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Demystifying Female Perpetrated Sex Crimes Against Children

by Michael Pittaro

This article presents the sobering realities about females who perpetrate child sexual abuse (CSA), a phenomenon that up till now has been largely unaddressed. Of course, this is in part attributable to the fact that males are far more likely than females to commit CSA. But it also has something to do with the observation made by author Michael Pittaro: that for most people, it is just too heinous and counterintuitive an idea to contemplate that a female, whose traditional identity has included giving life, nurturing, and protecting the young, could molest a child. As clearly outlined in this piece, the fact that some females do perpetrate child sexual abuse is, unfortunately, a sad reality and one that must be grappled with.

Sexual crimes, particularly those perpetrated against children and adolescents, are among the most heinous and disturbing criminal acts which one human being can inflict upon another (Duncan, 2010). The psychological and emotional ramifications both during and after a sexual assault or series of assaults are compounded by the fact that most victims often know and likely trust their attacker (Duncan, 2010). Recently, I asked my university students to describe the stereotypical pedophile. The descriptions that followed were almost exclusively confined to that of a male, and based on the research to date, that would be an accurate assumption. Very few would lump females under the general category of “sexual offender,” and even fewer would go so far as to categorize females as pedophiles. Scientific documentation of female perpetrated sex crimes against children dates back as early as the 1930s, yet we, for the most part, still operate under the premise that

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“women don’t do that” (Duncan, 2010). Societal and cultural bias continue to perpetuate the myth that women are incapable of such crimes, and if they do engage in such acts, an abusive, dominant, and manipulative male likely coerced them. This type of thinking is why criminal justice practitioners and scholars often perceive females who sexually target children and adolescents as victims, not perpetrators (Duncan, 2010).

Although female sexual offenders represent a mere 1% to 5% of the total number of “known” sexual offenders, female perpetrated sexual offending is now recognized as a significant social, legal, and scientific problem warranting further criminological research (Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon & Rose, 2008; Gannon, Rose & Williams, 2009). Despite the growing media attention and scientific research conducted to date concerning female sexual offenders, few criminal justice researchers and practitioners have attempted to truly understand this largely misunderstood and understudied population (Gannon, Rose & Williams, 2009; Sandler & Freeman, 2011). Even though there have been positive advancements within the research and practitioner literature, the research leading to laws, public policies, and therapeutic programs still focus predominantly on male sexual offenders while erroneously dismissing female sexual offending as less abusive, traumatic, and violent (Pratley & Goodman-Delahunty, 2011; Wijkman, Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2010). One of the leading misconceptions is that there are universal criminogenic factors that lead to sex offending, which is based on the enormity of research uncovered over past decades in relation to male sexual offending (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011).

DISTORTED PERCEPTIONS

Regrettably, this distorted perception that female perpetrated sex crimes against children and adolescents are less serious and harmful contradicts the current, although admittedly limited, scientific research findings in regard to female sexual offenses against children (Gannon & Rose, 2010; Miller, Turner & Henderson, 2009; Muskens, Bogaerts, Van Casteren & Lubrijn, 2011; Pratley, Goodman & Delahunty, 2011; Wijkman, Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2011; Wijkman et al., 2010). Contemporary research findings acknowledge long-standing gender responsive bias within the societal, legal, political, clinical, and academic arenas. In response, female sex offender researchers have collectively emphasized and have fully supported the need for further research to understand and distinguish male pedophilia from female pedophilia (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Gannon & Rose, 2010; Miller, Turner & Henderson, 2009; Pratley, Goodman & Delahunty, 2011; Wijkman et al., 2011; Wijkman et al., 2010).

