



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

# **A critical analysis of the perceptions of, and responses to, female child sex offenders**



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**Abstract****A critical analysis of the perceptions of, and responses to, female child sex offenders**

This dissertation will challenge the typical perceptions of female child sex offenders and examine the responses made to them by the public, the media, the criminal justice service and by welfare professionals. Unlike previous criminological research that has cast females as invisible, this dissertation has sought to bring women to the forefront. In particular, female child sex offenders have been presented as a sub-group that few want to treat, investigate or acknowledge; one might refer to them as 'societies last taboo'. Subsequently, this has resulted in narrow representations, which have placed limits on our knowledge and failed to capture the heterogeneous essence of the offending population. Society has relied on populist explanations and stereotypical constructions to form their understandings, largely oblivious to the breadth of female child sex offending that exists. Through analysis of pertinent literature, from early criminology to contemporary research, this dissertation has provided a new perspective through which to examine gender expectations and the impact these can have on criminological representations. Paradoxically, female child sex offenders are a juxtaposition of the feminine ideal and as such have provided a ready field for analysis. Initially, one hypothesised that scholarly reactions would adhere to the Lloyddian construct of 'double deviance' and would be predominantly negative. Whilst this has been partially evidenced, this dissertation also validates much of Pollak's 'chivalry thesis'. Overall, one would ascertain that failure to acknowledge the reality of female sexual abuse has provided a partial and incomplete picture of the true extent of dysfunction.

## **Introduction**

The objective of this dissertation is to understand and explain the perceptions of, and responses to, female child sex offenders. The representations of females in mainstream criminology have historically been narrow and monolithic, frequently defining the female criminal through a disproportionate and patriarchal prism. This preponderance echoes back through early Lombrosian theories of deviance and biological pre-dispositions, followed by post-war academic research conducted by eminent criminologists such as Pollak, who contended there was a considerable under-representation of women in official crime statistics. It is implied that much of this retrospective backdrop has contributed to the on-going subjectivity and androcentricity that surrounds female offending and especially female child sex offenders.

It is apparent from the research literature that female child sex offenders are an anathema to societal and theoretical expectations, both male and female. This categorisation permeates all strata of society including the public, the media, academia and the criminal justice system. Despite growing interest in the topic and access to wider criminological empiricism, this field continues to be affected by a lack of definitive information and remains in its infancy.

This dissertation will firstly focus on the nature and profile of female child sex offenders. Notably, it will outline the main female typologies, the gendered similarities and differences between perpetrators, and the consequences this has for treatment options. Correspondingly, the following two chapters consider the reactions that female child sex offenders provoke. Chapter two

deliberates the power of the media, with a direct emphasis placed on their inflated role as 'moral guardians'. It analyses the implications of a non-congruence between gender expectations and offender actions, drawing reference to 'double deviance' and documenting case studies of Myra Hindley, Vanessa George and Rosemary West. The third chapter concentrates on the influence of the professionals who are involved with the management of female child sex offenders and the possibility of a 'culture of denial'. It will conclude by examining the consequences of female criminological stereotypes, and what these could mean for the future of child protection.

### **The nature and profile of female child sex offenders**

This chapter is predominantly descriptive and outlines the characteristics of female child sex offenders. It will begin by examining the culture of criminology and the impact this has had on the representations of female offenders. Secondly, it will critique theories of biological essentialism and chivalry, in accordance with the official crime statistics. Thirdly, it will review the extent of the child abuse problem and the benefits of having detailed typologies regarding females. Lastly, it will deliberate the gender specific treatment options and the necessity for these.

Before considering my area of research in depth, it is crucial to understand the backdrop of criminology. As a discipline, it has repeatedly been referred to as the 'malestream' and has been criticised due to its androcentric nature (DeKeseredy and Perry, 2006). This may be because female crime, for all practical purposes, has been monopolised by men; legislators, judges and police men. Likewise, theoretically, there has been an emphasis on male interest, numerically and hierarchally (Heidensohn, 1985). Comparably, the law defers to an objective standard of "the reasonable man", which despite intending to be 'ungendered', is unquestionably enmeshed in masculinity (Naffine, 1987;4). Subsequently, this creates ideals of behaviour that are determined by male mentality and cast women further outside the field of vision. Conclusively, criminology and law are gender blind institutions that relegate women who do come into the equation as aberrant and separate from the human male norm (Naffine, 1987).

Many of the beliefs that society hold about female offenders are rooted in early criminology; despite these first being contended more than one hundred years ago. One of the most infamous explanations for female criminality, or lack of, was suggested by Lombroso and Ferrero in 'La Donna Delinquente'. This theory conceptualised that women are ruled by their biology, distinct from men who are autonomous (Lloyd, 1995). Placing emphasis on sexual and psychological factors, it was asserted that women's hormones and reproductive role made them susceptible to emotionality, unreliability, deviousness and could push them towards crime (Heidensohn, 1985). Utilising the measurement of skulls, brains and bones, it was ascertained that there were fewer born female criminals. Contrary to this this, women who breached boundaries were regarded as more savage and inclined to cruelty. Deviance was formulated as peculiarly sexual and was deemed mutually exclusive with maternity (Heidensohn, 1985). The female criminal was doubly exceptional, as a woman, and as a criminal, creating a true monster.

Contextually, it was during this period that social explanations of criminality began to dominate most of the century (Lombroso et al., 2004). Thus, it is interesting to observe that it was only women's behaviour that continued to be explained in simple scientific terms, to which there clung odours of witchcraft and demonology (Heidensohn, 1985). With a spurious scientific basis and no systematic enquiry, these perceptions told us little about women and more about male bias.



Another theorist with an insatiable interest in female criminality was Pollak. Through recognition of the 'tip of the iceberg' conundrum, Pollak hypothesised that the grandeur of unaccounted for crime was gendered and committed by women. He justified this dually, firstly, through the 'chivalry thesis'. This theory implied that women are treated more leniently by the criminal justice system and were less likely to be prosecuted. Secondly, that women's criminality was hidden through 'masking', thus escaping the attention of the police and the courts (NORLAND and SHOVER, 1977). Subsequently, that the low official rate of female offending distorted the true picture of crime and that if it was represented at its true level, statistics would rise dramatically (Scutt, 1978).

Pollak contended that women were addicted to crimes that were easily concealed and could be aided by their containment in the home, such as, child abuse. Similarly, that reporting would falter due to these victims being inherently more vulnerable (Heidensohn, 1985). Poignantly, Pollak sought to expose how women manipulate their maternal role in sexual exploitation. Underlying these assertions was Pollak's belief that women were more naturally deceitful than men. Whilst women are capable of faking orgasms during sex, men have to become erect and cannot hide failure. Furthermore, women are better equipped to hide the truth and are impelled to do so in a society where the mention of menstruation, menarche and pregnancy are taboo (Heidensohn, 1985).

Despite Pollak's thesis, it is largely uncontentious to assert that women are more law abiding than men (Naffine, 1987). Official statistics illustrate that

male offenders outnumber females in engaging in criminal activities by approximately 5:1. Although, closer ratios have been suggested by unofficial data, criminologists have tended to overlook these (Ogilvie, 1996). To speak broadly, females are the perpetrators of minor crimes; theft, drug abuse and buffer charges. Respectively, women commit few crimes that would pose a societal threat and most are not recidivists (Heidensohn, 1985). These understandings can be used to perpetuate the belief that female offending, as a field, does not require funding or research. This argument lacks validity because it is widely acknowledged that official statistics are unreliable guides, to both male and female crime (Naffine, 1987). This standpoint becomes even more problematised on recognition that child sexual abuse is one of the most insidious and underreported crimes.

