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FEMALE SEXUAL OFFENDING

Miriam Wijkman and Jeffrey C. Sandler

Introduction

Many people think that sexual offenses are only committed by men. This is reflected in the fact that research on female sexual offending is scarce: The majority of studies on sexual offending focus on adult or juvenile males. At the same time, victimology studies and self-report studies on sexual offending show that female sexual offending is not as rare as many may think (Cortoni, Babchishin, & Rat, 2016). Even if women involved in sexual crimes may constitute a small group and may be responsible for a small proportion of all sexual offenses, the short- and long-term impact of sexual victimization is relatively large, varying from medical and sexual problems to psychological problems and (sexual) re-victimization (Beitchman et al., 1992; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Some researchers even suggest that the effects of sexual victimization caused by a woman may be more serious than the effects of sexual victimization caused by a man (Bunting, 2007; Denov, 2004a). The aim of this chapter is to provide a review of the scientific literature on the topic of female sexual offending. We will report the prevalence research on female sexual offending, describe offender and offense characteristics, and provide an overview of several topics less studied for female sexual offending, namely criminal career features, risk factors for recidivism and assessment, and treatment. Comparisons and contrasts with male sexual offending will be made. In this chapter, we will solely describe female sexual offending of hands-on offenses, offending such as rape and sexual assault, as research has indicated that females who commit hands-off sexual offenses may differ significantly from those who commit hands-on offenses (e.g., Cortoni, Sandler, & Freeman, 2015). Likewise, studies which focus on women who commit other hands-off offenses such as trafficking for sexual exploitation and prostitution (e.g., Reid, this book), or child pornography (e.g., Fortin & Paquette, this book) are also not included in this chapter. Furthermore, we will only include studies with

adult (18+) women. For more information on juvenile female sexual offending, we refer to McCuish and Lussier's chapter (Chapter 10).

Prevalence

Establishing the prevalence of female sexual offending remains a challenge for researchers. According to Green (1999), victim surveys show that between 14% and 24% of sexually abused males and between 6% and 14% of sexually abused females report having been abused by a female perpetrator. Bumby and Bumby (1997) reported even higher prevalence rates, fluctuating between 2% and 78%, which they explained by the very different types of research incorporated. It is difficult to compare the results reported by studies using clinical samples, student-based samples, and population-based surveys. According to victim studies, between 1% and 9% of the female victims and 14% and 52% of the male victims reported they had been sexually victimized by a woman (Saradjian, 2010). To provide more systematic information about prevalence, Cortoni and Hanson (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010) estimated the proportion of sexual offenses committed by women by using official reports and population-wide victim surveys. Both reviews were based on data retrieved from five countries (Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and the U.S.). Based on official records, the proportion of female sexual offending ranged from 0.6% to 8.7%, with an average of 4.6%. When victimization surveys were then used, the proportion of female perpetrators ranged from 3.1% to 7%, with an average of 4.8%. Overall, these two reviews (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010) indicated that women commit approximately 5% of all sexual offenses.

More recently, Cortoni, Babchishin, and Rat (2016) conducted a meta-analysis on the prevalence rates of female sexual offending. In this meta-analysis, prevalence studies conducted in a wider range of countries ($n = 12$) were included compared to prior reviews, and the sample size of the studies was taken into account. In this study, victimization surveys indicated a prevalence rate of 11.6%, which is quite a lot higher when compared with the 2.2% prevalence rate which was found in criminal justice data. Thus, the literature shows wide varying prevalence rates about the proportion of sexual offenses committed by women. It is fair to state, however, that the rates reported in victimization surveys are higher when compared with official/criminal justice data, and that women constitute a relatively small proportion of those offenders who commit sexual offenses. There are, however, some difficulties in establishing prevalence estimates of female sexual offending. Establishing prevalence estimates of sexual offending in general is not an easy task (results from the National Crime Victimization Survey [NCVS] in the U.S. showed that sexual assault and rape are the most underreported violent crimes; Truman, Langton, & Planty, 2013), but there are some issues which are especially relevant for female sexual offending. These issues can be described from a societal perspective, from a victim perspective, and from a criminal justice perspective.

