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# Attitudes towards and perceptions of females who sexually offend against children: a comparison between students and professionals

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## ABSTRACT

Research has identified that male and female perpetrators are viewed differently. The aim of the study was therefore to (a) explore attitudes towards and perceptions of females who sexually offend against children, and (b) compare these attitudes and perceptions between a sample of students and professionals. Ten students, who had not previously studied theories of sexual offending or the management of child sexual offenders, and ten professionals, who work with females in a therapeutic capacity, took part in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed using Thematic Analysis. Three themes were identified, namely the “facilitating role of women in society”, “why women offend”, and “what should happen to women who offend”. There was a tendency to minimise sexual offending by females. Across the two samples, there were similarities in terms of perceptions around why women offend, and differences in terms of attitudes around what should happen to women who offend.

## PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

The current study builds on our existing understanding of the attitudes and perceptions held by both students and professionals towards females who sexually offend against children. It highlights how attitudes and perceptions inform decision-making in regard to treatment and supervision, including how personal factors, such as being a parent or working with victims of sexual abuse, may facilitate this in professionals. It is important to further develop our understanding of the impact of attitudes and perceptions on decision-making, especially in professionals, given the role therapeutic alliance plays in promoting treatment efficacy.

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## KEYWORDS

sexual offending against children; child sexual offending; female offender; attitudes; perceptions

## Introduction

Research exploring attitudes towards and perceptions of individuals who commit sexual offences has primarily focused on males, with few studies focusing specifically on females who offend. This may be related to existing scales referring to a male offender when measuring attitudes towards and perceptions of those who sexually offend. When gender is not specified, Gakhal and Brown (2011) argue that one is likely to assume that the offender is male. This is suggested to be due to gender stereotypes in the context of offending, with those who are not experienced in working

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with sexual offenders more readily adopting the scenario of a male perpetrator and a female victim (Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). While Gakhal and Brown (2011) acknowledge that most sexual offending is accounted for by males, they raise the question as to whether sexual offences committed by females are rare or merely under-reported.

The existing literature suggests that both are true, with sexual offending by females being both under-reported and under-recognised (Cortoni et al., 2017; Gannon & Rose, 2008; Nathan & Ward, 2001; Tozdan et al., 2019). More specifically, in a meta-analysis by Cortoni et al. (2017), nearly 12% of sexual offences reported in victimisation survey across 12 Western countries were committed by females, with only just over 2% of these having been reported to the police. The latter may be explained by the fact that female perpetrators of child sexual offences typically know their victims, and that offending takes place within the home through care giving practices (Brayford, 2012; Tozdan et al., 2019). As such, policy that depicts scenarios of “stranger danger” or a predatory male hinders awareness, recognition and detection of offending by a female, and impacts on general attitudes and perceptions held in society. It is also of note that female child sexual offending is such a taboo that official statistics fail to report on this type of offending behaviour, making this information not readily available, and thereby limiting understanding by researchers and professionals in this area (Tozdan et al., 2019).

The existing literature further paints a picture of male offenders generally being viewed more negatively, including as morally inept, dangerous and harmful (Weekes et al., 1995). However, the majority of studies group those who sexually offend together, and also do not stipulate or define the type of offending behaviour engaged in. One criticism of this is that it communicates the assumption that individuals who commit sexual offences are a homogenous group. Fedoroff and Moran (1997) argue that it is the heterogeneity of those who commit sexual offences that accounts for conflicting findings between studies. Furthermore, a study by Weekes et al. (1995) found that attitudes towards those who commit sexual offences against children are viewed even less favourably than sexual offenders overall, suggesting that offence type is an important factor when considering attitudes and perceptions.

Existing studies have primarily adopted a quantitative methodology by using the Attitude Towards Sex Offender Scale (ATS; Hogue, 1993), and focusing on forensic professionals (e.g. prison officers, police officers, probation officers and psychologists), with some studies also exploring attitudes in student samples and the general public. In Hogue’s (1993) original study, where attitudes towards those who sexually offend were assessed in different criminal justice professionals, it was found that police officers presented with the most punitive attitudes, followed by prison officers who are not involved in delivering treatment interventions, and those who are. These were followed by probation officers, with the most favourable attitudes held by prison psychologists. This effect has been replicated by various studies, with those working with individuals who have committed sexual offences holding more positive attitudes (Blagden et al., 2014; Hogue & Peebles, 1997), likely due to these professionals having an understanding of the pathways to offending. Studies have further compared attitudes between lay people and professionals, highlighting that the general public typically holds more negative attitudes towards individuals who sexually offend when compared with students, and that professionals who work with sexual offenders present with the most favourable attitudes (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006).

Gakhal and Brown (2011) adapted the ATS by substituting the term “sex offender” with “female sex offender” in order to explore attitudes towards this population in the general public, students, and probation officers. They found that professionals held more positive attitudes than students and the general public. However, they also identified a gender effect, whereby probation officers held more positive attitudes towards females who sexually offended than the professional groups in Hogue’s (1993) sample (i.e. police officers, prison officers involved and not involved in treatment interventions, and probation officers/psychologists), where gender was not specified. While these findings provide important insights into the effect of gender on attitudes, the study did not differentiate between the types of sexual offences committed by females.

### *Differences in attitudes towards male and female offenders*

While individuals who commit sexual offences are viewed much more negatively than those who commit non-sexual offences (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011; Willis et al., 2010), attitudes towards and perceptions of females who have committed sexual offences are more likely to be positive, given that this type of offending behaviour is perceived to be more foreign, and awareness and knowledge around it is limited (Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). The general public, therefore, endorses gender stereotypes, and consequently minimises sexual offences committed against children by females – they are considered less harmful, and, at times, even glorified when they involve underage male victims (Hetherton, 1999). In a study by Rothwell et al. (2021) that compared the perceptions of forensic psychology students with those of members of the general public, the latter held harsher views of individuals with sexual convictions and their rehabilitation, while participants overall endorsed more negative attitudes towards individuals who committed sexual offences against children. Interestingly, the study found no main effect of perpetrator sex. Despite this, from the perspective of professionals who work with victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, it has been suggested that this type of abuse can have a more significant psychological impact on victims (Christensen, 2018).