Hegemonic society has succeeded in constructing 'women' as weak and conformist; thus, rendering them irrelevant to a lot of criminological study and instead generalising male results as conclusive to all (DeKeseredy and Perry, 2006). Theorists Daly and Chesney criticised this preponderance in their 'gender ratio' theory, articulating the importance of differentiating between male and female offending levels and why these may materialise (Chafetz, 2006). Likewise, sex differences in criminality are so sustained that they should be appraised as one of the most significant features of recorded crime (Heidensohn, 1985), a point that has seemingly been disregarded. The emphasis that studies of deviance have placed on shallow, misconceptualised understandings of gender has produced 'sex role' stereotypes, in which particular attributes are more appropriate for one sex than the other (Ogilvie,

1996). This neglects the fact that women have been shown to contribute to all tariffs of crime and demonstrates the lack of logic in suggesting there are 'sex specific' crimes. Crime may largely be a masculine activity; however, it is one in which women do participate (Heidensohn, 1985).

This chapter will now examine the prevalence and risks of female child sex offending. Child abuse is an endemic problem and has been referred to by 'Child Line' as the most frequent problem they incur (Turton, 2010). Child sexual abuse is ambiguous in nature and defined broadly, thus, measurement is problematic and categorisation is difficult (Myers, 2002). Krugman delineated it as the engagement "of a child in sexual activities that the child does not understand, to which the child cannot give informed consent or which violate the social taboos of society" (Hetherington and Beardsall, 1998; 1). Koonin later interpreted it as "the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult" (Tsopelas et al., 2012; 305). Variations in definition arise as some exclude non-contact force and single abusive episodes, whilst others alter depending on victim age, age difference, relations and consent (Ford, 2006). Concurrently, child abuse takes place in privacy, hence true prevalence remains unknown (DeKeseredy and Perry, 2006).

These complications are heightened due to the freedom that women have with children. Society is more tolerant to the affection of females and allows publicly permissible, unrestricted access to children that may be denied to men, sometimes even fathers (Turton, 2010). Carlson has provided a spectrum to determine child sexual abuse by women, the first is 'chargeable

offences'; oral sex, intercourse and masturbation. The second is 'offences'; voyeurism, exposure, and seductive touching. Thirdly, 'invasions of privacy'; bathing together, washing past reasonable age and asking intrusive questions. Lastly, 'inappropriate relations'; substituting the child for a partner or using as a confidant for personal or sexual matters (Ford, 2006).

The subject of female perpetrators is only recently gaining prominence in academic and social discourse, thus it is relatively new and remains in its infancy (Gannon et al., 2012). It was ascertained by Mayer that as awareness of males who sexually offend grew, the same would concur about women, however this was not the case (Ford, 2006). To many, the possibility of female involvement was 'taboo'; the depiction of a woman being violent is not palatable and the concept of a female sexual offender is removed from societal sensibility (Duncan, 2010). Correspondingly, one of the most substantial contributions to feminist criminology was the recognition of the effects of sexual abuse on female victims, chiefly by males (Gannon and Cortoni, 2010). Factually, this emphasis has increased the criminological and psychological resistance to the possibility that females could commit these offences, as will be deliberated.

The empirical evidence surrounding child sexual abuse does overwhelmingly suggest that it is a male dominated activity, irrespective of the sex of the victim (Cossins, 1999). Grubin's research asserts that a minute 1% of sexual offences were committed by females. Conversely, Finklehor established that women were responsible for 5% of the abuses against girls and 20% of the

abuses against boys (Ford, 2006). Despite these figures being comparably smaller, one would contend that females still account for a sizeable amount of offences and therefore require clinical attention (Gannon et al., 2012).

Notably, statistics cannot be taken as fact and there are great discrepancies which ensue, especially in respect of women. Whilst official data suggests a prevalence of 1.2-8%, self-report studies have illuminated rates of up to 58% of abuse by females (Ford, 2006). What is more, research on female abusers is restricted due to small sample sizes, making generalisation to the larger population difficult (Laws and O'Donohue, 2008). Fewer than twelve studies have used samples of greater than thirty participants; this often leads to precarious results and problematises creating psychological profiles and building treatment options (Vandiver, 2006). At present, there is no well formulated theory of female child sex offenders, but what is apparent, is that like males, females are not a homogenous group. They digress in personalities, offences and victim choices.

Grayson and DeLuca established that most of their female perpetrators were in their twenties and thirties, however it is evident that women of any age can and do sexually abuse children. It is probable that sexual abuse by older women is less well recognised, thus skewing the figures (Grayston and De Luca, 1999). Nathan and Ward identified several common predictors; poor education, low socio-economic status, unemployment and a tendency to follow traditional roles. In the same vein, Tardif et al established 2/3 of the females in their sample were living on welfare benefits and experienced a notoriety of social disadvantages that could contribute to their feelings of

powerlessness. This adheres well with Ong's suggestion that the structural powerlessness of women as mothers in the public sphere may translate into total power in the private sphere (Kemshall and McIvor, 2004). Conversely, it is important to acknowledge that one of the most underreported aspects of child abuse is abuse of children in the upper or middle classes, a finding that could be analogous with professional bias (Ford, 2006).

Furthermore, an abundance of female child sex offenders were revealed to have personality disorders, substance abuse issues and difficulties in intimate relationships. Ford contended that when female child sex offenders were not abusing children, the majority showed symptoms of psychological distress; self-harm, depression and anxiety (Ford, 2006). Kaplan and Green reinforced this, stating 71.6% of the women in their study were highly psychiatrically disordered and 43.9% had suicidal ideations. Pertinently, sexual violence has been cited as a potential coping mechanism to avoid negative feelings (Oliver, 2007). Correspondingly, the females in Ford's study, had an unfavourable sense of self and felt they had little control over their lives. It was commonplace for them to see themselves as more comparable to children, hence believing they could build better relationships with them. Similarly, the isolated nature of these women's lives was well illustrated, as none of them could name somebody they considered a friend (Ford, 2006). However, Faller has drawn resonance to the fact that women's sexual abuse is not necessarily part of a psychiatric disorder. He concluded that the women he studied were not generally highly disturbed, nor psychotic when abusing children (Oliver, 2007). Comparably, Matthews identified 'sexual arousal' in 11/16 female child

molesters, despite this, the contention of mental illness is prevailing (Shaw, 1999). This can be rationalised through the 'mad, bad, victim' dichotomy, as will be discussed in chapter three.

To continue, a significant finding throughout the literature was the prominent link with the 'cycle of abuse theory'. This theory hypothesised that offenders behaviours may stem directly from their histories of childhood maltreatment (Bexson, 2011). Travis et al established that all the women in their sample had suffered physical, sexual or psychological abuse and often a combination of these (Ford, 2006). It is logical to infer that experiences of neglect or abuse may create a perverse blue print, which offenders then re-enact on their own or other peoples' children (Mutz, 2001). Anderson substantiated this, by asserting that the strongest explanation for female sexual offending was the theory of "intergenerational transmission" (Gannon and Cortoni, 2010; 37). The female may employ coercion to regain the sexual control that she was denied as a child. Unquestionably, this does not mean that abuse is inevitable and there are numerous limitations to this hypothesis. Evidence illustrates that girls have much higher victimisation rates than boys, yet commit less sexual offences. If one took the intergenerational abuse hypothesis as gospel, it would be legitimate to expect more girls to grow up to offend (Gannon and Cortoni, 2010).

Typologies have been created to assist understanding of the heterogeneities of female abusers; characteristics, life experiences, sexual and criminal histories (Gannon and Cortoni, 2010). Typologies are crucial for theory

development and illuminate demographics that impact offending. This dissertation has chosen to focus on the typologies as constructed by Saradjian and Matthews, as these are most highly regarded by clinicians. One will begin by discussing 'women who initially abused young children'. Within this typology, the reasons for abuse included; physical gratification, increased power and to bond closely with the child (Saradjian and Hanks, 1996). Fallor indicated that this typology could be applicable to single parent families, where mothers use their children as surrogates for partners. This abuse has been regarded as a compound of loneliness and isolation. Additionally, problems connecting with and disciplining their children, has substantiated in female abusers using sexual violence as a means of punishment. This attempt at justification transforms the act, blames and silences the victim, and displaces the responsibility (Ford, 2006).

