

## Public Perceptions of Female Child Sex Offenders

Child sexual abuse has gained specific attention in the past few decades. The prevalence of child sexual abuse has been increasing at an alarming rate, which requires specific attention (Christensen, 2018). It has been observed that limited research is available on female sexual offenders. A couple of decades ago, female sexual offenders were not given adequate significance due to their characterization as an extreme rarity. There is an immense need to focus on female child sexual offenders. The perceived high rates of offence by men as compared to women indicate that the rate of women perpetrated sexual abuse is significantly low. Any society always perceives a woman as a caregiver and nurturer (Christensen, 2018). Due to these particular reasons, limited research about female sexual offenders exists up till now. A critical examination of female child sexual offenders is of utmost significance due to its crucial impact on victims.

The proportion of female-perpetrated sexual abuse is far less than men (Tozdan, Briken, & Dekker, 2019). The proportion of sexual abuse differs based on its calculation from victimization data or official statistics. This rate ranges from 1.2 percent to 58 percent. According to a meta-analysis of 12 countries, it is identified that victimization cases reported to regarding female-perpetrated child sexual abuse is significantly lower (2.2%) as compared to the data from victimization surveys (11.6%). Regardless of the substantial difference in the proportion of female child sexual offenses, it is becoming more common with the passage of time. The comparison of prevalence rates indicates that sexual abuse committed by women is underreported. It demonstrates the under-recognition of female-perpetrated child sexual offenders. A number of studies have found that female perpetrated sexual abuse is more likely to

have a psychologically damaging impact on a child as compared to male committed sexual abuse. Due to the less reporting to police and law enforcement authorities, the public is less likely to consider these women as the sexual perpetrator (Christensen, 2018).

In Australian society, women are considered as caregivers and nurturers due to which people are less likely to perceive them as sexual abusers. The traditional gender roles in society are highly critical when it comes to female sexual abusers. According to a study by Wang, Kirillova, & Lehto, (2017), it is determined that teacher and student role is critical for a sexual relationship. There are two possibilities; female teacher and male student or male teacher and female student. In that particular study, the authors found that defendants show demand for harsher consequences and greater anger when the teacher is male and the student is female (Wang, Kirillova, & Lehto, 2017). It has been observed from this study that the attributes made by defendants are dependable with traditional gender roles. A critical examination of historical events and public perception indicates that women are innocent. Females have been a powerful social taboo who sexually abuse children. Their gender role and statistics portray them as innocent, passive, victims, and sexually submissive. In the traditional gender role, they are considered as gatekeepers of sexuality (Christensen, 2018). Due to these particular aspects, it is less likely for the public to perceive them as child sexual offenders. Women are often argued as receivers of sexuality in terms of anatomy, which makes it difficult to understand as someone who can sexually abuse children. They are perceived as a mother who is a protector of children in positions of trust (Christensen, 2018). These normative labels are undermined by female-perpetrated child sexual offenders. These female offenders are challenging traditional gender stereotyping. One must need to understand that media reports have a significant impact on the

perception of the public regarding any particular event. The perception of women in media reports is sympathetic as compared to men.

The representation of male-perpetrated child sexual offenders in media reports is strongly criticized as compared to female-perpetrated child sexual offenders. Lander and Essentials analyzed different newspaper articles in Australian dailies in order to determine the reporting perspective. In that analysis, it is found that media reports often portray males as child sexual offenders. It has been observed in this analysis that female-perpetrated child sexual offenders are described in a sympathetic way. Due to such representation by media reports, it has been observed that that women are less likely perceived as child sexual abusers. The articles on female child sexual abusers often present content in a specific manner to lessen the severity of this issue. Hayes and Baker also conduct a study in order to analyze the perception of women sexual offenders in media reports. They have theorized that the establishment of public perception regarding female sexual offenders is often suppressed. The traditional gender stereotyping approach is reinforced by media reports that are more likely to perceive them as sexually submissive. Hayes and Baker examined more than 450 media reports in order to determine why public perception is in favors of women being passive and sexually submissive. Female-perpetrated child sexual offenses are mainly presented as pariahs and aberrations, which is unlikely to create a positive atmosphere in the society to timely report offense by females. The induction of societal judgment in society is responsible for the unequal perception of sex offenders in society.