In the few studies that have explored the effect of gender on attitudes and perceptions, biases have been noted. Hetherton and Beardsall (1998) explored different professionals' decision-making in child protection cases, and their attitudes towards males and females who committed sexual offences against children. They found that both police officers and social workers believed that case registration and prison sentences, in hypothetical scenarios, were more appropriate for males. The authors suggested that this was due to females not being viewed as "dangerous" as males. Furthermore, when Denov (2001) explored how professionals understood and framed sexual offences committed by females, they found that police officers and psychiatrists minimised the seriousness of these (in comparison to offences committed by males), regarding them as less harmful and suggesting that there was no malicious intent in their offending. This was supported by Clements et al. (2014) who reported that the professionals from various disciplines in their sample minimised the effects of sexual offending by females, especially when compared to males, requiring less professional or legal attention. According to Pollock (2014), this extends to general criminality demonstrated by females, with a considerable amount of offences committed by females being minimised in terms of "dangerousness", and thereby impacting on the prosecution of such cases in the Criminal Justice System.

Finally, in a study by Senethavilay (2018), the gender of the respondent also appeared to play a role in terms of attitudes towards and perceptions of male and female offenders. Using The Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (CATSO; Church et al., 2008) and the Attitude Towards the Treatment of Sexual Offender (ATTSO; Wnuk et al., 2006) scales, a sample of graduate students enrolled on mental health programmes reported more negative attitudes towards the treatment of female sexual offenders. In addition, male respondents viewed female sexual offenders more negatively than female respondents. Buckley (2020) further reported that while a need for equal punishment of males and females who commit sexual offences was identified by their sample of members of the general public, there was a tendency to deny the existence of female sexual offending, and even when it was acknowledged, it was glorified if it related to a male victim. Notably, responsibility appears to be removed through society viewing females as nurturing (e.g. Clements et al., 2014), being coerced by a male (offender) (e.g. Denov, 2004), or offending in the context of a teacher-student dynamic (e.g. Buckley, 2020).

### *Explanations for differences in attitudes*

Sexual offending by females is hard to comprehend, given that females are perceived to be nurturing, caring, and have a motherly role (Clement et al., 2014). Consequently, people have difficulty

understanding how women can perpetrate such offences – it contrasts with the perceived gender roles and incapability of women to act in this way. This creates dissonance and can lead to cognitive strategies that attempt to reduce this, such as denial, rationalisation or minimisation of the offending behaviour (Denov, 2004). Gakhal and Brown (2011) further suggest that the fact that females commit sexual offences can evoke an effect of double deviance – because this type of behaviour is counter-stereotypical, it elicits an impression of greater deviance. Attitudes towards and perceptions of females who sexually offend may therefore be more positive or overly harsh.

Other mediating factors have been proposed to explain the attitudinal differences between populations. For example, according to the contact hypothesis (cited in Gakhal & Brown, 2011), the experience of working with sexual offenders promotes more favourable attitudes. However, their study did not support this – instead, while professionals presented with more favourable attitudes than students, students presented with more favourable attitudes than the general public. The authors argued that it was unlikely that students had any prior contact with sexual offenders, which would suggest that other mediating factors were present. In fact, Kjelsberg and Loos's (2008) study noted that prison officers tended to have the most negative attitudes (Hogue, 1993; Hogue & Peebles, 1997), and it is, therefore, possible that working with individuals who sexually offend (be it male or female individuals) on a day-to-day basis can also have an influence on attitudes in the opposite direction.

Harper and Hogue (2015) further suggest that a higher level of educational attainment may mediate more favourable attitudes towards males and females who commit sexual offences in the general public, which was supported by Willis et al. (2010) and Gakhal and Brown (2011). In fact, Gakhal and Brown (2011) hypothesised that those who hold more positive views may be attracted to subjects such as psychology and professions that involve working with this population. If this is the case, then psychology students, who have been recruited as participants in most of the studies in this area, are not representative of the wider student population (Gakhal & Brown, 2011).

One way of explaining why there are differences in attitudes towards those who commit sexual offences are distorted schemas (i.e. knowledge structures that are stored in memory; Crocker et al., 1984), which encompass what we know about societal biases and other factors that mitigate attitudes. According to this theoretical assumption, negative attitudes are formed from representations that are held within an individual's schema of a sexual offender (applicable to members of the general public). Conversely, those who reject stereotypes held within society, often informed by emotive, inaccurate, and sensationalised media reports of a violent predatory male (King & Roberts, 2015), hold more favourable attitudes (applicable to professionals). Holding a distorted schema of a sexual offender subsequently guides judgements based on the representativeness heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), which is an automatic process whereby one evaluates the degree to which A (sexual offender) represents B (schema of a sexual offender). When the sexual offender represents the relevant schema (of a predatory male), more negative judgements and decisions are made. Evidence of this guiding decision-making process was found by Harper (2012), where juveniles who sexually offended received less punitive judgements than adults who sexually offended.

Further to this, implicit theories about human attributes suggest that people tend to hold one of two implicit theories about human attributes: (i) entity ITs, which are thought to be fixed, unchangeable, and dispositional, or (ii) incremental ITs, which are thought to be malleable, fluid, and situational (Dweck, Chiu & Hong, 1995). Those considered entitist and incrementalist can hold the same schematic beliefs, however, may differ in how their stereotypic beliefs (or knowledge) are represented cognitively. This can influence domain-specific judgments and reactions when consistent with one's framework (Dweck et al., 1995). Notably, entitists are found to be more punitive towards moral transgressions, judging them to be a result of dispositional factors, whereas incrementalists are typically less punitive, with transgressions viewed as situational (Hong, 1994). In support of this, Blagden et al. (2014) noted a moderate positive correlation between incremental ITs about sexual offending and attitudes towards those who sexually offend. That is, as attitudes towards sexual offenders became more positive, so did their beliefs that an offender could change. Importantly, Harper and Bartels (2018) found that entitists held more negative attitudes

than incrementalists, however, implicit theories were noted to be more important in influencing judgements. These findings suggest that less stereotypical females were viewed more favourably than offenders who represented the stereotype (Harper & Bartels, 2017, 2018).