The second typology 'women who sexually abuse adolescents', is comparable in scope to Matthew's 'teacher/lover' theory. Thought-provokingly, these female perpetrators are deemed to be motivated by the assurance of support and closeness, rather than sexual desire. It is probable that these women have had a conjunction of poor or non-existent relationships with husbands, families or peers, to which sexual abuse is a resolution (Saradjian and Hanks, 1996). Adolescents are classified as ideal partners because they allow the perpetrator to feel like she is in control. In contradiction to other typologies, the initial sexual encounters are often not pre-meditated, however may later become a result of calculation and planning (Gannon and Cortoni, 2010). Furthermore, victims are frequently elevated to adult status and established



as consensual participants. It is not unheard of for these women to believe the child enjoyed and benefitted from the abuse (Elliott et al., 2010). Matthews reinforced this, affirming that women idealised the relationships and reframed them in the context of loving relationships (Robertiello and Terry, 2007). Elliott contended that whilst these offenders had the most positive backgrounds and skills at their disposal, they regularly saw victim's stability and sophistication when it was not there and needed to be convinced their behaviour was abusive (Elliott, 1993).

The third set of typologies refers to 'women who are coerced into abuse by men'. These females co-offend sexually, however are deemed to be participating under male influence. Whilst the victims are likely to be actively groomed by the male partners, it could be inferred that the female accomplices have been groomed themselves. One may assert that their initial motivations are directly linked to the motivations of their male partners. Henceforth, these women are regarded as the least responsible for their actions. Typically, they are dependent on others, have low self-esteem and a fear of being alone (Saradjian and Hanks, 1996). They may partake in abuse due to fears that their partner will otherwise leave (Forbes, 1992). These women frequently find it difficult to comprehend that the sexual abuse was morally wrong, as they would do anything to protect their relationship with the male (Peter, 2006). Elliott emphasised this, by suggesting that their infatuations made them susceptible to exceptionally pathological, self-centered and narcissistic traits. Hence, there was a great necessity for them to have long and extensive therapy (Elliott, 1993).

The final 'pre-disposed' typology as proposed by Matthews, challenges the common misperception that female abusers are categorically passive, rather than active participants (Robinson, 1998). This typology refers to women who act alone, have histories of victimisation and have deviant sexual fantasies (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2007). Frequently, these women have low self-esteem and believe they are bad people. They are depicted as the most aggressive, often acting out of revenge. In cognisance with the cycle of abuse theory, the psychological implications of being a victim of child abuse may lead some women to engage in self-destructive behaviour (Tewksbury, 2004). Sexual abuse provides women with the opportunity to project childhood victimisation onto someone else; it serves to contest childhood trauma with adult triumph and is an act of risk taking. Moreover, Pines follows, when women have children, they can re-create destructive patterns of their own lives. Through the notion of separateness, the needs of the child for welfare and protection are replaced with the perpetrators concerns to be cherished and loved (Motz, 2001). One must recognise the perceived dangers with this typology; perpetrators may report previous abuse to evoke sympathy and more lenient treatment (Bexson, 2011).

Additionally, it is necessary to discuss the gendered similarities and differences between child sex offenders, an area which Miller labels 'inconsistent' (Miller, 2003 cited in Ford, 2006). Research is considered gender biased; stereotypical beliefs about women dictate that their offences and motivations are different to that of men's. Or gender blind, in which

researchers disregard the concept of gender and see females as no different from males. Pertinently, these polarised approaches are detrimental for the responses and interventions implemented (Ford, 2006). Genesis II, a treatment agency in Minnesota, determined many similarities and differences between male and female abusers. Similarities included; previous chaotic abusive backgrounds, non-nurturing home lives, feeling that they were of low status and that they did not belong (Patton, 1991). Specifically, evidence illustrates that abusive acts committed by women are not particularly different from abusive acts committed by men, at least in overt behavioural terms. Rudin et al identified no significant divergence in acts committed by lone female perpetrators and male/female co-operations, both were regarded as very severe (Rudin, Zalewski and Bodmer-Turner, 1995). Correspondingly, Saradjian established that the offending process of males and females is akin, in that they use comparable tactics to groom children and set up abusive situations (Saradjian and Hanks, 1996). Despite these affinities, academics have warned of the problems with generalising male and female abusers. Sexual violence is a gendered act; thus, it cannot be assumed that females are simply acting like males or that male norms are applicable. Males and females are distinct and warrant unique explanations (Turton, 2010).

Contrastingly, Genesis II contended that female child sex offenders used force to a lesser degree, started abusing later and used less threats (Elliott, 1993). In this sense, their tactics were understood to be more persuasive than physical. This is not to negate from the acceptance that some women use violence to instill fear, obtain power and prevent disclosure (Elliott, 1993).

Sexually, Search observed that women were less prone to requesting that their victims masturbate them. This was inferred to mean that female abusers are interested in more than sexual gratification (Ford, 2006). Furthermore, female abusers are revealed to be more likely to allow others to use children sexually, including supplying children for third-party purposes. One could relate this to the 'male-coerced' typology and definitive cases, such as, Vanessa George, who chapter two will discuss. Conclusively, research demonstrates that abuse by women is more likely to involve multiple perpetrators, multiple victims, ritualistic abuse and penetrative acts (Ford, 2006). Therefore, challenging previous 'caring' stereotypes. Despite this, it is imperative not to make generalisations about severity; results may be biased due to minor actions being concealed. Subsequently, Allen suggests it is important not to endorse a 'males do' and 'females do not' dichotomy (Horton, 1990). Kelly stresses this, stating it is problematic for policy makers to assume one gender is more harmful than the other (Turton, 2010).

Regarding victims, both males and females are likely to abuse children that are known to them. A significantly shocking finding is that victims of female abusers are usually very young, predominantly below the age of five (Ford, 2006). Moreover, research counteracts myths that female child sex offenders only target males by identifying that women abuse both genders and only held a preference when targeting adolescents. Gender of the victim is noticeably influential when determining reporting bias; male victims are less likely to come forward because of a cultural bias towards women (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2007). However, Courtois also ascertained that

female victims are reluctant to report sexual abuse by females, especially in cases of incest, due to shame and stigma. When targeting adolescents, evidence suggests males and females frequently abuse outside of the family, for example, in the teacher-lover typology (Ford, 2006). Elliott contended that victims experienced comparable effects regardless of the gender of the perpetrator; drug abuse, suicide attempts and relationships difficulties. Therefore, reinforcing that female abuse has extensive consequences and should not be pardoned.

Lastly, one must contemplate the treatment options for female child sex offenders; which is another area that struggles due to a lack of research. Despite some treatments being equally applicable, it may not always be appropriate to apply male models of offending and treatment to females. Although there are several overt similarities, it is important to think beyond behavioural resemblance and consider underlying dynamics (Ford, 2006). Current research propositions that female abusers are not monsters, they can change and develop empathy for their victims, thus it is possible for them to lead positive lives (Elliott, 1993). Intervention work needs to identify the internal and external obstacles that prevent women from meeting their fundamental needs and find ways to overcome these, to meet needs in non-abusive ways (Ford, 2006). Treatments included; developing victim empathy, cognitive distortions and sexual arousal (Elliott, 1993).

To conclude, this chapter has sought to illustrate women's role within criminology. Whilst females are considerably law-abiding, there is little

justification for their relegation from research. It is becoming increasingly questioned whether female perpetrated sexual abuse is rare or underreported, and further empirical study is essential for the safeguarding of children. The typologies have provided an ample of new information, however more should be done to challenge existing stereotypes and to improve gender-specific treatment options. The next chapter will scrutinise the institution of the media and acknowledge the important ramifications it has had for the constructions of female child sex offenders.

### **Media representations of female child sex offenders**

This chapter considers the power of the media and the authority it has had in socially constructing ideas and determining 'reality'. Firstly, it will analyse the media news values, and outline how these characteristics impact on the types of crimes that are reported by the press. Secondly, it will examine how men and women are 'conveniently' represented in the media, according with gender roles. Thirdly, the case studies of Hindley, George and West will be evaluated. Finally, it will acknowledge the feminist backlash; double deviance and the search for equivalence.