Sexual offending perpetrated by women continues to be an under-recognized and under-researched area within the literature (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011). Though sexual offending among females has long been established, many still erroneously dismiss it as extremely rare and highly unusual, partially based on the earlier noted statistic that 1% to 5% of all known sex crimes involve females as the perpetrators (Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon &

Rose, 2008; Gannon, Rose & Williams, 2009). If such crimes do occur, they do not rise to the level of dangerousness, and are not viewed as being as emotionally traumatic to victims as the sexual abuse perpetrated by male sexual offenders (Gannon & Rose, 2010; Muskens, Bogaerts, Van Casteren & Lubrijn, 2011). Researchers, clinicians, and practitioners have traditionally minimized the seriousness of sexual offending by females and attributed such crimes as reactions to the sexual abuse they encountered, which is why this subject was only discussed, at least initially, within the feminist criminological literature (Gannon, Rose & Ward, 2010; Gannon et al., 2009; Embry & Lyons, 2012). This traditional, yet close-minded way of thinking—that female sex offenders only engaged in such crimes because they were victims themselves—inadvertently transfers blame, responsibility, and accountability away from the female sexual offender (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Gannon et al., 2010; Miller, Turner & Henderson, 2009; Muskens et al., 2011; Tsopeles, Spyridoula & Athanasios, 2011; Wijkman et al., 2010).

LIMITED THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

Academic research on sexual offending has been dominated by studies focusing almost exclusively on males as the aggressors and perpetrators of such crimes (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Cortoni, Hanson & Coache, 2010; Embry & Lyons, 2012). Nevertheless, emerging and established scientific findings support the idea that female sex offending occurs more frequently than previously imagined and is equally, if not more, dangerous and traumatic to victims because of the caring, nurturing gender roles that are thought to be innate and culturally defined by society's standards (Kimonis, Skeem, Edens, Douglas, Lilienfeld & Poythress, 2010; Martellozo, Nehring & Taylor, 2010).

Feminist criminological theories have historically served as the backdrop in explaining why females engage in sex crimes, particularly pedophilic acts involving children and adolescents (Gannon & Rose, 2008). The common theme throughout the female criminological literature has portrayed female sex offenders as reacting to their own sexual victimization, or shift all accountability, blame, and responsibility to male sexual offenders who coerce these women who are believed to be passive and submissive into becoming co-perpetrators (Gannon & Rose, 2008). While the research examining female sexual offenders has increased substantially over the past decade, our research knowledge of female offenders has lagged significantly behind that held for their male counterparts (Gannon & Cortoni, 2010; Gannon, Cortoni & Rose, 2010; Gannon, Rose & Ward, 2012; Gannon et al., 2010; Gannon, Rose & Ward, 2008). Due to extremely small population sample sizes, many researchers shy away from female sexual offender research and as a result, the research into these offenses has been limited to small-scale studies often inundated with methodological and analytical challenges (Duncan, 2010; Gannon & Rose, 2009; Gannon & Rose, 2008; Gannon, Rose & Williams, 2009). As a result, theorists have not had access to the critical amount of

rigorous research required to construct a convincing comprehensive theory of the multiple factors involved in the etiology of female sexual offending. As a direct consequence of this, it appears that professionals have attempted to either (1) apply male-derived theories to the explanation of female sexual offending, or (2) develop basic theoretical building blocks in the form of a typological understanding of female sexual offending (Harris, 2010).

In response, Gannon, Rose and Ward (2008) have introduced "The Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending (DMFS)," which provides a clearly detailed theoretical explanation of female perpetrated sex offending, noting specifically the contributory roles of cognitive, behavioral, affective, and contextual factors relative to the distinct pathways to these offenses. For the most part, culpability and accountability associated with female sex crimes against children are lessened, which minimizes or negates the seriousness of their offenses and sums up their crimes as being misguided, yet consensual, innocent love relationships often intended to fill an emotional void. This line of thinking is unlike the one we hold of men who sexually prey upon children.

UNRAVELING THE MYSTERY BEHIND THE FEMALE SEXUAL OFFENDER

Like their male counterparts, female sexual offenders can range in age, race, social class, and religious beliefs because sexual offending crosses all demographic boundaries. Preliminary research findings suggest the typical female sexual offender who preys upon children as Caucasian and in her mid-20s to early 30s, which is consistent with what has been appearing in the recent news. Furthermore, she has a history of physical or sexual abuse, suffers from a variety of mental disorders, struggles with substance abuse, and is socially isolated or under the perception of being socially isolated (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Cortoni, Hanson & Coache, 2010; Embry & Lyons, 2012). Additionally, the typical female sexual offender has a history of dysfunctional romantic relationships, and she often serves in roles with unsuspecting access and availability to children and adolescents, many of which are hidden in plain sight (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Cortoni, Hanson & Coache, 2010; Embry & Lyons, 2012).