### *Impact of attitudes and perceptions*

Attitudes hold cognitive and affective attributions which can inform behaviour directed towards individuals who sexually offend/have sexually offended (Harper et al., 2017). Such behaviour may create barriers in the form of refusing to accept them re-entering and -integrating back into society (Willis et al., 2010). However, again, there appear to be differences depending on the gender of the individual in question. Gakhal and Brown (2011) suggest that, in comparison to males, females who committed sexual offences in the past can re-integrate into society more easily. The authors argued that this was due to attitudes towards females who sexually offend not being firmly established by society. As a result, attitudes are more malleable, especially when compared to the more stable negative attitudes held towards male sexual offenders.

More specifically, Brown (1999) found that the general public was likely to engage in discriminative behaviours towards individuals who had been convicted of sexual offences and were in the process of re-integrating back into the community, including refusing them housing. However, at the same time, participants were reportedly supportive of rehabilitation for those who had served their sentence. What is important to note is that employment, housing and social support are well-established protective factors that contribute to desistance from offending, thereby reducing someone's risk of reoffending (De Vries Robbé et al., 2015). For society as a whole and/or communities to create difficulties in these areas for those who are re-integrating back into the community is therefore arguably associated with an increased risk of recidivism (Scoones et al., 2012; Willis & Grace, 2009; Willis & Johnston, 2012).

The influence attitudes and perceptions have on decision-making is important as negative attitudes held by the general public towards individuals who have committed sexual offences has contributed to current legislation perceived to protect the public, including restrictions upon movement (e.g. not living within a specific distance from schools, travelling abroad) and community notifications, where the general public can access information on those convicted of sexual offences who live in close proximity to them (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). The general public are of the view that such legislation is positive and reduces risk. However, research has found no support for these strategies in reducing recidivism (Nobles et al., 2012; Tewksbury & Jennings, 2010; Zgoba et al., 2010). The public may therefore be unintentionally increasing the risk they wish to reduce through calling for the implementation of strategies that are predominantly informed by attitudes and perceptions (Willis et al., 2010). Considering the power the general public have in calling for and shaping strategies perceived to reduce risk, it is of note that the area of understanding and changing the general public's attitudes and perceptions has largely been overlooked (Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Willis et al., 2010). In addition, it is important to examine attitudes and perceptions in professionals who work with individuals who have committed sexual offences, especially in light of the effect this may have on the therapeutic relationship. Therapeutic relationships and interactional styles between practitioners and clients, where displays of empathy, emotional warmth and encouragement are given, are salient in promoting treatment efficacy and behavioural change (Hogue, 1993; Serran et al., 2003; Willis et al., 2010).

### *The present study*

The relationship between how attitudes and perceptions develop and the nature of these is multifaceted. Research has shown that many factors play a role in the formation of attitudes towards and perceptions of those who sexually offend. This includes the offender's gender, and the type of offence committed. There appears to be a notion that sexual offending committed by females is less severe, and deserves less restrictive sanctions as a result. However, it is currently not known if

this effect extends to those who sexually offend against children. While differences in attitudes and perceptions have been highlighted across various populations, such as students and professionals who work with sexual offenders, to date, limited research has explored these differences from a qualitative perspective, with most studies employing a quantitative methodology.

The present study therefore expands on existing literature by exploring attitudes towards and perceptions of females who sexually offend against children through qualitative interviews with students and professionals who work with this population in a therapeutic capacity. The qualitative design adds a further layer, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes and perceptions, including a comparison between the two groups. Students with no experience of studying this topic are likely to hold similar attitudes to those previously observed in the general public. As such, the exclusion of students with a psychology background (or in fact any other background where they may have learnt about sexual offending) sought to mitigate the more favourable attitudes that are generally found in this population. Furthermore, while the study primarily sought to recruit professionals who work with females who have sexually offended, some professional participants also had experience of working with males and victims. The aims of the present study were therefore to: (i) examine the attitudes towards and perceptions of females who sexually offend against children among students and professionals; (ii) explore their perceptions around why females sexually offend against children; and (iii) identify what the perceived impact is of these attitudes and perceptions of females who sexually offend against children.

## Method

### *Ethical approval*

Full ethical approval for the study was granted by the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Ethical Review Committee at the University of Birmingham. The researcher adhered to the British Psychological Society's (2018) Code of Ethics and Conduct throughout the study. Additional approval was granted by the Research and Development Group of a private mental health care provider for the purpose of recruiting their professional staff. The study was not pre-registered prior to it being conducted.

### *Participants*

A total of 20 participants took part in the study. The sample comprised two groups of participants, one being students ( $n = 10$ ) and one being professionals who work with females with a history of offending behaviour ( $n = 10$ , of which  $n = 3$  had worked with both males and females with sexual offending histories against children, and  $n = 2$  had worked with victims specifically). Participants were male ( $n = 3$ ) and female ( $n = 17$ ) adults aged between 19 and 58 years ( $M = 30.05$ ;  $SD = 12.03$ ). In the student sample, participants were of various nationalities, including British ( $n = 4$ ), Chinese ( $n = 2$ ), Sri-Lankan ( $n = 1$ ), Arab ( $n = 1$ ), Filipino ( $n = 1$ ), and British Pakistani ( $n = 1$ ), and were studying across undergraduate and postgraduate level at the University. In the professional sample, participants were British ( $n = 9$ ), and British Asian ( $n = 1$ ). The sample represented a range of professional groups: (i) case worker ( $n = 3$ ), (ii) occupational therapist ( $n = 2$ ), (iii) senior mental health worker ( $n = 1$ ), (iv) forensic psychologist ( $n = 1$ ), (v) trainee forensic psychologist ( $n = 1$ ), (vi) assistant psychologist ( $n = 1$ ), and (vii) trainee nursing associate ( $n = 1$ ). Professionals were recruited from three charitable organisations. Minimal demographic information was collected for each participant in light of the sensitive nature of the topic area, and in order to ensure anonymity for the participants. All participants were given a pseudonym using a name generator.<sup>1</sup> A total of 14 students expressed an interest in taking part in the study. Four did not pursue arranging the interview once they became aware that the study did not offer compensation for participation. All others who had expressed an interest in taking part attended and completed the interviews.