It is widely recognised that one of the most pervasive forms of social control is the mass media (Chiotti, 2009). This is largely because media representations create impressions of events rather than providing accurate, objective and factual records (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002). They cease to be value free, as a series of value judgements have been imposed throughout the process (Pollak and Kubrin, 2011). The events captured become visible only through the reporter's eyes, thus it is difficult for consumers to separate sacred fact from profane interpretation (Chibnall, 1977). Therefore, the language used is a reflection and a deflection of reality and can be associated with 'media hegemony' (Pollack and Kubrin, 2011). This term refers to the dominance of a certain way of life and how this is diffused to the public. When Gramsci coined it, he asserted that media systems privilege the ideologies of the powerful and that the news provided an arena for them to disseminate information to an extensive audience (Pollack and Kubrin, 2011). Individuals often utilise the knowledge they obtain from the media to construct a picture of

the world; in this sense, the media could be responsible for what is considered good or bad, moral or evil (Kellner, 1995; 24).

Subsequently, one must recognise the types of crimes that the media report and the respective effects these have on fears of victimisation. Violent and sexual crimes appear the least in official statistics, however are the most heavily covered by newspapers (Galeste, Fradella and Vogel, 2012). These offences dominate two-thirds of crime new stories, but account for less than 10% of the crimes recorded by the police (Pollak and Kubrin, 2011). This phenomenon has been referred to as the 'law of opposites', because the crimes, criminals and victims represented in the media are in most respects the polar opposite of the patterns suggested by the official statistics and victim surveys (Stenson and Sullivan, 2006).

The 'law of opposites' has been rationalised through numerous theories, notably Jewkes' theory of 'newsworthiness'. Jewkes ascertained that certain characteristics made some news-stories more enticing than others. To name a few; predictability, risk, sexual aspects and the involvement of children (Jewkes, 2011). Similarly, Chibnall created a criterion for news selection which included; immediacy, drama, personalisation and novelty. Thus, it is conceivable that crime news will always be prime news (Chibnall, 1977). Further, the criterion of 'negativity' should be cited. Although a cliché, it is no less true that "bad news sells" (McGregor, 2003; 2).



To continue, this chapter will examine 'gender roles' and how these are reflected, or even exaggerated by the media. Definitionally, gender roles are the "socially prescribed rules for being masculine or feminine" (CHIOTTI, 2009; 43). They are ingrained into societal structure, and the media play an invaluable role in reinforcing the acceptable sexual behaviour of men and women (CHIOTTI, 2009; 46). Following this perspective, 'gender' and 'sex' are often misunderstood as mutually exclusive entities, with the terms being used interchangeably. Thus, disregarding that 'sex' is biological, whilst 'gender' is a social construct. Problematically, these simplistic notions imply that there is an intrinsic link and therefore no other forms of masculinity and femininity can be contemplated. Gender roles portray women as cheerful, gentle and sensitive. Men, comparably, are constructed as leaders, aggressive, assertive and forceful. This would correlate with suggestions that males have been socialised more towards crime and violence (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). Further rationalising why mainstream constructions of masculinity and male offending can be normalised and explained through labels, such as, 'bad' (Peter, 2006). Naylor contends that it is the unexpectedness of female offending that causes the public to require an explanation (Gilbert, 2002).

Whilst male crime has been "glorified, even fantasised" (Morrissey, 2003; 16), the same has not applied to female offending. Society has consistently denied the rationale between women's violent actions, as they contradict traditional ideas about nature. Women and violence are correlated so infrequently that it remains private, unrecognised and misunderstood. Butler problematises this

in 'Gender Trouble', reiterating that violence and aggression are not attached to biological sex, but to the non-biological nature of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1990). It has been ascertained that the media see women's behaviour as a cultural marker and a discursive sign, thus are reluctant to criminalise them. Criminal women feed society's fear that the social fabric is depreciating (Jones and Wardle, 2008). Frigon compared this to 'Victorian morality', because female violence was indicative of increased demoralisation of the collective (Dobash, Noaks and Dobash, 1995). Theorists Jack, Butler and Kramer have criticised the media's finite portrayal of women enunciating that if everyone can wear a mask, perform a gender or is covered by a veil, then society should accept the multi-faceted nature of women (Gilbert, 2002).

In cognisance with this critique, the media perpetuates cultural myths and patriarchal assumptions about the position of women. Females are forced into subordinate roles as sex objects, wives or mothers and are denied the opportunity to be self-determining individuals. Significantly, when females are the subject in the media, the term utilised most frequently is 'victim' (CHIOTTI, 2009). Winter identified three common categorisations of women; the lunatic, the monster and the idiot (Jones and Wardle, 2008). Likewise, there are pertinent themes of demonisation, sensationalism, medicalisation and titillation. Further, female offenders are labelled fascinating because they provide not only human drama and emotion, but sexualised drama and emotion (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002). They breach both gender expectations and normal human interactions; thus, their narratives can be

readily personalised and provide increased entertainment (Dobash, Noaks and Dobash, 1995).

Child sexual abuse has acquired a significant public profile in recent years, partly due to graphic media coverage (CHIOTTI, 2009). It was first discovered in the 1980's and received a dramatic rise in attention after the production of 'Child Watch'. Accordingly, it became a regular topic for documentaries, chat-shows and drama programmes; all of which contributed to increased public anxiety and awareness (Jewkes and Letherby, 2010). Unsurprisingly, findings have suggested that media coverage of child abuse is largely stereotyped and superficial. Great emphasis has been placed on inherent characteristics of disease and corruption, disregarding issues of social causation and prevention (Wilczynski and Sinclair, 1999). Poignantly, whilst most crimes divide the public morally, the consensus on sexual crimes remains constant (Hayes and Carpenter, 2013). The predominance of child sexual abuse in the media is logical; firstly, the renowned knowledge that 'sex sells', secondly, because risk enmeshes contemporary society and thirdly, because children constitute a cultural barometer in which the health of society is measured (Jewkes, 2010).

Although large proportions of the news are dedicated to child sex offending, a limited scope of cases are provided. The media focuses on stories where children are victims whilst in statutory care, by strangers or by members of the clergy (Greer, 2012). They are seemingly reluctant to report cases of interfamilial abuse (Frei, 2008); cases of sexual abuse within the home are

noted for their absence, rather than for their prevalence. This predominance legitimises Greer's argument that to many incest is a "crime too far", thus the media and the public would rather choose to ignore that it happens (Greer, 2003; 188). Further, one could suggest that the media are attempting to protect the institution of the family, through reinforcing the stereotype that sex offenders are a separate species (Hayes and Carpenter, 2013). Despite knowledge of abuse by authority figures increasing in recent years, these cases are minutely covered in comparison to those who fit the archetypal 'dirty old man' (Jewkes, 2010). This is because stereotypes allow the "public to disassociate themselves from the individual described, whilst simultaneously maintaining the horror of the unknown predator" (Jewkes, 2010;16). One would contend that these representations are illogical and potentially harmful, when considering the evident diversity of child sex offenders.

In contempt of female child sex offenders being a much smaller population, they comprised of over half of the number of sex offenders presented by the media (CHIOTTI, 2009). Representationally, there is evidence of female abusers being portrayed noticeably differently to males. Although media coverage was negative, female child sex offenders were commonly referred to as 'sex mad' or 'temptresses', rather than necessarily heinous (Gavin, 2009). Gender stereotypes were especially apparent when looking at the figures pertaining to heteronormative fields of coverage; males did not have their personal lives scrutinised to the same extent and were almost never sexualised. 70.1% of female child abusers were classified as 'married',

whereas 66.7% of male's relationship statuses were unknown (CHIOTTI, 2009). This bares resonance with the historical notion that women exist as the property of men. Likewise, gender stereotyping was illustrated through emphasis that the perpetrator was a woman; 'wife', 'lesbian pervert' or 'female groomer' (Hayes and Baker, 2014). It is poignant that men were seldom described as 'bad fathers' in the same way that women were portrayed as 'bad mothers' (Jewkes, 2004). It is fathomable that female's actions were considered worse because they were deemed to be defying their gender role and transgressing the laws of nature (O'Donnell, 2016).

