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Female Sexual Offenders: An Area to be Explored

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Editorial

Sexual crimes pose a major challenge for today's societies and policies. These crimes represent one of the worst forms of interpersonal violence, with strong repercussions at the social and individual level. Even so, we still far from understand the nature of these crimes, particularly when they are perpetrated by women. Sexual violence is a complex phenomenon, with a large heterogenic presentation. While most people endorse the idea that sexual violence is exclusively perpetrated by men, scientific data and judicial records show that a percentage of sexual offenders are women. Indeed, according to the US Child Protective Services, 1.5 million females were sexually abused by a woman [1]; also, among sexually victimized men, 20% were victimized by a female sex offender [2]. Women are further recognized to work as co-offenders, not only assisting male sex offenders (e.g., providing the optimal context for abusing children, including their own children) but also raising children and other women for sexual exploitation [3].

Despite evidence supporting sexual violence by women, scientific literature characterizing female sex offenders is missing. Forensic sexology is particularly interested in taxonomies. Accordingly, four typologies of female sex offenders have been proposed: 1) the nurturer (the most common type of offender, implies a hierarchical relationship; includes mother or caregiver abusing their children), 2) co-offender (the female offender has a passive role, assisting male offenders abusing minor or adult victims; mother-father-son is a common presentation), 3) adult on adult (female offender rapes adult men, usually by means of intoxication; female gang raping is also known), and 4) criminal offenders (women recruiting other women or minors for sexual exploitation/prostitution) [4]. However, is worth noting that these typologies lack replication and the psychosocial characterization of each (an important step for the establishment of the risk-factors associated to criminal recidivism) is based on anecdotal evidence. Currently, there is only one model conceptualizing female sexual offending behavior. This model describes three stable pathways for female sexual offending: explicit approach (offences are well planned/organized; implies psychopathic traits), directed avoidant (includes women that were coerced by men to offend), and implicit disorganized (offending behavior results from high impulsivity/low self-control) [5]. Although promising, this model is centered in USA data, thus challenging its generalization to other countries. For this reason, most countries lack an evidence-based background aimed at guiding legal decisions, as well as guidelines for psychological and psychiatric assessment (including risk-assessment) and rehabilitation of female sex offenders.

Also, is worth noting that sexual aggression by women has strong negative consequences, both at the individual and legal level. At the individual level, sexual crimes perpetrated by women present similar severity to those committed by men. Victims of female offenders report strong psychological impairment [6]. However, unlike victims of male offenders, they don't find a supportive context or a well-prepared body of professionals to assist them [7]. At the legal context, sex crimes present very high rates of attrition (i.e., the percentage of cases that are dropped from, or otherwise lost to the criminal justice process); only 5-10% of the cases end up being appropriately punished [8]. A key reason explaining this scenario relates to the social scripts and rape myths supporting the blaming of the victim. Because attrition strongly depends on the psychological reactions of the victim (which are shaped after the social reactions to the sexual crime), the victim's lack of confidence is a major factor impacting attrition [9]. Due to the strong stigma associated with being sexually victimized by a woman, the attrition in sex crimes perpetrated by women is expected to be even higher; indeed, most cases are not even expected to be reported to authorities [10].

Social scripts defining sexual violence and offenders are masking female sexual offending behavior, resulting in a strong gap in the scientific literature aimed at guiding legal decisions and biopsychosocial interventions with female sex offenders. Ultimately, this lack of knowledge and

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social awareness will lead to new and unprotected victims.

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