## *Procedure*

Participants were recruited by means of opportunity sampling. In order to recruit students, posters designed to advertise the research were put up across various locations on the campus at the University. For the purpose of recruiting professionals, an email flyer was sent to charitable organisations on the professional doctorate programme's mailing list of placement contacts by the researcher's academic supervisor. Additional charitable organisations were contacted via email by the researcher, of which two responded and gave approval for the researcher to recruit their professional staff. Contacts at charitable organisations were asked to distribute the flyer among their colleagues, as well as display the flyer in staff areas at their sites. Recruitment took place between September 2019 and March 2020. Potential participants (both students and professionals) who expressed an interest in taking part in the study were sent a participant information sheet by the researcher. Once participants confirmed that they were indeed interested in taking part, the researcher arranged an interview with them. Interviews with the student participants took place in relevant focus group rooms at the University, and interviews with the professional participants took place in a quiet room at their workplace or via telephone.

Prior to the interviews taking place, participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time during the interview and up to four weeks post-interview (without having to give a reason) by contacting the researcher via email. Participants were then asked to sign a consent form, confirming that they were happy for the interviews to be audio recorded, and for their data to be used as part of a write-up of the study's findings. Due to COVID-19, four interviews with professionals that had been scheduled to take place in person were subsequently conducted via telephone. In this case, participants were sent the consent form via email, and asked to return a signed copy to the researcher prior to the interview. Upon completion of the interview, the researcher thanked the participants for taking part in the study, and provided them with a debrief sheet. The debrief sheet included the research team's contact details and information about helplines and support organisations in case participants were affected by the content of the interviews.

## *Data collection*

Prior to the interview commencing, participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire that recorded participants' age, ethnicity, professional status, and level of highest academic qualification. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule (see Supplementary Material) which was used flexibly to guide discussions, rather than explicitly asking every single question. The interview schedule was informed by relevant aspects covered in the Attitude Towards Sex Offender Scale (Hogue, 1993), and the Perception of Sex Offender Scale (Harper & Hogue, 2015), including (i) characteristics of female sexual offenders, (ii) nature of their offending behaviour, (iii) severity of offending behaviour, (iv) factors that influence views of the latter, and (v) perceptions around appropriate sentencing and management. In addition, participants' perceptions of female child sexual offending more broadly, and offenders' motivations specifically, were explored in more depth. Throughout, follow-up questions and prompts were used for the purpose of clarification and further understanding. The average duration for student interviews was 66 min (ranging from 44–80 min), and 52 min for professional interviews (ranging from 41–75 min).

## *Data analysis*

All interviews were recorded using an encrypted Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcripts were subsequently imported into NVivo (Version 12), a qualitative data analysis software programme, to facilitate the process of data analysis. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive approach to Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis is a

qualitative data analysis approach which is theoretically flexible and follows six steps to identifying patterns using a diligent process of familiarisation, coding, developing and revising themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This process allows for the identification of similarities and differences across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006), without being driven or informed by a pre-existing framework.

An inductive, bottom-up approach to analysis was employed, thereby facilitating the analysis to be data-driven. Throughout the process of data analysis, the researcher referred to the study's research questions as a way of guiding the analysis, and for the purpose of developing a coding framework. The analysis followed the six-phase approach to Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). In addition, the second author reviewed 10% of the line-by-line coding completed by the first author on the transcript of the first interview, and provided feedback around the practice of coding, with a particular focus on developing descriptive labels that are close to the data. The present study adopted a critical realist approach/standpoint, and the researcher kept a reflective log and engaged in reflection throughout the process of analysis in order to support the development of themes.

## Results

A total of three themes, together incorporating eight subthemes, were identified, namely (i) the role of women in society, and how this may facilitate offending, as well as prevent detection; (ii) why women may engage in offending behaviour of a sexual nature against children; and (iii) what should happen to them once they come to the attention of authorities (see Figure 1 for an overview of the thematic structure). A more detailed description of the themes, including supporting quotes, is presented thereafter.

### *Theme 1: role of women in society facilitates offending and prevents detection*

While most participants ( $n = 16$ ) contributed to this theme, it was more prevalent among students than professionals ( $n = 9$  vs.  $n = 7$ ). The theme was predominantly related to the idea that the role women have in society provides access and/or an opportunity to sexually offend against children.

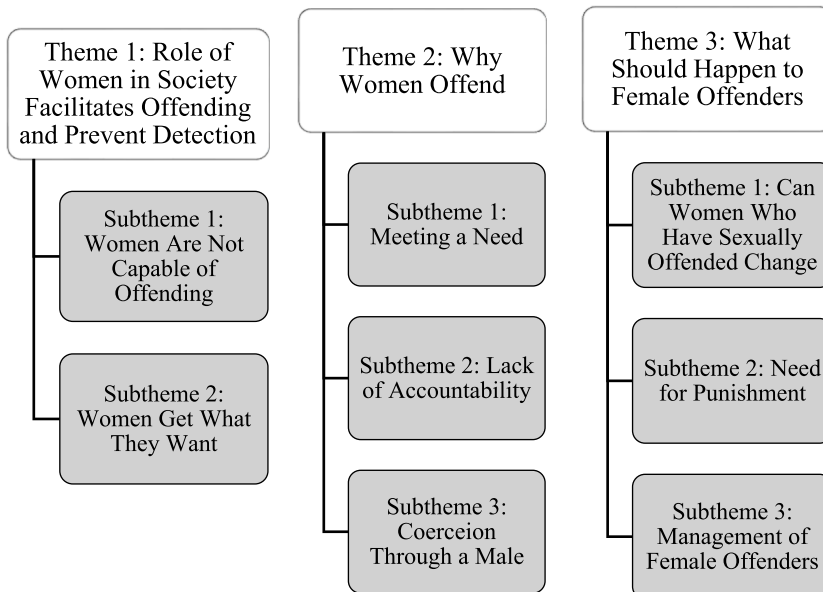


Figure 1. Overview of Thematic Structure.