Societal perspective

Society traditionally expects women to be non-aggressive and to be nurturers (Saradjian, 2010). It expects men to feel and express sexual desire for women and to be strong (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Researchers who studied females who commit domestic violence offenses have suggested that the inattention to violent women is related to the fact that traditional female role expectations regard a woman as a victim (Daly, 1992) and not someone who is capable of committing serious and violent crimes (Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003). Violent behavior by women is considered inappropriate and does not fit in with “traditional” female role expectations. When women display behavior which is inconsistent with these societal expectations, this behavior may be denied, minimized, or adjusted to existing social schema (Saradjian, 2010). Even if this behavior is acknowledged as being sexually abusive, people tend to minimize the damage of the abuse, or not to interpret the interaction of a (male) child victim with a female perpetrator as abuse (Finkelhor, 1984, as cited by Saradjian, 2010). Also, studies have shown that it is generally believed that male victims of a female perpetrator are harmed less than female victims of male perpetrators (Broussard, Wagner, & Kazelskis, 1991).

This societal perspective is also reflected in the way female sexual offenders are portrayed by the media. For example, sexual offenses by adult women against adolescent boys are often framed in terms of consensual, adult relationships (e.g., Mettler, 2016). Terms such as “relationship” and “affair” are used instead of “sexual assault” and “rape,” while words such as “seductress” and “mistress” give a sense of a consensual relationship between adults (Goddard & Saunders, 2000). This reframing of child sexual abuse into consensual terms is not unique to female-perpetrated offenses, but happens often (Goddard & Saunders, 2000). This traditional societal thinking also influences the extent to which people may be inclined to recognize female sexual offending as sexual abuse or to intervene when sexual abuse by a woman takes place. Women are permitted a much more liberal range of physical contact with their children than men: They usually bathe and dress their children and it is more accepted when they (and not their male partner) sleep together with their children. It is plausible that abuse committed in this context is not easily recognized as sexual abuse by family members and relatives, or by the victims (Banning, 1989; Ford, 2010).

Victim perspective

Such traditional role expectations may also result in victims less often reporting sexual victimization by women (Anderson, 2005). Male victims may feel especially “emasculated” having been victimized by the “weaker sex,” and may worry about the reaction of those around them. Men may be afraid they will not be regarded as “real men” because real men are supposed to always want sex and to always enjoy it (the “this would not happen to a real man” cliché) (Faller, 1987). Furthermore,

when a man is victimized, he is expected to not be upset or affected and it is not appropriate for him to show his emotions (Davies, Gilston, & Rogers, 2012); this may also serve as a barrier to reporting the crime to the police. Alternatively, female victims may be afraid that people will question their sexual orientation; similar fears were reported by male victims of sexual abuse who had been abused by a man (Alaggia, 2005).

Some general reasons given by adult victims for not reporting sexual victimization are: (a) blaming themselves for being raped/assaulted; (b) fear of repeat victimization when the victim knows the offender; (c) regarding the offense as minor; or (d) a belief that reporting the crime would not make a difference (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003). It is to be doubted if such inhibitions play a similar role for child victims. Reasons for children to not report are relatively unknown because most victim studies do not involve child respondents: The Statistics Netherlands survey interviews respondents from age 15, and the NCVS in the U.S. interviews respondents from age 12. Reasons why child victims probably do not report their victimization to the police could be unwillingness to acknowledge the abuse (especially when they are abused by parents or family members), children may be too young to remember the abuse, children are not able to express themselves because they are not yet able to talk, or children may not realize that what happened to them constitutes sexual abuse (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996).

Many of the reasons mentioned above for not reporting sexual victimization apply to all perpetrators and are not unique for women involved with sexual crimes. Peterson, Colebank, and Motta (2001), as cited by Saradjian (2010), reported, however, that when a woman has co-offended with a male, the victim may only report the abuse by the male and not the sexual victimization by the female. Since women may victimize children relatively more often and as children are not interviewed in victim studies, victim studies may also be underreporting sexual victimization by women more than sexual victimization by men.

Criminal justice perspective

In addition to societal and victim influences, factors related to criminal justice processing can also lead to the underreporting of female sexual offending. For example, research conducted by Denov and Roberts (2001) and Denov (2004b) showed that psychiatrists and police officers viewed sexual abuse by women as less harmful than sexual abuse by men, while some victims experience the sexual abuse as more harmful. Bunting (2007) reported that her respondents (professionals working with risk assessment tools and women involved in sexual crimes) were reluctant to accept that a woman could play an active role in sexual abuse or could even initiate it. Such beliefs are reflected in the fact that women convicted of sexual offenses have been found to be significantly less likely to be sentenced to prison than men convicted of similar sexual offenses (Sandler & Freeman, 2011). That is, after controlling for the influence of prior criminal histories and severity of sexual conviction charge, Sandler and Freeman (2011) found females convicted of sexual offenses 42% more

likely than males convicted of sexual offenses to receive a sentence of conditional release (e.g., probation), and 35% more likely to receive a sentence of either a fine or unconditional release. Criminal justice personnel viewing female sexual abuse as being less serious or harmful could deter victims from reporting such abuse, or could result in such abuse not being recorded even when it is reported.