Additionally, the media was reluctant to recognise that women can behave in masculine ways. Whilst 46.4% of all male child sex offenders were characterised as predatory, females were cast as predatory in only 11.4% of the publications. Accordingly, 47.7% of females were shown in caregiving roles, in comparison to no males. Typical headlines centralised the teacher, lover typology and constructed women as 'emotional' and 'in love' with their victims, reducing or removing their blameworthiness (CHIOTTI, 2009). Similarly, victims were rarely referred to as such, frequently being labelled 'willing participants' (Frei, 2008).

This would seem to suggest that media coverage of female perpetrators has little to do with harm. One may infer that the minimisation of risk is a desire to preserve hegemonic cultural norms. As Van Zoonen clarifies, "because the news is made by men, it is thought to reflect the interests and values of men too" (Allan, Branston and Carter, 1998; 34). More so, that the use of weak,

nurturing stereotypes can be utilised intentionally to confine women to their subordinate roles (Allan, Branston and Carter, 1998). Through restricting understanding of female offending and providing limited explanations, the problem remains at an individual level and “prevents us from looking at wider social and economic processes” (Dobash, Noaks and Dobash, 1995; 35). Concisely, by overlooking women and marginalising them as ‘emotional radicals’, their second-class status becomes justified (Len-Rios, 2005).

In coherence with the previous points, one could argue that the media have been overly-chivalrous towards female perpetrators. However, Grabe et al’s ‘patriarchal hypothesis’ provides a strong opposition to this. They reinforced the impact the type of crime and gender expectations can have on shaping news coverage, illustrating that women who committed the most unfeminine acts received the harshest treatment (Grabe et al., 2006). This partly explains why female perpetrators from different typologies receive variable forms of representation and treatment. This theory asserts that ‘paternalism’; the desire to protect women, is only applicable when the female conforms to a sex role that is passive and obedient. For females that defy this expectation, chivalry can be replaced with “harsh exploitation and harassment” (Grabe et al., 2006; 139).

Huckerby demonstrated this in his comparative study of Khouha Her and Andrea Yates; two women that killed their children, but were treated contrastingly. Her strangled six of her children and was brutally scrutinised in the media for poor mothering skills. Conversely, Yates drowned five of her

children, however, received more compassion from the courts as the media had illuminated her past as a subservient housewife and caring mother (Huckerby, 2003). Firstly, these observations exemplify the importance society places on womanhood and natural roles. Secondly, they testify that the media is more influential than it is generally assumed to be; it is a rhetoric force that is capable of theoretical and practical consequence.

This chapter will now analyse the case studies of Myra Hindley, Vanessa George and Rosemary West, with the intention of understanding how their backgrounds led to differential representations. Hindley is arguably the most notorious female icon of evil, receiving a whole life sentence for crimes, to which only two women have ever been given (Priest, 2013). Despite Hindley being a male-coerced offender, her infamy far outweighs her partners, Brady (Jones and Wardle, 2008). It is reported that Hindley had no sexually deviant pathology, but received more coverage because she committed crimes that violated gender stereotypes and definitively failed as a female.

Hindley has become a symbolic figure and has subsequently been represented in numerous pieces of work. The emphasis has been placed on the way that she looks, making her image iconic; dyed blonde hair and an “impassive stare” (Hayward and Presdee, 2010; 58). A photo that Hindley herself has referred to as an “awful mug shot” is said to connote malice and affectless evil in a way that a photo of Brady never has (Hayward and Presdee, 2010; 58). It stirred public hostility due to its non-committal attitude and lack of redemptive qualities (Campbell, 2011;3); all of which have

contributed to Hindley's construction as a cruel and calculating killer. One could contend that Hindley's image became a tool by which we "somehow comprehend the incomprehensible" (Hayward and Presdee, 2010; 58).

This assertion reinforces that the use of images has extended far beyond page aesthetics. Images are selected based on impact, dramatic meaning and unusualness, as well as how they will be interpretatively coded (Hall et al., 2013). Visualness has become a primary news value and "culture has moved perceptibly towards the iconic" (McGregor, 2003;3). Hall reiterates this, conferring that the contemporary news will be led by negative events with vivid, graphic pictures and an emotional sub-text (McGregor, 2003;6).

Accordingly, the photo of Hindley was produced with such force and repetition of negative language that it can no longer be referenced without producing a knee jerk reaction of the merging of 'Hindley the woman' and 'Hindley the monster' (Priest, 2013). The reputation of Hindley is so significantly sustained that the media still rely on her to stir emotion; recently referring to Maxine Carr as 'MYRA MK II'. The implication being that evil does not die, it simply transfers body. Thus, there will always be a Myra and that evil is powerful and somehow immortal (Jones and Wardle, 2008).

This makes evident the potential for women to be used as "moral panics"; a "condition, episode, person or group of persons which emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 1987; 9).

Newspapers have previously ascertained that bringing female sexual



offenders in to the open will “unleash a flood of stories” and that the number of female abusers has been “grossly underestimated”. (Forbes, 1992; 1). Whilst important that the media recognise the diversity of abusers to raise awareness, there is the potential risk that extensive coverage can be manipulated for other means. For example, some believe that Hindley was used as a ‘scapegoat’; a social and cultural warning to all women (Priest, 2013). Further to this, the media, retrospectively, have been poor at educating the public about crime, adhering to sensationalist tones and creating disproportionate levels of fear. To which there are practical consequences; policy makers are reactive to social problems, legitimated by the media, rather than social problems that are proven by empirical data (Galeste, Fradella and Vogel, 2012).

Another perpetrator that has severely flouted gender explanations is Vanessa George, the woman that propelled the issue of female abusers to the public agenda in 2009. George was employed in a nursery school, but was revealed to be participating in an online pedophile ring, orchestrated by Colin Blanchard (Bexson, 2011). George was frequently on the front page of national newspapers, whilst, Blanchard, who was linked to all the women, appeared relatively less. She was particularly demonised due to her occupation, as she violated a seemingly safe environment (Bexson, 2011). Importantly, this case brought into question the ways in which nursery and school staff have legitimate access to children. Duncan contended that expectations and limited knowledge about female abusers have harboured a climate where women are responsible for children without appropriate

supervision and oversight. Thus, although gender expectations have contributed to increased demonisation, they have conversely resulted in fewer safeguards existing to protect children (Evans, 2012).

Media articles represented George in juxtaposed ways, drawing on prior character reports. Parents were cited as referring to her as “friendly... absolutely lovely”, however equally expressing that the sight of her makes them feel “sick” (Hayes and Carpenter, 2013; 7). This opposition of feelings was reflected by images of George appearing as an ‘ordinary woman’. Greer contended that until recently media representations have falsely reassured society that normal people, especially women, do not commit sexual offences, something these images counteract. Stevenson reiterated this by stating the English press have “effectively destroyed such fragile, albeit illusory, security that women are incapable of such acts” (Jones et al, 2011; 112). Lee highlights the emphasis the media placed on George’s aesthetics; she was habitually referred to as ‘18 stone Vanessa George’. This could be said to signify her abnormality and deviation, drawing comparisons with the work of Lombroso and Ferrero (Evans, 2012).

Lastly, Rosemary West, is an offender that could be regarded as having the most active role. West received a whole life sentence for her involvement in the sexual assault and murder of ten girls, alongside her husband, Fred. Unlike the other perpetrators, Rosemary was described as the controlling force in the relationship (Harrison, 2011). Furthermore, West’s media representations were by far the most sexualised; with emphasis placed on her

bisexuality, her occupation as a prostitution and her 'sexual appetite' (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002). This may be highlighted because "the woman who has engaged in extramarital sex, or kinky sex, or perhaps is just 'sexy' is capable of any deviance" (Dobash, Noaks and Dobash, 1995; 81). Humphries strengthened this, stating that the media dictates that "women with a certain sexual history are less worthy of fair treatment" (Humphries, 2009; n.p.). Poignantly, the media chose to exclude West's dysfunctional sexual history and the suggestions that she was a victim of sexual abuse herself. One wishes to draw resonance to fact that although the media did not discuss West as a victim, nor did West's defence team. This is thought-provoking because West as 'controlled' and as 'vulnerable' are constructions that feminist scholars have consistently tried to push. One may infer that feminist scholars struggle to accept that women can partake in these acts, without any coercion from males.