### *Subtheme 1: women are not capable of offending*

This subtheme was more prevalent among students ( $n = 6$ ) than professionals ( $n = 2$ ). It represents the general perception that women are not capable of offending sexually against children. It seemed that for some participants it was hard to envisage women sexually offending against children, particularly their own children, as it was incongruent with how women are perceived in society more widely: *"It's like you know, a woman can never, never do that ... erm or especially if it's their own child"* (Lea). Two students reported that prior to seeing the study advertised they were not aware of women committing such offences, and predominantly attributed this to males: *"Does that really happen like females offending sexually to children. Does it happen? Because I feel like erm with males it does happen"* (Lan).

Participants appeared to represent society's general view that the commission of sexual violence was attributed to males rather than females: *"They don't associate that aggression and sexual violence ... with a woman, it's more with a man"* (Lea). As a result, there was a tendency to assume that a male was involved in a woman's offending behaviour: *"The man, a man must have been involved, there's no way she could have done that on her own"* (Lea).

Furthermore, there was a common perception that offending fits with stereotypical views of men and their nature. Men were viewed as *"predators"* (Alison), *"sexual beings"* and *"creepy"* (Adele). However, traits such as being *"vulnerable"* and *"maternal"* (Anna) were attributed to women and seen in direct contrast to males: *"Women are soft and lovely and nurturing ... and then men are evil perverts"* (Lorraine). There was recognition among participants that this caused discomfort, which may explain the shock and disbelief in wider society when females offend. In addition, male offending was thought to be more severe and include a wider range of *"horrific, sadistic, stranger crimes"* (Andrea) when compared to female offending: *"I guess there is less things they could do ... I think it's easier maybe for a male to ... rape someone"* (Lisa). More specifically, some students appeared to minimise the severity of offending by women, suggesting that they mainly targeted consenting *"borderline teen"* (Laia) boys.

Participants further suggested that predominantly attributing sexual violence to men in fact enabled female offending to be kept hidden:

I wonder if it's, erm ... the, like the police's erm own kind of ... like a bias, like an unconscious bias, maybe and that you kind of automatically assume that it would be a male or they are kind of looking for men. (Adele)

Most participants ( $n = 14$ ) felt that traditional gender roles and stereotypes influenced their perceptions of why they felt women were incapable of offending. Participants described how there was an expectation for women to be *"motherly"* and *"nurturing"* (Adele), which was at odds with harming children:

Erm I think mainly, yeah, it doesn't fit with I guess my own kind of perception of a woman erm in that we are generally more kind of motherly and nurturing. Erm ... and it just seems to jar with that kind of erm ... that way you think a woman is. (Adele)

Overall, while students appeared to endorse the narrative that women were not capable of offending, professionals made sense of female offending being more hidden as a result of unconscious biases, suggesting that this may even lead to offending behaviour being overlooked. Some participants felt that a woman's role and caregiving practices inadvertently provided access to children without suspicion. Although female offenders were viewed more favourably than male offenders, students held more punitive attitudes than professionals overall. Despite this, some participants acknowledged the need for equal sentencing and treatment (both for males and females), noting that any sexual offence against a child was severe, irrespective of the gender of the offender.

### *Subtheme 2: women get what they want*

Participants perceived women to present with certain traits that enabled them to get what they want. This theme was more prevalent in students ( $n = 4$ ) than professionals ( $n = 2$ ), who referred

to these traits as a way of making sense of why female offending may be more hidden. A common trait that was felt to be associated with women in general was being manipulative: *"Well as a woman myself I think it's ... most women are able to manipulate..."* (Lea). Being manipulative was described as enabling women to conceal offending and gain access to victims: *"They want to get into families. So they can present as quite likeable and trustworthy"* (Angela).

Manipulation and grooming strategies were further discussed by professionals as being used by women as a way of avoiding detection, with one participant generalising these traits as being typical of all offences committed by women: *"There's always a certain trait that I can see through ... through, you know the manipulation, the grooming element, the erm ... especially observing them with others and erm ... so ... I think there's something that makes them ... similar"* (Angela). These traits were perceived to be particularly unique to women who were viewed to have greater *"social intellect"*, helping them to *"hide things well"* (Lea).

Overall, the traits used to describe female offenders within this subtheme read quite contradictory to the characteristics used to describe females in Subtheme 1. While some participants struggled to reconcile the idea of women committing sexual offences against children, it became clear that, on reflection, participants felt that they may have had to be quite *"clever"* and *"manipulative"* in the process of committing an offence and avoiding detection.

## **Theme 2: why women offend**

When discussing motivations for why women may commit sexual offences against children, some participants struggled to comprehend this. All participants spoke about potential reasons for why women may offend, identifying both internal and external factors.

### **Subtheme 1: meeting a need**

This subtheme was the most prominent explanation for why women may offend ( $n = 15$ ), and was perceived to meet internal needs of women, such as gaining or giving love and affection, as well as for the purpose of sexual gratification. Some participants thought that women were desperate to be loved: *"... it's almost that desperation, you know I need to love something that's within reach ... and it just so happens to be a child. It's a lot easier to love, and that love kind of overflows and becomes this horrible thing ... in a horrible form"* (Lea).

Other participants thought that women were sexually attracted to children, and thereby sought to gain sexual gratification through offending, describing it as a *"sexually motivated crime"* (Amanda); *"If that's their sexuality, if they are attracted to young children"* (Lindsay). A prominent explanation among professionals for why women may offend was that offending was motivated by a desire to gain control and a sense of power: *"... about that control and having that power and feeling in control of things"* (Amelia). One participant thought that women either offended in order to feel in control or because they were being controlled. They further tended to attribute offending to an *"addiction to offending against a child"* (Aran), with the positive reinforcement/reward of the offending behaviour that seeks to meet their needs facilitating future engagement.

Overall, participants referred to various internal needs women who sexually offend against children may seek to meet. While there were some differences between students and professionals, many participants thought that offending met a personal need, and was therefore internally motivated.

### **Subtheme 2: lack of accountability**

Explanations for why women may sexually offend against children also involved biological factors that would lead to disinhibition or a lack of awareness/understanding of someone's behaviour ( $n = 11$ ). Mental illness was one of the prominent factors participants referred to in the context of contributing to someone acting or being out of control, and not of their usual character. This somewhat removed responsibility from females who offend, and they were viewed more neutrally than when

offending was thought to be a choice: *"Like I know there are certain mental disorders where you know make you ... I don't want to say less autonomous but maybe less in control of your actions"* (Laia).