Background factors and offense characteristics

In this section, we will discuss studies that have been conducted on the background factors related to women involved with sexual crimes. Drawing conclusions about background factors is complicated by the fact that only a small number of studies have been conducted on females who sexually offend. Sample sizes, while generally small, have a broad range and vary from 11 (Green & Kaplan, 1994) to 1,466 women (Sandler & Freeman, 2009). The studies also vary in sample origin/composition. Some samples consist of women who were charged or arrested for sexual offenses (e.g., Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Vandiver, 2006), some consist of women who were convicted of sexual offenses (e.g., Strickland, 2008; Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2010), some consist of women on sex offender registries (e.g., Sandler & Freeman, 2007), some consist of women in treatment facilities (e.g., Faller, 1995), and some consist of a combination of these conditions (e.g., Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; McCarty, 1986; Peter, 2009). Likewise, some studies combine juveniles and adults (e.g., Faller, 1987; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Miccio-Fonseca, 2000; Tardif, Auclair, Jacob, & Carpentier, 2005), and many use (sometimes very small) clinical samples (e.g., Gillespie et al., 2015). All of these differences make it difficult to compare results across studies. The differences mean, for example, that the prevalence of certain characteristics may fluctuate greatly across studies, depending on the nature of the sample. Furthermore, findings about personality disorders should be interpreted with caution since women from clinical samples are generally treated for psychological problems, after which (in the clinical setting) their roles as abuser become evident.

Offender characteristics

Overall, the majority (>60%) of females who commit sexual offenses are reported to be Caucasian (Bader, Scalora, Casady, & Black, 2008; Faller, 1995). Some studies have reported intellectual problems like borderline cognitive functioning (Faller, 1987; Lewis & Stanley, 2000) and a history of sustained low school performance (Mathews et al., 1991; Travin, Cullen, & Protter, 1990), while others have reported average and above-average intellectual capacities (IQ>90) (Turner, Miller, & Henderson, 2008). A few studies have mentioned a high prevalence of mental disorders (>37%) (Fazel, Sjöstedt, Grann, & Långström, 2010; Strickland, 2008), including depression and suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress disorders, anxiety disorders, and cognitive disorders, as well as personality disorders (Bumby & Bumby, 1997; Faller, 1995; Kaplan & Green, 1995; Mathews et al., 1991). Paraphilias are seldom

mentioned or diagnosed in women (Becker, Hall, & Stinson, 2001). In a study by Wijkman et al. (2011), a paraphilia was diagnosed in only three cases (two women with pedophilia and one with paraphilia not otherwise specified). It is well known that women are less frequently diagnosed with some kind of paraphilia than men, with a ratio of about 1:30 (Abel & Osborn, 2000). Despite the fact that paraphilias may be underdiagnosed in women, this absence of paraphilias could also indicate that perhaps females who sexually offend less often have sexual motives underlying their sexual offending when compared with males who sexually offend (O'Connor, 1987). Substance abuse (alcohol and/or drugs) prevalence in female sexual offending studies has varied from 13% to 55% (Faller, 1987; Mathews et al., 1989). Faller (1995) reported that over one-third of the women were married; other studies have reported lower rates (Kaplan & Green, 1995; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Miccio-Fonseca, 2000).

Childhood experiences

The vast majority of the women involved in sexual crimes have been found to have had difficult childhoods, including physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and/or alcohol abuse by parent(s) (Bumby & Bumby, 1997). Again bearing in mind some samples come from clinical settings, victimization rates varied widely. Sexual victimization ranged from 31% to 100% (Faller, 1987; Levenson, Willis, & Prescott, 2015; Mathews et al., 1989; Wijkman et al., 2010) and physical abuse varied from 35% to 93% (Allen, 1991; Mathews et al., 1989). In one study, the majority of the married women (85%) reported getting married as teenagers to escape the family home (McCarty, 1986). Women involved in sexual acts are in some studies described as socially isolated, having few or no friends, not feeling at home anywhere, and/or originating from broken and dysfunctional families (Mathews et al., 1991; McCarty, 1986; Travin et al., 1990).