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

In comparison to male sexual offenders, female offenders have a higher tendency to victimize children and adolescents they know and are entrusted to care for in some capacity. In fact, in more than 75% of all cases, the female perpetrator and victim knew each other (Duncan, 2010). These known victims, in turn, are less likely to report their involvement as victims in the crime because they are overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, shame, and loyalty towards the female perpetrator (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Gannon et al., 2010). Reports

of strangers being victimized by females obviously occur, but unlike male sex offenders who target children, such crimes are very rare (Duncan, 2010).

Sexual offenses against children by females are therefore mostly hidden in plain sight. For example, many offenses occur during common, everyday child caring practices such as bathing, dressing, and changing diapers because these are cultural accepted expectations and practices in nearly every society (Wijkman et al., 2010). Females are universally regarded as caretakers, nurturers, and protectors of children and adolescents. As a result, sexual abuse by females will be less suspicious and therefore, less detectable when compared with child sexual crimes committed by men. However, the relatively recent increases in highly publicized instances of female sexual abuse perpetrated against children and adolescents has resulted in an increased demand for research (qualitative and quantitative) to fully understand the causes and distinct criminological pathways associated with females who sexually target children and adolescents (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Gannon et al., 2010).

THE DARK FIGURE OF CRIME

However, it is the existing cycle of bias on the part of criminal justice practitioners and scholars that inadvertently contributes to the growing dark figure of crime, a term used in criminology to describe the crimes that occur in society but remain largely unknown and unreported to the police. As criminal justice practitioners, we only know about the crime when it is uncovered by the police or reported to the police for an investigation. Simply stated, we do not know how much and how often female sex offending against children is occurring.

It often starts with the non-reporting victim, someone who has been victimized once or repeatedly, yet does not bring the victimization to the attention of the authorities for one reason or another. To compound matters, law enforcement has traditionally minimized the severity of the sex crimes because the female is not perceived to be as deviant, as violent, or otherwise as predatory in comparison to her male counterparts. If criminal charges are filed, there is the high likelihood of the case being plea-bargained, thereby diminishing the severity of the crimes once again by having the accused plead guilty to a lesser charge. If it reaches the courtroom, judges have customarily viewed females as more amenable to treatment; therefore, sentences are likely to be less severe in the length of the prison sentence and conditions of imprisonment (Duncan, 2010). Lastly, community-based sexual offender treatment programs continue to be dominated by male perpetrators; therefore, female sex offenders are mandated to participate in groups that were designed specifically for male sex offenders. We also know from the research that victims, male or female, more often contact the police when males victimize them (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Cortoni, Hanson & Coache, 2010; Embry & Lyons, 2012). Taken collectively, all contribute to the dark figure of crime in regard to female sexual offending.

GROOMING: THE DEVIANT ART OF DECEPTION

Victims of female sexual offenders are often selected because the offender perceives them as vulnerable, isolated, and/or emotionally needy (Beech, Parrett, Ward & Fisher, 2009). Especially in the case of adolescent males, female offenders may rely on the victim's natural sexual curiosity or feed into the victim's feelings of being unloved or unappreciated. Some of the grooming techniques used by female sex offenders are similar to those of male sex offenders, including targeting vulnerable children and adolescents, often those with low self-confidence and low self-esteem (Beech et al., 2009). The victims also tend to have less parental oversight and involvement, making them more vulnerable to the deception and trickery of a motivated sexual offender. Some strategies include:

- Assuming caretaking roles (*e.g.*, babysitting, teaching, tutoring, coaching);
- Forming a "special relationship," which further drives an emotional wedge between the victim and his/her parents;
- Becoming a welcome, trusted guest in the victim's home;
- Giving gifts, engaging in playful games, spending special quality time together with plenty of positive attention;
- Isolating the targeted victim from his/her family and friends through manipulative and deceptive techniques;
- Using the opportunity to seize upon the victim's feelings of being unloved/unappreciated;
- Emotional bonding and trust building over a period so that there's a mutual loving, caring relationship;
- Desensitizing the victim to sex (*e.g.*, talking, showing pictures, and watching pornographic videos);
- Using pretense, "safe" language ("teaching," "exploring," "closeness")
- Exploiting the victim's natural sexual curiosity or uncertainty to reassure and build confidence in the victim that the acts are "normal" (Gannon, Rose & Ward, 2008)

To maintain and sustain this relationship, perpetrators will often use bribes or gifts to ensure continued compliance, threaten dire consequences to ensure secrecy, threaten to blame the victim, and threaten with the loss of the "loving" relationship that has been formed.

CONCLUSION

The thoughts that we hold in relation to female sex offending are largely ingrained in our societal and cultural beliefs, beliefs that also hold true for key criminal justice system participants ranging from law enforcement agencies

responsible for investigating and charging the perpetrator, to the judges who render less-than-equitable prison sentences (Duncan, 2010). Once the female offender is eligible for parole, the parole board will likely assess most female sex offenders as low-risk, which is the opposite of the common designation given to male sex offenders who target children. Since the police are essentially the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system, their collective decision to investigate and criminally charge female sex offenders with the most appropriate crimes is of the utmost importance in creating and sustaining equitable treatment within the criminal justice system. The old adage “if you do the crime, you do the time” comes to mind.

These societal, cultural, and gender biases surrounding female perpetrated sex crimes, if left unchallenged, can and will prevent the criminal investigation and subsequent charging of female sex crimes (Duncan, 2010; Gannon, Rose & Williams, 2009; Sandler & Freeman, 2011). If the police choose not to arrest or correctly charge the female perpetrator with the appropriate sex crimes under the law, we will never know the true extent of this phenomenon. Admittedly, there have been positive advancements within the research and practitioner literature regarding sex offenders and the crimes they perpetrate. The research produced thus far has contributed to the establishment of federal and state laws, public policies, harsher sentencing decisions, and the creation and implementation of evidence-based therapeutic programs to curtail recidivism rates among child sex offenders. Nevertheless, criminal justice practitioners and researchers continue to focus predominantly on male sexual offenders while erroneously dismissing female sexual offending against children as less abusive, deviant, traumatic, violent, and therefore, worthy of attention (Pratley & Goodman-Delahunty, 2011; Wijkman et al., 2010).

Regrettably, we still operate under the widely held, yet distorted perception that female perpetrated sex crimes are less serious and traumatic to victims. This thought process contradicts the current, but limited, scientific research findings in regard to female sexual offending (Gannon & Rose, 2010; Miller et al., 2009; Muskens et al., 2011; Pratley & Goodman-Delahunty, 2011; Wijkman et al., 2011; Wijkman et al., 2010). Contemporary research findings acknowledge long-standing gender responsive bias and prejudicial treatment within the societal, legal, political, clinical, and academic arenas. In response, a small but growing number of female sexual offender researchers have collectively emphasized the need for further research (Cortoni & Gannon, 2011; Gannon & Rose, 2010; Miller, Turner & Henderson, 2009; Pratley & Goodman-Delahunty, 2011; Wijkman et al., 2011; Wijkman et al., 2010).

Some researchers, including myself, believe that sexual offending by females is relatively common, but the extent of such crimes is largely unknown because of the lack of reporting and because these women tend to be diverted out of the criminal justice system. Their “crimes” are minimized and not necessarily categorized as sex crimes. Others suggest that sexual offending by

women is likely to be under-identified because of societal and cultural stereotypes that females are “passive” in regard to sexual behaviors and that they are nurturers, caretakers, and protectors, not violent predators. Simply stated, the criminal justice system’s position should reflect the reality that some women *do* commit sex offenses against children, and they are dangerous predators.

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