However, at times when offending behaviour seemed incomprehensible, mental health issues were assumed to explain it: *"I would assume that there's something not right ... because I can't imagine that a sane person could do something like that"* (Lee); *"Well it is just such a horrible crime to commit, I cannot see how anybody would do it if they were in the right frame of mind"* (Aran). This would suggest that the only way participants were able to make sense of why women may sexually offend against children was at odds with reality, and as such they were not accountable for the behaviours they engaged in.

Furthermore, professionals acknowledged that hormones and chemical imbalances may explain why some women may sexually offend against children. As a result, women were viewed more compassionately: *"I would be more likely to be more compassionate with the woman because ... and that's my own biases there, because of the ... whatever happens to a woman's body and hormones and everything like that"* (Abigail). This compassion appeared to extend to the explanation of women's own histories of abuse as playing a role in their offending behaviour. More specifically, students thought that traumatic experiences prevented women from really knowing what they were doing. In contrast, professionals described how for some women who had been victimised themselves, and who had grown up in an environment that was not safe, abuse had been normalised, and may therefore be viewed as *"what happens between adults"* (Andrea), and thought of as *"kind of all they've known. It might be a norm"* (Amelia).

Overall, participants sought to explain offending behaviour by referring to biological and mental health-related factors they perceived to play a contributing role, thereby removing responsibility from women who sexually offend against children.

### **Subtheme 3: coercion through a male**

This subtheme was present across interviews with both students ( $n = 5$ ) and professionals ( $n = 6$ ). Women were perceived to be vulnerable, and their offending was explained through being controlled by a male who *"dominates"* (Lorraine) and coerces them by using threats or implicit controls as a result of grooming:

Where a male says, 'if you don't do these things', I've heard it here 'if you don't do these things I'm going to hurt your family'. So you have to obey this because otherwise the risk for you ... is a lot more and that might be the same 'if you don't allow me to do this' or 'if you don't do this, then I'm going to be doing this to the children'. (Abigail)

Participants described how they thought women were groomed by men to offend, subordinating their needs, and engaging in offending behaviour to solely please their partner, rather than pursue any personal need. This was explained by referring to women's desire for affection and love, as well as having a dependent attachment style:

Yeah, I think they are not trying to seek the affection from the children. I think it's that they are seeking the affection from these men that are abusive. Erm ... but they don't, err they are so vulnerable themselves that they don't really see that they are being manipulated into doing things, because they just want that kind of care and affection from someone that they're willing to do whatever it takes to kind of keep that. (Adele)

The narrative of coercion by a man appeared to be used to explain why some women may sexually offend against children, and enabled participants to make sense of how a woman may engage in such behaviour. It was easier to view women who are coerced by a man as victims, and therefore not hold them responsible for their actions, than imagining a woman as the main offender or leader in a co-offending dynamic:

If it's a matter of ... do this or else then it would be, yeah, erm, I don't know about severity because it's still a severe act but maybe ... it's a factor that might be ... not quite as bad as if they were doing it because they wanted to. It could just be that they don't want to do it but they are being forced by someone. (Alix)

Overall, coercion or being controlled by a male was another way of explaining and rationalising why some women may sexually offend against children. It allows responsibility to be removed from the woman and placed on the man, and may have felt more comfortable for some participants.

### **Theme 3: what should happen to female offenders?**

All participants spoke about the consequences of committing sexual offences, and what should happen to women who engage in this type of offending behaviour. Overall, students held more punitive views, with professionals presenting as more understanding of the role of and need for rehabilitation and treatment (as opposed to punishment).

#### **Subtheme 1: can females who have sexually offended change?**

All participants discussed whether it was possible for females who had sexually offended against children to change, with clear differences being revealed between students and professionals. In students, there was a sense of uncertainty as to whether change was possible, querying if they could ever be trusted again: *"I don't think I would be able to trust them ... even after ten years they would still kinda be wary of that individual"* (Lorraine).

Related to this was the question around the need for therapy, and whether rehabilitation was effective. This was accompanied by thoughts of behaviour change being internally motivated, with some students feeling that women *"probably wouldn't want to change"* (Lisa), and that behaviour change was particularly difficult to achieve for some subgroups of offenders, including those who sexual offend against children:

I think if people went in and they were prepared to change, I think it could be effective. But I think it would be wasted if people didn't, like there would be some sick people who wouldn't be able to change I'm sure ... erm so it would probably be wasted on them. (Lisa)

While there was a general assumption among professionals that people can change, and that this was the purpose of treatment, participants noted that the motivation to do so was varied across individuals. As such, there was an emphasis on treatment in order to reduce the risk of reoffending. This seemed to promote confidence that anybody released or discharged into the community would be deemed to be safe, as they would have been able to evidence behaviour change: *"... I would say rehab is important, otherwise they could be just the same as when they went in"* (Alix); *"if they're being released from prison or hospital, wherever they've been, there must be some feeling that they're ... safe to be in the community ..."* (Amelia). Supporting behaviour change, and recognising that risk of reoffending can be reduced, may be due to professionals having worked in a therapeutic capacity where this is the underpinning principle of their role: *"In my line of work I need to be hopeful that it's possible. Erm, yeah I kind of have to be optimistic that ... you know there is a chance that they can be rehabilitated and risk reduced and stuff"* (Amelia).

#### **Subtheme 2: need for punishment**

While students appeared to minimise sexual offending by females, there was a strong sense that punishment was needed and justified, including being removed from the community for ten years or more: *"... the person to suffer yeah, yeah just get away from the community"* (Lan). Students endorsed for female offenders to suffer the consequences: *"definitely suffer the consequences of whatever they did"* (Lisa), and some even promoted violence as way of reducing offending, and felt that this was *"deserved"* and a *"good justification for it"* (Lee).