Victim and offense characteristics

The average age of the women at the time of commission of their sexual offense is generally around 30 years (Ferguson & Meehan, 2005; Nathan & Ward, 2002). Similar to their male counterparts, the sexual acts committed by women who sexually offend run the entire range of sexual abuse, from genital fondling to oral sex to sexual penetration (Mathews et al., 1991; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Mixed findings have been reported on the gender of victims of female sexual abuse; some studies reported a majority of male victims (e.g., Freeman & Sandler, 2008), while others reported more female victims (e.g., Nathan & Ward, 2002). Some studies have reported that some women had more than one victim, and that these victims were not older than 11 years (pre-pubertal) (Bader et al., 2008; Faller, 1995; Johnson, 1989; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Turner, Miller, & Henderson, 2008). In the majority of cases (>70%), victim(s) were relatives or acquaintances. Some of these victim and offense characteristics are similar to what has been found for men involved in

sexual crimes, some are different. For example, while most victims of men have also been found to be relatives or acquaintances (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000), men have been found to have a strong preference for female victims and to favor slightly older victims (on average) than women involved in sexual crimes (Freeman & Sandler, 2008).

Findings on co-offenders for women who sexually offend have been reported by a few studies. In the study by Fehrenbach and Monastersky (1988), no co-offenders were reported, while other studies have reported co-offending rates of 25% (Bader et al., 2008), 34% (McCarty, 1986), 63% (Wijkman et al., 2010), 68% (Faller, 1995), and 75% (Nathan & Ward, 2002). The co-offender was usually a man, often the intimate partner of the female who committed the sexual offense (Faller, 1987; Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Gillespie, Williams, Elliott, Eldridge, Ashfield, and Beech (2015) compared 20 solo-offenders and 20 co-offenders on a range of clinical characteristics. They found that solo offenders showed a greater presence of mental health and substance abuse difficulties, while co-offenders reported a greater presence of environmentally-based factors, including a current partner who was a known sexual offender and involvement with antisocial peers.

In summary, it appears that the average woman who sexually offends, as portrayed by previous studies, has a history of trauma, often has mental disorders, is socially isolated, and performs moderately intellectually. It would be interesting to study whether these women are different from women who are involved in other (violent) crime types. The high prevalence of sexual abuse victimization in their history is prominent, in addition to physical abuse and neglect. Victims of females who sexually offend are generally known to the offender.

Heterogeneity of female sexual offenders

It is well known that there is variation in various aspects of male sexual offending (e.g., Knight, 1998, 1999). Researchers have attempted to address this heterogeneity by developing classification models and typologies (see Cale, this book). Such classifications have been based on the age of the victim (child molesters versus rapists), the age of the offender (juvenile versus adult offenders), the presence of any co-offenders (solo-offenders versus co-offenders), whether there was physical contact with the victim (hands-on versus hands-off offenders), and offenders' criminal careers (versatile versus specialized offenders).

Several authors have also identified subtypes within the population of females who commit sexual offenses. In general, the typologies that have been developed on females who sexually offend are mainly descriptive rather than explanatory. Typologies describing females who sexually offend can be divided into two types. In the first of the two types, more qualitative typologies are developed using interviews with offenders, or by analyzing treatment reports (Green & Kaplan, 1994; Mathews et al., 1989). The typology of Mathews et al. (1991) is the one most often referred to in the literature, as it has the richest (in terms of detail) dataset. The authors used extensive information on 16 females who sexually offended and who

had been assessed in a treatment facility. They clustered the women into groups in a qualitative manner, identifying three types of females who commit sexual offenses (in descending order of size of the groups): (a) the *teacher-lover type*, a woman who abuses an adolescent but denies the abuse and expresses that she has a love affair with the victim; (b) the *intergenerationally predisposed type*, a woman with a history of physical and/or sexual abuse, who on her own abuses her own child or a child acquaintance; and (c) the *male-coerced type*, a dependent woman who has experienced sexual abuse herself, and who (under duress) participates in the abuse of a child or children, initiated by her husband or intimate partner.