As with all the male-female co-operations, Rose received the bulk of the attention and has been portrayed as 'doubly deviant'. This is a theme that has been integral throughout and has confirmed that the media devotes more space and blame to women, regardless of whether they are the main perpetrators. Resonating with 'moral panics', there is a curious parallel that places women, the most oppressed group, as the largest social problem. Feminist scholars have demonstrated that women are either held responsible for the behaviour of male perpetrators or have had their own behaviour understood as a form of sexual deviance which is "intrinsically more evil than any male version. It is women's "neglect, collusion, provocation or sacrifice"

which is depicted to lie at the root of child sexual abuse (Forbes, 1992; 4). Seemingly, one abusive woman is used to counteract the abuse of ninety-nine men, thus ignoring the “real culprits” (Forbes, 1992; 6). This adheres to the wider ‘blaming movement’ against women that is actively encouraged by patriarchal society. Women are considered responsible for all that happens within the family and are morally blameworthy when they fail to protect themselves or their children (Ward, 1984). Mothers are expected to self-sacrifice and this has resulted in disproportionate attack of them (Forbes, 1992).

Contextually, West’s case was part of a broader continuum, identifiable from the 1980’s, that sought to protect gender and the family. The intensive media attention was described as symptomatic of a wider political agenda and a desire to encourage conservative family values. This was despite West’s domestic home being sites of violence, sexual abuse and murder (Carter, Branston and Allen, 1998). Corresponding with the ‘double deviance’ thesis, Fred’s behaviour was neutralised, “I was only the undertaker” (Carter, Branston and Allen, 1998; 239). His behaviour was either blamed on his mother who sexually abused him, or Rose, his sadistic, lesbian wife. These explanations perpetuated the belief that women are responsible for men’s ‘badness’ (Carter, Branston and Allen, 1998). Both West’s media portrayals were personalised, however, quantitatively and qualitatively different. It was a story of female inadequacy and perversion, rather than an analysis of male sexual violence (Storrs, 2006).

Feminist criminologists have rationalised this prevalence of female blame through the 'search for equivalence'. From this understanding, the world is thought to be symmetrical, men suffer from the same things as women and conversely that women find pleasure in the same deviant behaviour as men (Carlen, 2011). Feminists have suggested that there is a tendency to assume anything that happens to women, must happen to men too. MacKinnon confirms that this pattern is now being applied to the identification of offenders, as well as victims. The connotation being that if men abuse, women abuse (MacKinnon, 1994). The recognition of female abusers is convenient and fits reassuringly into this model, inferring that the proportion of male child sex offenders was an incomplete picture. One may assume this is why feminist criminologists have been less persuasive in the investigation of female abusers. By discussing them, it admits their existence and destroys idealised myths about the innocence of women. Even now, women are a consciously subordinate group and may be reluctant to disclose information that males could use against them. Kasl contends, "to talk about female-perpetrated child sexual abuse was equivalent to letting men off the hook" (Hetherington, 1999;164). Although, female abusers may be in greater capacity than statistics suggest, these explanations should not ignore the dynamics of male power and sexuality in the context of gender inequality. Without diminishing the guilt involved in female child sex offender's acts, their common role as victims and survivors of violent and corrupt relationships should be acknowledged (Forbes, 1992).

In conclusion, it is evident that the media have a profound influence on how the public view female child sex offenders. The media's role as a moral guardian is undisputed; informing the public of risks, but also encouraging moral panics. This chapter has attempted to emphasise that gender roles are fundamental in relation to chivalry and paternalism. One has drawn attention to the variation within the media; not all female child sex offenders are treated the same, the amount to which they transgress boundaries will determine their representation and the degree of stigmatisation they receive. The next chapter will consider this further by discussing responses made to them by professionals.

### **Responses by professionals**

This chapter will draw upon representations of women and discuss the impact these have had on the responses made to female child sex offenders by professionals, in numerous fields. Firstly, it will examine the important role that these professionals have in protecting children. Secondly, it will analyse the 'sexual scripts' and their complicity in creating a 'culture of denial'.

Accordingly, it will provide evidence for the neutralisation and dismissal of female perpetrator's actions. Finally, it will consider the effects these responses have had, in terms of victim's experiences.

In recent decades, child sexual abuse has become a paramount concern for professionals working in the fields of criminal justice, education, social services, medical services and the media (Turton, 2010). Child sexual abuse poses major threats to the safety and the long-term well-being of children, and there is a growing recognition that the effects are staggering in impact and diversity (Campbell and Carlson, 1995). Unfortunately, the same progressive understanding has not been achieved in relation to the perpetrators; the problem of female sexual abuse has not been readily addressed in the works of policy or research (Bunting, 2005). Poignantly, the National Child Protection Policy has historically failed to explicitly reference the issues of females that sexually offend against children (Bunting, 2005). This follows an unsettling pattern of continuation from early physicians that suggested "pedophilia either does not exist at all in women, or is extremely rare" (Freund et al., 1984; 198). Despite this being proven otherwise, it is remarkable that many professionals

continue to devote insufficient time and attention to female perpetrators and their victims.

Historically, it has been established that, within the field of child abuse, there is no definitive, empirically based theory; judgements about allegations are based on intuitive, rather than objective fact (Jackson and Nuttall, 1993).

Despite being asserted more than twenty years ago, the research conducted for this dissertation suggests that little has changed. The crucial decision of whether a child has been sexually abused must be prompt, firstly, to reduce the risks of further victimisation, secondly, to remove suspicion from those falsely accused (Jackson and Nuttall, 1993). Therefore, professional's perceptions are perceived to be infallible, as they invariably affect the entire course and outcome of a case. Pertinently, professional judgements have been described as highly irregular with several variables influencing decisions, a significant one being the gender of the perpetrator (Hetherington and Beardsall, 1998). Contentiously, there is research in Canada and Britain that has highlighted the potential for female perpetrated sexual abuse to be taken less seriously by professionals working in child protection and in the criminal justice system (Bunting, 2005). Allen suggests pre-conceived attitudes may prime professionals not to see abuse where it exists, something that will be illustrated clearly (Horton, 1990).

A thorough discussion of 'sexual scripts' is crucial to understanding the unconscious responses made by professionals. It is frequently asserted that the recognition of female abusers has been impeded by idealised beliefs that



women are incapable of sexually abusing children (Hetherington, 1999). It is maintained that individuals have always questioned the idea of women causing sexual harm or discomfort, hence why at a macro level, sexual offences are deemed 'male' (Denov, 2003). The media and their exacerbation of 'gender roles' has been complicit in this construction, but sexual norms have also been subtly conveyed through institutions such as the government, law, education and religion (Delamater and Plante, 2015).

Predictably, sexual scripts have been characterised by an active male and a passive female recipient (Oliver, 2007). Coinciding with belief systems of femininity and masculinity, they contend that males are highly sexually aggressive, stating "once a man's sexual response has been set in motion, he is thought to have difficulty controlling it" (Denov, 2003; 304). Comparably women are prototypical victims; the guarantors of idealism, passivity, and virtue (Denov, 2003). There is little to suggest women initiate sex, have sexual interest or are possibly sexually aggressive. Females are expected to influence males to avoid sex, rather than encouraging them to have sex (Denov, 2001). This resembles Judaeo-Christian depictions of female sexuality and the emphasis that was placed on motherhood. It further elucidates why society struggles with the notion of women being sexual at all, let alone, comprehending that women could sexually abuse children (Denov, 2003). Research has asserted that because female abusers are the extreme opposite of what the sexual scripts suggest, family members to health care professionals, often experience 'cognitive dissonance'. This is an unpleasant reaction that provokes psychological attempts to reduce it through

“modification, addition or alteration of the cognitions” (Kite and Tyson, 2004; 310).