In contrast, most professionals communicated a strong need for treatment over punishment: *"Surely we've got to help rather than punish"* (Adele), emphasising that punishment does not reduce the risk of reoffending: *"I do think just sending people to prison without treatment is not going to be effective"* (Andrea). However, while some professionals (all of whom worked with victims of child sexual abuse) advocated for punishment and prison sentences, they still referred

to the importance of rehabilitation. All professionals seemed to feel that without treatment, punishment served no utility in promoting change, and reducing the risk of reoffending respectively.

Don't think I agree with sending sex offenders, like child sex offenders to prison, because I don't think that actually solves the issue. Erm, unless they actually get some sort of treatment in prison, I think you are just kind of prolonging the problem ... (Adele)

Participants, therefore, thought that the duration for an appropriate sentence for women ought to reflect an individual's treatment needs, as well as how long it would take to meaningfully engage in risk reduction work (as opposed to a set tariff):

Appropriate sentencing ... mm ... I think it needs to involve treatment ... so it comes down to I suppose a sentence that allows them to receive the support ... I think the sentence needs to be responsive to the psychological needs of the offender. (Andrea)

Overall, this subtheme demonstrates the split views between students and professionals when it comes to what should happen to women who sexually offended against children. Students' desire for punishment and prison is not supported by professionals, and most professionals held a strong belief that rehabilitation efforts were thought to be more effective.

### *Subtheme 3: management of female offenders*

All participants discussed what they thought would be appropriate in terms of managing women who were released from prison back into the community. Most participants felt that women should "live life" (Lin) following having served a prison sentence. However, there was a sense that offender management would have to involve certain conditions in order to promote safety. Both students and professionals talked about the need to restrict employment which would involve working with children: "I don't think you should be allowed, like if it's a work environment with kids, I don't think you should be allowed back there" (Lisa). Professionals typically took a more responsive approach to management that was tailored to the individual and recognised their risk factors (as opposed to students who felt that blanket risk management plans were suitable): "... I suppose what I'd want to see is more responsive treatment, responsive supervision, responsive monitoring, support" (Andrea).

Students emphasised the need to protect the community and children and were supportive of measures, such as exclusion zones (e.g. parks and playgrounds), that would prevent female offenders from being in close proximity to children. This was rationalised as a protective strategy that appeared to be linked to the uncertainty around behaviour change:

I think there should be, there should be no go zones for them because, like I said what's stopping them from doing it again? You've got to think about in the long term ... you, you're rehabilitating them but ... you want to protect the community. (Lea)

Students also felt that supervision would ensure that women were compliant with restrictions, and that this should involve tracking or tagging them:

... would be a good idea to track them for a good period of time. Maybe for like ... a year or something. Yeah they could do tracking instead of having someone there and you would still be able to see where they were. (Lisa)

In contrast, while professionals typically acknowledged the need for safety, they recognised that risk management plans should also incorporate relevant support for the women re-integrating into the community: "It's just about making sure that there is some sort of support ... and safety structure to make sure that they are safe" (Amelia). This included supervision, as well as treatment focusing on the women's protective factors, in order to help them build a pro-social life and promote desistance:

If you get her to build up her life outside, get her to have the job, you know develop meaningful relationships, I think that will put her on a lot better ... path than opening the doors and saying there you go, now just try and ... live your new life. (Adele)

Overall, students thought that there was a need to control women's movements and enforce restrictions. There was little trust that they would be compliant, which is likely an extension of the perception that women would not want to change, and therefore explains why students suggested these measures. In contrast, professionals highlighted the importance of a tailored and responsive approach, recognising the need for managing risk factors while at the same time supporting women to re-integrate into the community, and thereby reducing the risk of reoffending overall.

## Discussion

The present study explored attitudes towards and perceptions of females who sexually offend against children in a sample of students and professionals who work with this population in a therapeutic capacity. Three dominant themes were identified: (i) the "role of women in society, and how this may facilitate offending, as well as prevent detection" captures participants' perceptions of the traditional gender roles women hold in society, and how they enable offending to remain hidden. More specifically, participants talked about how a woman's role provides access to children and an opportunity to offend without suspicion, thereby allowing offending to go undetected; (ii) "why women offend" identified participants' views of both internal and external factors that may play a role in sexual offending against children by women; and (iii) "what should happen to female offenders" offers insight into participants' perceptions around appropriate sentencing and offender management. Here, students and professionals differed substantially, with students adopting a more punitive and professionals a more responsive approach. Overall, the interviews gave rise to expressions of empathy, compassion and/or anger towards females who sexually offend against children across participants.

Our findings show that professionals tend to hold more positive attitudes towards and perceptions of women who sexually offend against children (when compared to students). This is supported by relevant studies that have explored attitudes towards individuals who sexually offend, including females, among different groups of professionals (Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). The differences in perceptions between professionals and students were particularly noticeable in the area of offender management and rehabilitation, with professionals recognising the need for responsive and individualised strategies. Conversely, students were typically doubtful of whether female offenders were able to change, and therefore expressed the need for more punitive strategies. It appeared that participants' perceived threat of female offenders, and an intrinsic need to protect children, drove the enforcing of these strategies, believed to protect society from "offenders" who are unable or unwilling to change.

Gakhal and Brown (2011) termed this effect the *contact hypothesis*, where contact with offending populations leads to more positive views (Hogue, 1993; Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Having greater awareness, knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of sexual offending also promotes more supportive attitudes, and reduces one's susceptibility to misrepresentations across a range of sources of information (Lea et al., 1999). In fact, some professionals did draw on theories of offending and therapeutic models, suggesting that their attitudes and perceptions were guided by the evidence base and the training they had received. Conversely, most students had very little knowledge of female child sexual offending, with two students questioning the occurrence of this, and others highlighting that their understanding of this phenomenon was influenced by media representations of a teacher-student dynamic. Male teenage victims were suggested to have given consent, with the scenario clearly being romanticised. These findings are supported by the existing literature in that sexual offending by females is typically minimised (Buckley, 2020; Denov, 2001; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Hetherington, 1999), and at times even glorified (Buckley, 2020; Hetherington, 1999). Interestingly, participants did not take into account the relationship between the victim and the offender in any other context, such as intra-familial offending, for example. As such, the severity of offending appeared to have been minimised based upon gender only.