In the second of the two typology types, typologies are developed using quantitative techniques like cluster analysis, in which a small number of quantitative variables such as gender and age of the victim, criminal career features, and the presence of a co-offender are combined (e.g., Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver, 2006; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004; Wijkman et al., 2010). These studies often use a large sample of offenders. Vandiver and Kercher (2004), with a sample of 471 females who sexually offended, distinguished six types. They mainly used information about the nature of the sexual offenses, the gender and age of the victim, offender demographics, and the criminal career of the offender. Sandler and Freeman (2007) also used a large sample ($n = 390$). They could only partially reproduce the typology of Vandiver and Kercher, however, and found other subtypes, which nevertheless differed only marginally on criminal career aspects from the Vandiver and Kercher subtypes.

More recently, Wijkman et al. (2010) used a smaller sample ($n = 111$), but they were able to include many variables about offender, offense, and victim characteristics. They identified four prototypes, namely the *young assaulters*, the *rapists*, the *psychologically disturbed co-offenders*, and the *passive mothers*. The first two groups are relatively young solo offenders who abuse victims outside their family; the last two are mainly mothers who abuse their own children together with a co-offender. The prototype “rapist” resembles the sexual predator of Vandiver and Kercher (2004) because of the young age of the offender at the time of the offense. The “young assaulter” looks mostly like the young adult child exploiter that Vandiver and Kercher found because of the relatively light context of the offense, most often during babysitting situations. The “passive mothers” resemble the male-coerced molester and (partly) the predisposed molester of Mathews et al. (1991). The “passive mothers” were, like the male-coerced molester, acting in conjunction with a male. The women exhibit a pattern of extreme dependency and they report fear of their partner. The victims are her own children. Thus, Wijkman et al. (2010) found some subtypes as mentioned by Vandiver and Kercher (2004), but also some subtypes as reported by Mathews et al. (1989).

Theoretical explanations of female sexual offending

At this time, only Gannon et al. (2008) have developed a model outlining the offense process of women who sexually offend, called the Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending (DMFSO). The model is patterned after the models as

developed by Polaschek et al. (2001) and Ward et al. (1995), and was derived from interviews with, and the narrative experiences of, 22 females incarcerated in the United Kingdom for committing sexual offenses. The model explains the offense process and its parts, such as the planning process and particular offending styles. Specifically, the model distinguishes three phases to the offending process: (a) Background factors; (b) the pre-offense period; and (c) the offense and post-offense period. In the first period, background factors like early family environment, abusive experiences, lifestyle outcomes, vulnerability factors (e.g., coping style, social support, mental health) and major life stressors (e.g., domestic abuse, death of a loved one) are examined. In the second period, the pre-offense period, factors such as having an unstable lifestyle and offense-relevant distal planning are studied. In the third and final period, the offense and post-offense period, proximal planning, the offense approach, and the responses of the woman to the offense are described.

In a follow-up study, Gannon et al. (2010) identified three distinct and stable pathways to female sexual offending, based on their interviews with the same 22 females who committed sexual offenses who were included in the original 2008 study. The largest group of offenders ($n = 9$) followed an “explicit approach,” which means they intended to offend, and explicitly planned their offense. The second largest group of offenders ($n = 5$) followed a “directed avoidant” pathway. These offenders intended not to offend, but did so under the direction and coercion of a male accomplice. The third and final pathway was followed by offenders ($n = 4$) who were “implicitly disorganized.” They did not intend to offend, but offended impulsively following severe self-regulatory failure. (The final four offenders in the study could not be classified into one of these three pathways.)

The same three pathways identified in the U.K. sample were then also identified in a North American replication study, in which no new pathways were identified (Gannon et al., 2014). Limitations of these pathway studies were that all offenders had received a prison sentence, implying that their offenses were fairly serious. Furthermore, the offenders victimized mostly children, so there is little information about women who offended against adolescents, peers, or adults. Also, one of the limitations of using interviews as the main data source is that respondents may be susceptible to memory distortions and/or impression management strategies. Future studies might want to examine whether offense pathways can be more easily obtained using a quantitative approach like the checklist developed by Gannon et al. (2014). This quantitative approach may be less vulnerable to social desirability bias.