Furthermore, individuals frequently contend that women are incapable of sexual abuse, as males cannot become physically aroused if they are unwilling. This represents a limited understanding of physiological responses, but also of victims, as it only acknowledges males (Peter, 2006). The dismissal of abuse, due to physical construction, is profoundly similar to arguments made by Mathis in 1972, “that she might seduce a helpless child into sex play is unthinkable...what harm can be done without a penis?” (Hetherington, 1999;165). It further neglects that the sexual acts perpetrated by females are widely comparable to the those committed by males and that the psychosexual impact is heightened, if anything (Clements, Dawson and Nair, 2013). Moreover, in respect to intrusiveness and violence, there are more similarities than differences and policy categorically fails to reflect this (Duncan, 2010). Unfortunately, these scripts are harmful as they inhibit development of new discourse that seeks to divulge women who sexually offend (Denov, 2003).

To continue, these sexual scripts have seemingly permeated professional discourse and have resulted in a ‘culture of denial’ that is linked to cognitive dissonance. The ‘culture of denial’ refers to the occupationally established ways of seeing sexual assault, in which notions of male abusers and female victims have become paradigmatic (Denov, 2001). One does not need to reiterate that female child sex offenders are a gross deviation from femininity

and that their existence is therefore frequently minimised or dismissed, even by professionals. In this sense, much of the lack of acknowledgement has been considered a byproduct of discomfort, fear and revulsion (Denov, 2004). Further resemblance has been drawn between the current professional bias and the problems Freund faced when trying to persuade those in 1986 of the possibility of father-daughter incest in female patients (Denov, 2004). The 'culture of denial' has been noticeable in research across numerous professions, and by looking in depth, this chapter seeks to explain some of the professional blind spots.

Correspondingly, the 'culture of denial' has been understood as a transformation process. Female abusers challenge traditional scripts and are the epitome of 'deviant', however, they can slowly be integrated into the professional stock of knowledge and realigned with more culturally acceptable notions of behaviour (Denov, 2001). Denov demonstrated that both psychiatrists and police officers either consciously or unconsciously transformed the female child sex offender to adhere with their individual constructions of women (Denov, 2004). Likewise, Nelson suggested professionals strive for consonance, thus reconstruct the offender and her offence in accordance with a 'fantasy model' that is more fitting with conventional ideas about gender and sexuality (Nelson, 1994). It is fathomable that professionals apply a gendered lens because it provides an alternative gaze through which to view the offender and alleviates discomfort. Pertinently, these professionals did not invent these portrayals, they reflect a

wider cultural belief system, which has frequently “represented women within thematic constructs” (Denov, 2001; n.p.).

The ‘culture of denial’ is far from subtle; there are countless reports of police officers reacting with disbelief, minimising the seriousness of reports and labelling cases as ‘unfounded’. Likewise, there is evidence of psychiatrists reacting skeptically or marginalising victims of female abuser’s experiences (Denov, 2003). Hetherton and Beardsall noted that it was far more probable for female abusers to be treated leniently and allowed to drop out of the child protection service by virtue of gender (Hetherton and Beardsall, 1998). Thus, illustrating that women’s wrong-doings are often exonerated and their assertions of guilt are neutralised, suggesting less necessity for punitive sentencing (Mellor and Deering, 2010). These findings validate the ‘chivalry’ hypothesis and are particularly alarming when acknowledging that these are the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system and ultimately the safeguards of children (Duncan, 2010). Interestingly, the minimisation of harmfulness of female abusers by male professionals has been interpreted as a self-protective manoeuvre for their masculinity (Hetherton and Beardsall, 1998). Thus, drawing resonance with the previous chapter and the impact of patriarchal society.

When analysing professional documentation, the gender bias in such occupations is unsurprising. The American Psychiatric Association previously published a manual called the DSM-IV; it was regarded as a “fundamental tool of the formal culture” and a “significant element of formal policy” (Denov,

2001;312). In the discussion of measures that paedophiles may use to gain access to children, it cites “winning the trust of the mother” and “marrying a woman with an attractive child” (Denov, 2001;313). Firstly, this presupposes that males are habitually the perpetrators and ignores that women could employ similar techniques. Secondly, it emphasises that women and particularly mothers, are the fundamental protectors of children. Therefore, it irresponsibly enables women to remain invisible as potential risks (Denov, 2004). It would be more effective to train about warnings from ‘individuals’, irrespective of their gender. These findings corroborate evidence that professionals are not being given the tools to address these issues, or to know that these issues exist (Philby, 2009). Furthermore, because documentation is so narrow, professionals that do realise the risks of female abuse, may suppress their concerns due to fears of challenging established institutional opinion (Duncan, 2010).

In practical terms, research demonstrates that it is common for males to exclusively be asked about perpetration experiences and for females to exclusively be asked about victimisation experiences. Likewise, investigators have been criticised for defining sexual victimisation in a manner that only reflects behaviours that involve male perpetrators (Peter, 2006). Several practical reasons for this have been proposed. Firstly, deficient resources; there has been a focus on short term, immediate, high risk cases, which tend not to include female abusers. Secondly, professionals report preferring to identify male perpetrators as there is continued scope to work with the non-abusing mother. Thirdly, there are currently a lack of contingency plans for

circumstances when the sexual abuser is the mother (Turton, 2010).

Resoundingly, professionals seem to want to keep the family institute together, with emphasis being placed on the mother as a form of 'cement'.

Accordingly, the 'culture of denial' has been advantageous to female abusers in relation to suspicion, reporting and prosecution. Victimology research illustrates that victims are less likely to report their abuse if they believe their experiences are extraordinary in anyway and female abusers arguably epitomise 'extraordinary' (Hetherington, 1999). Victims that have been abused by both males and females frequently suggest abuse by females was harder to disclose, due to the stigma that they believed was attached. Clinical reports cite copious cases in which victims have identified their abuser as male initially, before admitting it was a woman (Denov, 2003). For these reasons, it is essential that professionals make a routine effort to ask about sexual abuse as perpetrated by females. Professionals must demonstrate that it is an acceptable topic and one that will be met with understanding and support (Bunting, 2005).

This chapter will now discuss how professionals have transformed, minimised and dismissed female abuse, beginning with the 'mad, bad, victim' dichotomy. Professionals, especially psychiatrists, have tried to find an alternative way of explaining female child sex offenders through oversimplified explanations of women as good or bad, mad or sane, victimiser or victimised (Peter, 2006). Retrospectively, when they have struggled with theories of causation, they have attributed sickness (Saunders, 1988). Berliner and Barbieri asserted that

many mental health professionals believed women had psychological disorders, thus excused their behaviours and made them candidates for mental health intervention (Saunders, 1988). Further, that most were judged to be psychotic based on their sexual acts, despite having had no psychiatric examination (Denov, 2004). When faced with the incontrovertible evidence that women do sexually abuse, there seems to be the necessity to separate 'abuse' from 'femaleness'; this is frequently achieved through introducing the element of blame and making other factors responsible (Hetherington, 1999).

The pre-disposition to medicalise and pathologise women is arguably complicit in marking the limits and boundaries of feminine behaviour, as the same treatment was not, and is not, applied to men (Denov, 2004). These representations perpetuate the belief that any mother who sexually abuses her child must be crazy, something that is hard to fathom, but is not necessarily true (Peter, 2006). Ballinger states that even when a female abuser resists being relegated to these stereotypical categories by giving her own logical explanations to her crimes, she is often disqualified as a speaker and her accounts are muted by 'experts'. Subsequently, women continue to be relegated to narrow frames of reference, lacking agency and responsibility for their actions (Ballinger, 2005). This is a form of misplaced sympathy that dually minimises the effects of the abuse and denies the victim's reality of the trauma (Munro, 2017).

Furthermore, female child sexual offending has been referred to by some, as the "unintended slip of the boundary of the caring role", thus realigning

perpetrators with the idealised woman (Turton, 2010; 288). Individuals in 'Female Sexual Abuse of Children' are quoted as stating "Rubbish—Women don't sexually abuse children, it must have been the children misunderstanding motherly love" (Elliott, 1997;6). This quote clearly demonstrates that a mother's 'special status' within society allows her to use 'love' as a powerful deflection, in a way that males cannot (Munro, 2017). These presumptions are also intertwined in misguided understandings about child abuse and sexuality; mother-daughter child abuse has been denied due to individuals interpreting it is a lesbian act and contending that mothers cannot be lesbians. However, sexual abuse is not necessarily linked to sexual desire, it is frequently about power and control (Munro, 2017).