Some professionals acknowledged that negative attitudes were neutralised through being challenged in the course of their training and experience of working with this population. Interestingly, it was suggested by Lea et al. (1999) that training and length of experience related to reflexivity and critical thinking. Furthermore, professionals recognised that working in a therapeutic profession required a belief in individuals being able to change, expressing discomfort at attitudes and perceptions that were particularly harsh and/or incongruent with therapeutic models.

While professional identity (working in a therapeutic capacity) may promote more positive attitudes and perceptions, in line with previous research (Blagden et al., 2014; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Hogue & Peebles, 1997), a professional's personal identity did seem to moderate this. Being a parent appeared to increase the perceived sense of threat and fear, and this was used by professionals as a way of rationalising what they considered to be harsher or more restrictive decision making (e.g. life-long exclusions on accessing areas where children are likely to be present). This was acknowledged by some professionals who questioned whether the strategies they endorsed were "too severe" (Abigail). It may be argued that some professionals have learnt to manage this internal conflict, and are able to compartmentalise their attitudes and perceptions, which allows them to work in a therapeutic capacity. Furthermore, working with victims of child sexual abuse appeared to foster more negative attitudes towards female offenders, especially in light of witnessing the long-term effects of victimisation. Overall, while the *contact hypothesis* and education and/or training may therefore explain the differences in attitudes between students and professionals, variations in these among professionals still appear to be influenced by both personal and professional contexts.

Despite students holding harsher attitudes and perceptions than professionals, mostly in relation to sentencing and offender management, females who committed sexual offences against children were generally viewed more positively than their male counterparts. While more prominent in students, there was greater compassion expressed for females than males, which was also acknowledged by some professionals. As females were viewed more positively, and incapable of committing such offences, their offending behaviour was minimised, and they were not held accountable or responsible for their actions. More specifically, offences committed by females were thought to be less harmful and invasive (in comparison to those committed by males), and females were perceived to not engage in offending behaviour willingly and/or purposefully.

One way responsibility from female offenders was removed was to view them as victims, by attributing sexual scripts that depict a coercive male who forces a subordinate and powerless woman to engage in offending behaviour. This scenario was often rationalised by the female needing and/or wanting to be loved, and therefore engaging in behaviours unwillingly with the motivation of pleasing a coercive male (Buckley, 2020). The use of such sexual scripts has been noted to be a barrier to identifying offending behaviour in females (Gakhal & Brown, 2011). It is therefore concerning that such factors are endorsed, especially in some professionals. Further rationalisations used by participants in the present study included disinhibition or blurred boundaries due to biological abnormalities or female offenders' own sexual abuse histories.

The perceived need to punish females who sexually offend against children (seen in both students and professionals who work with victims) elicited support for strategies built on the premise that harsh sanctioning will deter individuals from offending, including violence. This finding is not only concerning but also surprising, given that evidence suggests that such strategies are ineffective in terms of reducing risk (Comartin et al., 2009). As such, females may face the same level of vigilantism that has reportedly been experienced by some males in the process of re-integrating back into the community (Levenson & Cotter, 2005), despite Gakhal and Brown (2011) suggesting that women would resettle into the community easier than males. In line with Brown (1999), this creates barriers to rehabilitation and resettlement which have the opposite effect to what the general public intends to achieve (Scoones et al., 2012; Willis & Grace, 2009; Willis & Johnston, 2012).

In summary, professionals held more favourable attitudes towards females who sexually offend against children when compared to non-psychology students. Notably, some students doubted females' ability to offend in this way, which has the potential to impact on victims coming forward to report offending by females in terms of fears of not being believed. This not only affects the detection of this crime, but also has implications for its prosecution in terms of the limited awareness and understanding of this issue being represented within the jury of criminal trials in the form of members of the general public. In addition, professionals typically endorsed a more responsive and individualised approach to treatment and rehabilitation, while students presented doubts around whether female child sexual offenders were able to change, and therefore advocated for more punitive strategies that are known not to be conducive to community re-integration, having potential implications for levels of risk and recidivism. In regard to this, it is important to consider how public opinion informs policy – negative attitudes towards and perceptions of individuals who have committed sexual offences in the past may adversely affect approaches that aim to facilitate rehabilitation, community re-integration, and desistance respectively.

### *Limitations and directions for future research*

There are a number of limitations to the present study which should be acknowledged. Firstly, four professionals were interviewed by telephone due to COVID-19. The researcher felt that this impacted on the interview dynamic, both in terms of how comfortable the participants felt and being able to access non-verbal cues. As a result, these interviews were much shorter. Secondly, it appeared that professionals were aware of what they thought they ought to say, and what would reflect core values of the profession. At times, this meant that they were less forthcoming. It is also important to acknowledge that participants were predominantly female. Previous research has noted that there are differences between males and females in terms of their attitudes towards and perceptions of individuals who commit sexual offences (e.g. Senethavilay, 2018). In addition, there was substantial cultural variation in the student sample, and as such our findings may not be representative of attitudes and perceptions in the general public in the UK. It would therefore be of interest to explore how cultural influences and variations across countries may impact on the formation of attitudes and perceptions, as well as how client group may impact thereon, especially in light of our finding that some professionals who worked with victims of child sexual abuse presented with harsher attitudes.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, females were viewed more positively than males who sexually offend against children, highlighting gender differences in attitudes and perceptions. There was a tendency to minimise offending by females and remove responsibility from them, which was influenced by gender roles and stereotypes. Although females were seen more favourably overall, when it came to what should happen to them, students still adopted a more punitive approach compared to professionals. This seemed to be informed by a need to protect society against women who they thought may be unlikely to change. However, professionals took a more responsive approach that emphasised the need for rehabilitation and support, arguing that this was more effective than punishment. Our findings tentatively suggest that some types of offences are more minimised than others, based on contextual and relational factors, such as the female teacher-male student scenario and the female who is coerced by a male partner.

### **Note**

1. Student sample pseudonyms: Lin, Louise, Lorraine, Labib, Lisa, Lee, Lan, Laia, Lindsay, Lea; Professional sample pseudonyms: Angela, Abigail, Amanda, Andrea, Adele, Aran, Alison, Alix, Anna, Amelia.

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