Criminal careers, recidivism, and risk assessment

The reoffending patterns of females who sexually offend were studied in a meta-analysis by Cortoni, Hanson, and Coache (2010). Their meta-analysis consisted of data obtained from conference presentations, government reports, official recidivism data from websites, and direct communication with researchers and government agencies. Their study used data on 2,490 females who committed sexual offenses, all of whom had entered the criminal justice system. These data covered offenders from

Australia, Canada, England, the Netherlands, and the U.S. Over a follow-up period of 5.9 years, sexual recidivism was 1.3%, violent recidivism was 4.3%, and general recidivism was 19.5%. Over a similar average follow-up period of 5.8 years, Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2009) reported recidivism rates in their meta-analysis for males (29,450 sexual offenders) of 14% for sexual offenses, 14% for violent offenses, and a little over 36% for general offenses. Thus, it appears that, particularly for sexual offenses, females who sexually offend recidivate at rates significantly lower than those of males who sexually offend. Furthermore, the discrepancy in reoffending rates between male and female offenders is not unique to sexual offending and is also found for violent offending, drug offending, and property offending (Sandler & Freeman, 2009).

Wijkman and Bijleveld (2015) conducted a study on the criminal career features of a group of females convicted of sexual offenses ($n = 135$). The average age at which these women had first committed a sexual offense was approximately 35 years. Over their entire criminal career, roughly half (51%) of the women committed other offenses besides sexual offenses. After the sampling offense, very few committed other offenses: 131 (97%) desisted (defined as staying free from offending for a period of at least five years before the last date the offending data were collected, i.e., 2011). Average criminal career duration was 3.7 years for all women ($SD = 5.3$).

Despite the low recidivism rates, a few studies have tried to identify recidivism risk factors for females convicted of sexual offenses. The sample of Williams and Nicholaichuk (2001) consisted of 61 women who had been followed for an average 7.6 years. Recidivism was defined as receiving a new conviction after the index sexual offense. Almost a third of the women (32.8%) reoffended with any offense, 11.5% violently reoffended, and two women (3.3%) reoffended with a sexual offense. These two offenders reoffended on their own (i.e., no co-offender) and their victims were not related to them. One reoffended against both genders and her victims were younger than two years. The other reoffended against a girl of 15 years. Sandler and Freeman (2009) studied the recidivism patterns of 1,466 women convicted of a sexual offense in New York State, with a fixed follow-up period of five years. Recidivism was defined as a rearrest for a particular type of crime following an offender's first conviction for a sexual crime. They found that 29.5% of the women were rearrested for any offense, 6.3% were rearrested for a violent felony offense, and 2.2% were rearrested for a sexual offense. The 32 women who were rearrested for a sexual offense were more likely to have had at least one prior misdemeanor conviction, at least one prior felony conviction, and at least one prior drug conviction, than those offenders who did not sexually reoffend. When controlling for other possible factors, three variables increased the risk of a sexual rearrest: (a) The number of prior child victim convictions (non-sexual offenses); (b) the number of prior misdemeanor convictions; and (c) age of the offender (each year older at the time of the first sexual offense increased the odds, a finding opposite what has been found for males who sexually offend [Hanson & Bussière, 1998]).

Wijkman and Bijleveld (2013) conducted a recidivism study based on 261 females convicted of committing a hands-on sexual offense in the Netherlands.

The average follow-up period of their study was 13.2 years and recidivism was defined as being reconvicted after the index sexual offense. Over a quarter (27.6%) of the offenders were reconvicted for any offense, 6.2% were reconvicted for a violent offense, and 1.1% were reconvicted for a hands-on sexual offense. Because of the low recidivism rate, no risk predictors were studied for women who sexually reoffended. Having an antisocial orientation (e.g., being diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, history of substance abuse, history of non-sexual crimes) was a significant predictor for both violent and general recidivism. This antisocial orientation has also been found to be a significant predictor for violent and general recidivism in males who sexually offend (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009).

Widely used risk assessment instruments such as the Historical-Clinical-Risk Management-20 (HCR-20) for violent recidivism and the Static-99R for sexual recidivism were developed based on risk research conducted primarily in male samples. Some scholars are of the opinion that there is no reason to assume that male-based instruments are not applicable to women because most risk factors are considered valid for both genders, the so-called "gender-blind" perspective (Smith, Cullen, & Latessa, 2009). The meta-analysis of Smith, Cullen, and Latessa (2009) showed that the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) is an instrument that is useful to assess all offenders, men and women. They do, however, mention that there are signs that the instrument could benefit from modifications when being applied to female offenders. This recommendation is in line with what other scholars suggest, namely that the assessment of risk differs at a certain degree between male and female offenders. The reasons for women to reoffend would differ from those of men and, therefore, there is a need for more gender-sensitive risk assessment (Van Voorhis, Wright, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2010).

