



121 Clinical and Treatment Reality in Italian Female Perpetrators of Crimes Considered “A Danger to Society”

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the importance of the real incidence of psychopathy in women for the planned treatment of new inmates.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by assessing the rates of diagnosis of psychopathy in women affected by a serious mental disorder and considered at high risk of criminal reiteration.

The incidence of psychopathy is estimated to be 0.5% – 1% of the general population, while as many as 20% – 25% of prison populations qualify for the diagnosis.¹ The construct of psychopathy is essential in explaining criminal behavior, but unfortunately, empirical research on psychopathy in women has been inconsistent. In selected populations with a higher frequency of behavioral problems and higher rates of criminal behavior, men more often qualify for the diagnosis than women. Grann found that only 11% of female violent subjects met the criteria for psychopathy, as opposed to 31% of male violent subjects. In prison populations, other studies found rates of 16%² and 17.4%³ among women, substantially lower than the rates for men in prison.

Furthermore, although men and women share most interpersonal and affective traits, as well as psychopathic behaviors, they may rely on different tactics to achieve the same goals. Considering these differences, the increase in female criminality demonstrates the need to gain a better understanding of the construct of the disorder in women in order to validate results already obtained in large samples and to develop suitable, objective evaluation tools for making reliable predictions of re-offenders, institutional facilities needs, and treatment responses.

In Italy, all women perpetrators of a crime who are not considered penally liable because they were affected by a serious mental disorder at the time of the crime, and considered at high risk of criminal reiteration (a danger to society), are hospitalized in the “Ospedale Psichiatrico Giudiziario” (OPG) (Judiciary Psychiatric Hospital) of Castiglione dello Stiviere, in northern Italy. This facility also admits men with the same characteristics. A recent research conducted in this hospital facility, using the PCL-R,⁴ demonstrated a 30.7% rate of psychopathy among the inmates affected by a personality disorder, (16.9% male and 13.8% female); the mean score at the PCL-R in the sample was 28.5 for women and 26.5 for men. The research also showed that in 85% of males with a high psychopathy score, the admission diagnosis at the OPG was antisocial behavior, whereas in women a diagnosis of a borderline disorder was more common. These results are in line with those in the recent international literature that point out not only the different phenotypical manifestations of psychopathy in the two sexes, but also the likely general underestimation during risk assessment, of the violent potential and rates of female psychopathy.⁵ This is also because few data are yet available on this issue.

In the light of these considerations, an observational study of the entire female population hospitalized in the OPG of Castiglione delle Stiviere was conducted to individuate the real incidence of psychopathy. In fact, it is very probable that the rates of diagnosis of psychopathy in women are too low. If this hypothesis is confirmed, admissions to the OPG failing to make a correct diagnosis of so important an element as psychopathological traits may have a negative impact on the planned treatment of new inmates.

References:

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