns have been identified within the medical and mental health fields, in which the interacting effects of training, diagnostic criteria, and cultural stereotypes are believed to impact professionals’ considerations about sex offenses committed by females” (p.3). Just like within the criminal justice system (e.g: the police), professionals in mental health care would dismiss the case, and be biased if the reports were about a female sex criminal. The victim would be labeled as a ‘liar’ and the culprits deemed as harmless compared to male sex criminals.

There is evidence to prove that when reports of female sexual abuse towards a victim is given to the medical professionals, it is dismissed as a harmless case and not taken seriously unlike the case if it were a male sex criminal. The Center of Sex Offender Management confirms this by stating, “When presented to psychiatrists and other clinicians, these kinds of cases have been met with skepticism and marginalization, and the women who committed the acts have been perceived as less culpable and less harmful” (p.3). The culprits of the female gender, who were the cause for the abuse and traumatization in a victim, are not taken as seriously as men. There is also the stigma during survivor abuse groups, where female victims felt ashamed. The book, *Female sexual offenders: theory, assessment and treatment*, cite a study done by Lind saying, “Lind (2004) describes having to form a separate group for the women who had been sexually abused by females as they even felt stigmatized in survivor groups where the other participants have been sexually abused by males” (pg. 2001).

How society reinforces the stereotypes of female sex criminals

To society, sex related crimes have only been applied to males thus ignoring or turning a blind eye to female suspects for the same crimes. Since the gender stereotypes (in this case) are greatly imbalanced, this allows for one gender to escape the consequences of the same crime that a male would commit. Society views women as nurturing caregivers, unable to be capable of aggression as a male would. As stated before, female and male victims for female sex criminals have the trouble of convincing society that women can be sexually abusive. The Center for Sex Offender Management confirms this by stating, “Misconceptions also exist about the “ability” of women to sexually victimize males, with some believing that males are incapable of being physically aroused if they are unwilling participants (Anderson & Struckman-Johson, 1998; Hislop, 2001) (p.3).

Society believes that if a male was ‘aroused’ during the course of either rape or other forced sexual abuse (e.g: fondling oral sex, forced penetration, etc), then society would dismiss the claims of the individual male who was the victim. The Center for Sex Offender Management confirms this by stating, “This reflects not only a limited understanding of physiological responses, but also suggests a narrow minded view of female-perpetrated sexual victimization as solely involving members of the opposite sex” (p.3). This may add to the list of reasons why it is difficult for male victims of female sexual abuse to report their abusers to the authorities and to clinical professionals.

Psychological effects on victims

While society would like to believe that sexual abuse from a female sex criminal is much less damaging than if it were done by a male, the truth is that there is no evidence or studies to

support society's claims on this. On the other hand, there is no evidence to support the psychological effects and results from the abusers, despite the strong resistance society (and some political movements as well) has against the image of female sex criminals. The book, *Female sexual offenders: theory, assessment and treatment*, cite a study done by Denov stating that, "For example, Denov's (2004) sample of seven men and seven women reported that their sexual abuse by women was highly damaging and difficult to recover from; only one male reported that his abuse by a female perpetrator did not damage him" (p.210). It seems that with these findings, they are contrary to society's opinions, proving that there is no difference of sexual abuse from a female sex criminal and a male sex criminal. In fact, the damage could possibly be greater due to the stereotypes of women, leading to the victims feeling betrayed by society and their views.

There has been research done stating that a female's sexual abuse as much worse than that of a male's and the authors cite a study done by Sgroi and Sagent (1993) stating, "...that those victims who had been abused by both male and female perpetrators all felt that the abuse by a woman was more harmful and damaging than the abuse by a male" (p.211). The possibilities of society having lied about female sex criminals could have caused feelings of betrayal for the victims. The traumatic sexualization by referencing a study done by Dimrock, stating, "Many victims of sexual abuse by women struggle with issues of sexuality and sexual identity. Dimrock (1988) found that 7 of 25 adult males sexually abused as children had been victimized by women (4 mothers, 2 sisters, and 1 stepsister)" (p.213).

Finally, social and relationship (e.g: parenting) difficulties are also present in the victims of sexual abuse by women. The authors above mentioned that "Rosencrans (1996) found

parenting to be problematic by all nine of men and most of the women who had been sexually abused in childhood by their mothers” (p.213).

Discussion

Although there are studies done to prove that there are indeed female sex criminals and that the results of their actions have caused severe psychological effects on their victims, there are still limitations. Gender stereotypes and the way society views women, heavily influences the way criminal justice system and the medical fields view female sex criminals and severely limits the consequences for their crimes, making it easier for the crimes to be hidden and continued. The gender stereotypes for males in this case are even more severe: as society dismisses their claims of sexual abuse by a woman is psychologically damaging to them. Thus, their reports of being victims are not taken as seriously as female victims reporting abuse by male sex criminals, and as such: the crime goes ignored. As a result, little is done to bring equality in the criminal justice system and the medical fields for these types of criminals. There is undoubtedly more research required for these types of criminals. By doing more research and studies, there could be the possibility of equality in the justice system for this ‘special’ population of criminals.

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