The development of risk assessment instruments designed to predict sexual recidivism by males who sexually offend faces fewer obstacles than the same does for females who sexually offend. The higher sexual recidivism base rates for males who commit sexual offenses make it easier to develop risk assessment instruments, and consequently good instruments. These risk assessment instruments designed for males who sexually offend are not appropriate for females who sexually offend, however, as the instruments were developed for males who sexually offend using the perspective of males who sexually offend. As such, the instruments include items that may not apply to females who sexually offend. For example, the Static-99R (the most widely used risk assessment instrument for males who sexually offend; McGrath, Cumming, Burchard, Zeoli, & Ellerby, 2010) includes items for having had a male victim (increases risk) and for having lived with a lover for two years (decreases risk). Not only is it unclear whether these items impact sexual recidivism risk for females who sexually offend at all, but even if the items do impact risk, they may do so in the opposite way (e.g., having had a male victim might reduce risk and having lived with a lover for two years could conceivably increase it).

Since sexual recidivism by females who commit sexual offenses is very low, it is extremely difficult to develop a risk assessment instrument specifically designed

to predict female sexual recidivism. Estimates for sexual reoffending could be generated, but the confidence intervals around the estimates would be so large that the estimates would not be very useful for risk assessment and would not provide accurate prediction, thereby undermining the entire point of the estimates. The purposes of risk assessment are to inform on the level of risk posed by the offender, to indicate when the offender may be most at risk of reoffending, and to identify treatment needs of the offender, none of which would be served by risk estimates with overly large error rates.

Summing up, we can see that all of the female sexual recidivism studies as described above focused on static risk factors; none of them were able to identify dynamic risk factors. Dynamic factors are factors which can be influenced and are changeable, so these factors are often targeted in treatment when the goal of treatment is reducing (sexual) reoffending. Thus, the lack of research on dynamic sexual recidivism risk factors for females who sexually offend (driven by the sample size and base rate limitations mentioned above) mean treatment programs for females who sexually offend have little empirical guidance to follow in terms of sexual risk treatment targets. We could also ask ourselves whether it would be necessary to focus treatment on decreasing sexual risk, especially given the very low sexual recidivism rates. More research is needed in this area, as dynamic factors such as deviant sexual interest and sexual preoccupation are among the strongest predictors of male sexual recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009), while dynamic factors such as criminal attitudes, lack of employment, and substance abuse are among the strongest and most robust predictors of general criminal recidivism (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2006).

Discussion

Females who commit sexual offenses continue to be an understudied population and many questions remain unanswered. There are, however, a couple of striking findings in which females who sexually offend appear to be different when compared with males who sexually offend.

Firstly, many women who sexually offend had a (generally male) co-offender. Co-offending, therefore, appears to be a consistent characteristic of female sexual offending, whether the co-offender was a romantic partner, a friend, or just an acquaintance. In general, it is assumed that group dynamics differ between so-called “duo’s” (groups with two members) and so-called “2+” groups (groups with more than two members) (da Silva et al., 2013), and it is likely that the group dynamics would also differ between offenders who are in a romantic relationship, and between offenders who are family members or friends. It may be more difficult to resist the group pressure of four persons than the group pressure of one person, and it is easier to ignore an acquaintance who wants to commit an offense than a romantic partner with whom one is living in the same house. One of the major and general problems, however, in explaining co-offending, regardless of the kind of data, is that it is often not clear what happened during the offense. Especially during offenses when many offenders are involved, or

when offenses are committed over a range of time, it is not easy to reconstruct what happened exactly and what each offender did during the offense. Also, in such co-offending cases, offenders may attempt to minimize their responsibility for the offense while claiming the other offenders are the instigators. One reason for the women to moderate their share in the offense may be that they have more at stake, such as losing custody of their children, losing their job, and social ostracism when their social networks find out they have been convicted for sexual abuse.

Secondly, paraphilic disorders are almost never diagnosed in females who commit sexual offenses. This is striking considering the large percentage of child victims (>70%) sexually abused by adult female offenders. This means that, similar to males who commit sexual offenses (e.g., Seto, 2008; Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006), it is not necessary for females who commit sexual offenses to have a pedophilic interest in order to sexually offend against a child, and that females who commit sexual offenses have other motives not inspired by pedophilic preferences. It could also be that it is difficult to recognize pedophilic preferences in women, or that women are not able, or are unwilling, to recognize pedophilic interests in themselves and are therefore not able to report this to a clinician. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Text Revision (DSM-IV,TR), paraphilias other than sexual masochism are almost never diagnosed in women. It is assumed, however, that this reflects more the inability of professionals to register these issues in women (Saradjian, 2010).