People tend to show lenient attitude towards female child sexual offenders. A study by Mackelprang & Becker asked more than 430 undergraduate students in Australia to make a judgment on teacher sexual offense, which varied by the attractiveness and gender of the

offenders. It has been analyzed that female teacher-child sexual offenders are evaluated more leniently as compared to male teachers (Mackelprang & Becker, 2017). A great amount of tolerance is visible in society for female child sexual offenders when they are described as attractive. However, that amount of tolerance is not significantly observed for male child sexual offenders (Mackelprang & Becker, 2017). The response of professionals in the criminal justice system, the child protection system and healthcare is also inappropriate when it comes to female child sexual offenders. Mellor and Deering (2010) conducted a questionnaire with 231 Australian psychologists, psychiatrists, and child protection workers to get their perspective for women being a child sexual offender. Their attitude towards male and female sexual offenses was recorded (Mellor & Deering, 2010). Their response indicates that men are treated strictly in this regard as compared to women. It is highly problematic for the society where gender stereotyping is causing a problem for men, but it is being lenient and sympathetic to women (Mellor & Deering, 2010).

The perception of professionals is more lenient towards female child sex offenders as compared to male offenders. It is indicated by Mellor and Deering that “a level of professional minimization towards female-perpetrated child sexual abuse exists” (p. 433). It is highly critical to point out that victims of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse have difficulty in understanding their experience. They often feel extremely disordered to characterize their experience as sexually abusive due to the consequence of female-perpetrated child sexual offense being a social taboo (Mellor & Deering, 2010). The victims of the sexual offense by females often face serious concerns when it comes to disclosing their abuse in front of parents or even therapists. The intensity of these difficulties can be higher when a sex offender is their own mother. Additional shame and stigma are experienced and felt by victims who are sexually

abused by their own mother. It is a betrayal for children in terms of exploitation of affection of children and violation of their trust (Mellor & Deering, 2010). Regardless of the fact that the prevalence of female-perpetrated child sexual offense is increasing day by day, the public is less likely to emphasize and consider a woman as a sexual offender. The traditional gender stereotyping is also making it hard for professionals to determine women as a sexual offender. Traditional sexual scripts are evident that women are sexually passive and harmless.

However, some professionals are currently indicating that women can be sexual offenders out of sexual interest or opportunity. Victimization surveys indicate that women can be sexually aroused by children if they possess sexual fantasies (Tozdan, Briken, & Dekker, 2019). Female-perpetrated sexual abuse can have a significant negative impact on victims. A critical examination of women as sexual offenders helps in getting a better understanding of the entire issue. The victims of female-perpetrated child abuse have a life-long and persistent impact that can mentally deteriorate them. Unlike male-perpetrated sexual abuse, female-perpetrated sexual abuse is psychologically more damaging (Tozdan, Briken, & Dekker, 2019). A significant amount of traumatic effects can be observed by victims when they are sexually abused by a woman. Negative psychological impacts are endured by children who even gladly take part in sexual activities (Tozdan, Briken, & Dekker, 2019).

The study of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse is difficult as these offenses are underreported. The quality of child protection in society is significantly reduced due to the existence of a major gap in the knowledge and perception regarding women being child sexual offenders (Tozdan, Briken, & Dekker, 2019). It is highly necessary for the public and professionals to overcome the entire perception of female-perpetrated child sexual offenders being social taboo. A marked resistance has been observed in the perception of the public

regarding females' involvement in the sexual abuse of children (Tozdan, Briken, & Dekker, 2019). There is an immense need to enhance the attitude and awareness of the public and professionals toward this issue. The media is constantly portraying female-perpetrated child sexual offenders in an inadequate manner. It is necessary for the reports to properly portray female-perpetrated child sexual offenders in the same way as compared to men. It is deemed necessary to adopt an active approach in order to cater to the issue of female-perpetrated child sexual offenses.

The role of women as a female-perpetrated child sexual offender is significantly underreported due to traditional gender stereotypes. Women are considered as passive and sexually submissive due to which public tend to believe that they cannot be included in child sexual abuse. The portrayal of women in the media reports across the country helps to understand that positive perception of women. The perception of the public is based on the historical data and events in which a woman is a victim of the offense. Professionals in the criminal justice system, healthcare, and police department are also less likely to perceive women as a sexual offender. Due to that particular reason, the behavior and attitude of the public and professionals towards women are lenient. Undoubtedly, media is a strong and influential tool, so it should be utilized in order to modify the perception and beliefs of individuals. It can shape the myths and values of the public away from the romanticizing of this offense by women.

## References

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