



I6 Female-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse on Children: A Five-Year Long Italian Experience

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the gender-specific features of child sexual abuse perpetrated by women compared with male-perpetrated abuse.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing tools to recognize a form of sexual abuse often difficult to identify because of its intrinsic characteristics.

In the literature, little attention has been paid to females who sexually abuse as most of the studies focused on male perpetrators.¹ The phenomenon has typically been reported as relatively rare with a male-to-female sexual offenders ratio equal to 20:1. Available data indicate that women constitute approximately 5% of all sexual offenders.²

Despite this, female-perpetrated abuse is responsible for a non-negligible number of victims and offenders who need clinical attention. In addition, the phenomenon is certainly underestimated because it is difficult to diagnose females for several reasons: sexual abuse is often perpetrated by women who care for the child during routine daily activities, such as bathing or dressing, so sexual offending is often hidden behind the woman's caretaking behavior.³ Moreover, in most cases, a strong affective bond between the victim and the offender is created, so that the child does not reveal the abuse. The emerging cases that are reported for investigation appear to be the "tip of the iceberg" with respect to cases that are not reported. Finally, there are usually no clinically detectable lesions because sexual abuse is typically not conducted via violent acts.

In order to contribute to the knowledge of this topic, this study reports the data collected from January 2012 to June 2017 in the multidisciplinary unit called "Bambi," dedicated to the evaluation of suspected abused children, of the "Ospedale Infantile Regina Margherita" (Turin). Among 474 cases of suspected child sexual abuse, in nine cases (1.9%), the potential perpetrator was a woman: one child was male and the others were female. The children were between 3 and 9 years of age (four 4-year-olds, two 5-year-olds, two 9-year-olds, and one 3-year-old). In five cases, the parents of the children were divorced. The perpetrators in two cases were the mothers of the children, in four cases the paternal grandmother, in two cases a female neighbor, and in one case the babysitter. In only one case was the sexual abuse conducted in association with other perpetrators. One of the perpetrators already had a diagnosis of psychiatric disorders (borderline disorder and depression). In all cases, the perpetrators committed the abuse by touching and licking the ano-genital area, and in four cases, by also penetrating the vagina or anus. In one case, the culprit forced the child to watch porn videos. All children, except one, spontaneously described to the medical staff members the abusive actions perpetrated by the offender. More detailed information on the clinical and judicial path of each case will be provided during this presentation.

Although it is a common belief that if a female is involved in a sexual abuse, she must have been forcefully coerced by a male partner, the reported cases, in accordance with previous studies, suggest this is often not true.^{4,5}

Considering the unusualness of the phenomenon, although many treatment requirements appear to be similar to those of male sexual offenders, it is crucial that the gender-specific features of the phenomenon be taken into account, rather than attempting to fit female sexual offenders' treatments to existing male models.¹

This presentation provides attendees with additional knowledge regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse on children in order to understand gender-specific criminal offending patterns and provide an important tool in the development of prevention and rehabilitative strategies.

Reference(s):

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3. Christopher J. Ferguson and D. Cricket Meehan. An analysis of females convicted of sex crimes in the State of Florida. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*. 2005;14(1):75-89, doi: 10.1300/J070v14n01_05.
4. Theresa A. Gannon and Mariamne R. Rose. A descriptive model of the offense process for female sexual offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. 2008; 20(3): 352-374, doi: 10.1177/1079063208322495.
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Child Abuse, Female Perpetrators, Sexual Abuse