Deviant sexual fantasies and sexual arousal have been observed in some females who commit sexual offenses, but the majority of these clinical studies were based on small numbers (<20 offenders), so caution in generalizing these results is warranted (Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010). Also, it is unclear whether the nature of paraphilic preferences among females is the same as that of males. Seto (2008) has suggested that up to half of all child molesters are not pedophiles and, according to some Dutch studies, a minority of male child molesters commit their offense out of paraphilic preferences. Chivers, Rieger, Latty, and Bailey (2004) showed that while men's physiological sexual arousal actually reflects their sexual preferences, women's arousal patterns are much more diversified and tend not to reflect their sexual preference. This suggests that sexual arousal patterns of men and women are different, and that more research is needed before we can infer the absence or presence of deviant sexual interests in females who sexually offend, or even incorporate this topic in treatment (Rousseau & Cortoni, 2010).

A third finding is that adult females who sexually offend exhibit a late onset (generally in their 30s) of their criminal career and that sexual reoffending is almost always absent. This late onset is contradictory with one of the widely accepted theoretical tenets in criminology that crime peaks in early adolescence and declines in adulthood, the so-called age-crime curve (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The majority of the studies in life-course criminology analyzing this age-crime curve and (the development of) criminal careers focus on cohorts of offenders who have been followed from childhood until early adulthood (Piquero, 2008) and studies that follow offenders well into adulthood are scarce, even more so when it comes

to the criminal career development of females who offend or adults who sexually offend. Although no studies are known which have conducted trajectory analyses, it seems justified to label these women as late-starters (Lussier et al., 2010), since the average age at which they started offending was 33.

Theoretical explanations for adult-onset offending are still mainly absent, as this group of offenders has come to the attention of researchers only recently. Some scholars suggest that the start of adult-onset offending in women is due to escalating lifestyle problems and a consequent exposure to negative social settings, such as domestic violence and unemployment, rather than a high crime propensity (Andersson & Torstensson Levander, 2013). Some researchers suggest that these women's social backgrounds during childhood and emerging adulthood may have provided sufficient social control to keep them out of crime, or that they differ from chronic offenders by not having externalizing personality traits (Andersson & Torstensson Levander, 2013). As co-offending is so prevalent in female sexual offending, another explanation may be that the co-offender was the trigger for the sexual abuse, and perhaps even the instigator for the criminal career of the female offender. Since sexual offending in these women's adolescence is absent, and their age of onset for offending is in their 30s, it is possible to conclude that juvenile sexual offending is no precondition for adult female sexual offending. It is, therefore, possible that juvenile and adult females who sexually offend are in fact distinct groups that may need to be studied separately, and for whom separate explanatory models need to be developed. This has previously been concluded for adult and juvenile males who sexually offend (Lussier & Blokland, 2013; Lussier, Van Den Berg, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2012).

The majority of the studies which were conducted over the last decades focussed on describing characteristics and developing typologies. As such, these studies often had a descriptive nature. We think that conducting more studies which focus on describing characteristics do not add that much to the field as it currently stands. A considerable number of the females who commit sexual offenses have been (sexually) victimized in childhood and adolescence. The impact of these experiences on their offending behavior should be studied. It also needs to be studied more broadly which factors contribute to the onset of sexual offending in those females who commit sexual offenses. Studies need to have a more in-depth approach and need to tackle the more essential questions, such as unravelling and explaining the mechanisms underlying the offending behavior of the women. Future studies focusing on all these aspects would increase our understanding of the etiology of female sexual offending.

What have we learned?

- The majority of the women involved in sexual crimes had a (male) co-offender.
- Paraphilic disorders are scarce.
- Sexual reoffending is almost absent and women involved in sexual crimes have a late onset of their criminal career.

Future research needs

- More studies on the impact of victimization and other early-life experiences on female sexual offending.
- More studies that explain the mechanisms underlying the sexual offending of females.
- No more descriptive studies.

Recommended reading

- Cortoni, F., Hanson, R. K., & Coache, M. E. (2010). The recidivism rates of female sexual offenders are low: A meta-analysis. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 22(4), 387–402.
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