



Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences Section - 2012

I2 Female Sexual Offenders: Five Italian Case-Studies

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how little the subject of sexually abusive mothers is studied and that a more comprehensive exploration of this offender population is needed in order to more appropriately understand and classify female child sex offenders.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by helping to increase sensitivity and awareness of the phenomenon of female sexual abusers.

Historically, there has been an assumption that women do not commonly perpetrate acts of sexual abuse against children (Wakefiled & Underwager, 1991). Recent interest in women offenders has brought attention to the issue, and challenges the perceptions regarding women who abuse children. The growing interest in the topic of female-perpetrated incidents of sexual victimization has produced some empirical research on the subject. A brief search of the current literature also yields a few published case studies, consisting primarily of reports on personality characteristics and developmental information from female perpetrators. Although this “provides a necessary starting point in understanding female sexual abuse perpetrators” (Wakefield & Underwager, 1991, p. 56), the findings from this data should be seen as preliminary, and may not describe the full range of women involved in the perpetration of sexual abuse (Grayston & De Luca, 1999).

Women who sexually abuse minors are rare and case histories are scarce; even less is known about sexually abusive mothers. Current data suggests that females are responsible for only a small percentage of sexual offenses against children in the general population, and men remain the most common perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Unlike male offenders, however, females can often disguise sexual offending by performing normal daily activities associated with childcare (i.e., affection, bathing, and dressing). Their behavior may appear to be nothing more than excessively protective mothering. Moreover, mothers may also commit more overt and highly eroticized, seductive behaviors, even going so far as to bestow the role of “lover” upon the child. Due to the low number of cases in which women sexually abuse minors, more in-depth studies on this subject are needed. The clinical files of five women who are currently serving time in Italian prisons for the sexual abuse of minors are presented here. The cases involved varying degrees of participation in the abuse by the mothers, and ranged from active sexual engagement to allowing others to abuse their children. Records of the abuse cases and other records were utilized. In three cases, the women revealed an antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), while in two cases a borderline personality disorder (BPD) was diagnosed according with DSM-IV criteria.

While existing studies of female child sex offenders provided a range of insight and knowledge regarding women who sexually abuse, the current literature does not adequately represent the full spectrum of female-perpetrated child victimization (Grayston & De Luca, 1999). Considerably more well-documented empirical research is required to guide law enforcement and clinical professionals in their understanding of female sex offenders. In recent years, several preliminary typologies of female sex offenders have begun to emerge in an effort to more clearly specify characteristics, dynamics, and offense patterns of female sexual perpetrators. However, the current review has shown that most female sex offenders fall into several suggested typology models. Therefore, the existing typologies used to describe these women are insufficient. It is recommended that more comprehensive exploration of this offender population continue in order to more appropriately understand and classify female child sex offenders.

Female Sexual Offenders, Sexually Abusive Mothers, Cycle of Abuse