These problems are heightened due to female abuse being harder to recognise; actions may not have clear sexual intent and therefore could be dismissed as part of a normal mother-child relationship (Bunting, 2007). This makes professionals jobs harder, but also does little to protect victims who may not know they are being abused (Hetheron, 1999). Significantly, Elliot noted that four out of the thirty-two male victims he studied described the abuse by their mothers as "wholly beneficial and natural", illustrating the manipulation that can arise (Hetheron,1999;166) Even when abuse is more 'hands on', this does not guarantee the disruption of the representations of females as 'gentle carers'. Turner and Turner exemplified this, stating, many therapists regarded stories of female abuse as 'distorted nurturing' (Oliver, 2007).



Through essentialist thinking, professionals fail to account for women who find relationships with children difficult or different (Turton, 2010). This is unsatisfactory when recognising that victims of interfamilial abuse are likely to need the highest levels of support from professionals. Mothers are children's primary attachment figures and if children are sexually abused by them, the risk of trauma increases due to the realisation that the abuse has originated from the individual with whom they expected care and protection (Hetherington, 1999). The effects on the child's psyche are often exacerbated because it is easier for them to believe that the abuse was their fault. Likewise, they may desperately seek love, but at the same time be highly conflicted about the need, and wary of those who offer support (Munro, 2017).

The next way in which professionals have minimised the actions of female child sex offenders is through the 'rite of passage' explanation. Commonly associated with the teacher-lover typology, sexual contact between women and adolescent boys has regularly been considered a lucky encounter or a form of sexual education (Dollar et al., 2004). This attitude has been perpetuated by societal beliefs, gender attitudes and the media. Corbett illustrated that most students believed it was possible for teenagers and their teachers to engage in "mutually consenting sexual relationships despite differences in age and status" (Smith, Fromuth and Morris, 1998; 52). Even professionals have been prone to dismissing the behaviour as 'initiation' and 'orgasmic', despite the unlikelihood of the same being sup-positioned if the victim was a female (Denov, 2004). Nelson and Oliver rationalised this double standard when stating that the sociocultural construction of gender is so

deeply ingrained that it is impossible for the sexual contact between women and boys to have the same social meaning, even for scholars, as contact between men and girls (Dollar et al., 2004). Fetley, Ainslie and Geib reinforced this when suggesting that gender is the most salient variable in explaining attitudes about sexual coerciveness (Smith, Fromuth and Morris, 1998).

In adherence with theories of male socialisation, boys are encouraged to believe that sexual seduction by females regardless of their age, should be accepted and considered pleasurable (Hetherington, 1999). This form of abuse is portrayed as status enhancing, commonly evoking bragging to friends; thus, is classified as the least likely form to cause psychological harm or confusion (Dollar et al., 2004). Moreover, the influence of gender roles, may pressure the victim to remain silent to protect his core identity and avoid appearing susceptible to abuse by the 'weaker sex' (Hunter, 1990). Similarly, within this discourse, there has been a persistence of sexist language, such as, "having an affair", which negates the basic understanding that children and teens "are not able to give legal consent" and are not the "developmental equal of adults" (Duncan, 2010; 40). It seems that through the gendered lens of female passivity, perpetrators actions are absolved as 'well-meaning', affirming there had been no malicious intent (Knoll, 2010). Levine reinforces that it is exactly this transformation process that enslaves unfortunate habits and causes us to "abandon an entire class of victims that deserve better" (Levine, 2005; 103).

Rationally, as abuse committed by females is considered the least serious, victims of female perpetrators are also the least likely to receive protection (Dollar et al., 2004). In addition to impacting on reporting levels, it also effects how school officials who handle cases may respond (Dollar et al., 2004). Cases, such as these, skew figures because customarily they do not reach the attention of higher authorities (Denov, 2003). Similarly, there are several definitive problems for the male victim that should be addressed. Firstly, he may fear not being believed. Secondly, if he physically enjoyed it, he may not perceive himself as victim, despite the after-effects of abuse. Thirdly, due to the inferences that he should have enjoyed it, if he did not enjoy aspects, he may fear he is homosexual. Thus, overall, the young boy is placed in an untenable position (Bunting, 2007).

Lastly, this chapter will touch upon the consequences that professional and societal attitudes can have on the victims of female child sex offenders. These victims have been repeatedly silenced; in accordance with a limited understanding of victim experiences, there is also lack of definitive information regarding long-term effects (Denov, 2004). This chapter has hoped to illuminate that professional intervention, positive or negative, can have a detrimental impact on the well-being of the victim. Furthermore, that professional response, especially in relation to female perpetrators, is not always what it should be (Denov, 2003). There are a broad range of issues that have evidence that professionals are disregarding the crucial tenets of their job; sensitivity and a non-judgmental attitude (Denov, 2003). It is unnerving and unacceptable that there are reports of minimisation and

disbelief, in addition to victim blaming attitudes, behaviours and practices (Clements, Dawson and Nair, 2013).

It is fathomable that these responses will exacerbate the negative effects of child sexual abuse and incite, what is referred to 'secondary victimisation'.

The problems of which are extensive; increased distrust of professionals, increased sense of anger and increased likelihood of questioning or denying the abuse (Denov, 2003). Whilst professionals and society may feed into the idea that abuse by females is less harmful, victims seem to disagree.

Pertinently, 93% of victims that had been abused by both genders reported that the abuse was more damaging when it was committed by females (Denov, 2003). Furthermore, female's victims cited numerous effects that were "persistent, often debilitating, and had an impact on diverse areas of the participants' lives" (Denov, 2004; 1152). Many of these are similar to those that have been victims of male perpetrators; substance abuse, self-injury, depression, suicide, and sexual difficulties. However, also; confusion around identity, intense rage towards women and ongoing relationship problems (Denov, 2004). One must emphasise the need for increased professional training initiatives with a focus on female abusers. It is crucial professionals suspend their disbeliefs about women to reduce unsupportive interventions, encourage disclosures and improve victim confidence (Denov, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation has sought to provide a new outlook through which to understand female child sex offenders. With reference to early criminology,

chapter one necessitated the need for society to reconsider prior understandings of female child sex offenders and to fully include them in contemporary research. It outlined the extent of child sexual abuse and brought to light questions of whether female child sexual abuse is disproportionately rare or underreported. Female perpetrated child related sex abuse is a relatively new area of research and one that is still battling for recognition. The small sample sizes and limited data exacerbate these problems; however, it is evident that female child sex offenders are a group that merit closer attention and more detailed study. One would confidently ascertain that learning more about female abusers would expand the wealth of information on sexual offending per se. Males and females are fundamentally different; they have unique risk-factors and distinct pathways, therefore for the sake of treatment and prevention, more must be done to help women and to protect children.

Chapter two addressed the importance of the media and the role it has in socially constructing realities, through which individuals base their actions and options. It was revealing to observe that despite great advances in criminological research and against the backdrop of a more diverse and inclusive society, the continuance of gender biased and dated representations. Without doubt, it is clear for a number of reasons, that female child sex offenders have received disproportionate and hysterical labelling from the media. This applies to the moral outrage aspect and their demonisation for transgressing gender norms. Contradictorily, at the other end of the spectrum, chapter three illustrated clear evidence of 'airbrushing' to

facilitate societal idealisation of women. This has been particularly evident in respect of the 'mad, bad, victim' dichotomy and in the preponderance to represent women as 'in love' or 'naive'. Having considered the totality of this particular aspect of criminology, it would seem that much of the hitherto thinking and explanation for female child sex offending is linked to convenience categorisation and 'moral selectivity'. In essence, women are the underpinning fabric of society and the harsh realities of pathological offending do not sit well with a male dominated, paternalist infrastructure.

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