

## **Gender-Specific Criminal Features of Female Sexual Offenders and their Implications for Risk Assessment**

Symposium Chair: Franca Cortoni, Ph.D., C.Psych.

Female sexual offenders continue to be an understudied population and many questions remain unanswered. Among many issues, the elements related to these women's criminal behavior and their implications for risk assessment are poorly understood. Yet, the criminal aspects of female sexual offenders need to be researched in order to improve our understanding of the features (criminal and otherwise) that are related to the risk of sexual recidivism and the treatment needs of these women. In efforts to improve our empirical knowledge of female sexual offenders as well as our approaches to their assessment and treatment, this symposium proposes three presentations that focus on criminal factors among female sexual offenders. The first presentation will discuss research that examined offending frequency, duration and desistance in adult female sexual offenders. The second presentation presents the criminal features of women convicted of promoting prostitution, a unique subgroup of female sexual offenders. The third presentation will focus on the practical application of the findings of these presentations as well as other research findings to provide an empirically-based guide for the risk assessment of female sexual offenders.

### **Criminal Career Features of Female Sexual Offenders**

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Almost all sexual offending research concerns male sex offenders. The scarce literature on adult female sexual offending indicates that female sex offenders comprise about 1 to 5% of all sex offenders. Cortoni, Hanson and Coache (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of female sex offenders' recidivism and found a sexual re-offending rate of less than 2% while violent recidivism was 6% and general recidivism 20%. As far as we know, no studies have been conducted about offending frequency, duration and desistance in adult female sexual offenders.

We examined data on all (N=260) convicted adult hands-on female sex offenders who became known to the criminal justice authorities in the Netherlands between 1993 and 2011. As such, the research group we studied comprises, in a statistical sense, a population. We analyzed the official criminal

records of these females, as well as their court files that often contain psychiatric and psychological screenings, that also contained detailed descriptions of the sexual offenses committed.

Findings indicate that one in three female sexual offenders in the study had an IQ below 85. About 36% had an Axis I and/or II disorder. Sexual victimization was reported by 22%. More than 65% had committed the offense together with a co-perpetrator and two thirds of victims were female. The average age at which they had first committed a sexual offense was approximately 35 years. Over their entire career, about half of the women had committed other offenses besides sexual offenses. Less than 2% re-offended to with a new sexual offense and the majority of the women desisted after the index sex offense. The average criminal career duration was 3.7 years for all women. Further characteristics of their criminal careers in terms of age of onset, offending frequency, duration and desistance will be described for different offender types. To better understand the patterns of offending of female sexual offenders, these characteristics will be disaggregated by prominent background factors like disorders, IQ, and victimization experiences.

### **Are Females Convicted of Promoting Prostitution Sexual Offenders?**

Franca Cortoni, Ph.D., C.Psych.

Jeffrey C. Sandler, Ph.D.

Naomi J. Freeman, Ph.D.

Research has made great strides in the last 20 years toward identifying sex offenders' risk factors for sexual recidivism and their targets for treatment. These advancements have been clouded, however, by recent changes in law that designate certain offenses as sexual even though they have traditionally been viewed as non-sexual. In some jurisdictions, for example, an offender convicted of patronizing a prostitute, arson, or burglary could be forced to register as a sex offender and/or be reviewed for sex offender civil management. The result of these changes, which have been particularly prevalent in the United States, is that offenders who were not historically classified as sex offenders are now being included in sex offender treatment groups and sexual recidivism studies. The appropriateness of this inclusion, however, remains in doubt, as no studies have systematically examined whether this new class of sex offenders shares risk factors and treatment targets with more traditional sex offenders.

This issue does not just exist for male sex offenders, it also exists for female sex offenders. A recent study on the recidivism of female sex offenders found, for example, that including those offenders convicted of promoting/patronizing prostitution in the analyses significantly altered the study's results (Sandler & Freeman, 2009). It may be, therefore that these women differ significantly from women who commit more traditional sexual offenses in ways that meaningfully impact offender risk and treatment decisions. As such, the current study set out to investigate whether those females convicted of promoting prostitution differed from those convicted of more traditional sexual offenses.

The sample for the study consisted of 94 females convicted of sexual offenses and reviewed for possible civil management in New York State. Of these 94 offenders, 6 (6.4%) of them had promoting prostitution as their sole sexual offense. Results show that females whose only qualifying sexual offense is promoting prostitution differ significantly from women who commit more traditional sexual offenses. For example, the women convicted of promoting prostitution were younger, had more extensive criminal histories (including instances of non-sexual violence), had lower rates of deviant sexual preferences, and were re-arrested for non-sexual offenses at a significantly higher rate (50.0% vs. 15.9%). These differences also indicate that women convicted of prostitution-type offenses have different risk of recidivism as well as treatment/supervision needs. As such, the indiscriminate inclusion of these women in traditional sex offender treatment and/or research may erroneously skew treatment outcomes and research results.

### **Criminal Features of Female Sexual Offenders: Implications for Risk Assessment**

Franca Cortoni, Ph.D., C.Psych.

Just like with male sexual offenders, the assessment of women who have committed sexual offences is predominantly driven by the need to establish the likelihood of future occurrences of sexual offending behaviour and to identify interventions that would reduce their risk of recidivism. Because women are subjected to the same sanctions as males in the criminal justice system (e.g., Sexually Violent Predator laws in the U.S.), it is crucial that their assessment of risk and treatment needs be based on empirically validated approaches. Although tremendous advances have been made in establishing empirically-based assessment tools and practices among males, the assessment of risk among female sexual offenders remains a difficult endeavor. The low prevalence (relative to males) of female sexual offenders and their low base rates of sexual recidivism are the main reasons as to why there currently exists no instrument that have been validated to assess risk of sexual recidivism among these women. Professionals tasked with the evaluation of female sexual offenders therefore face many difficulties and may take the position that a male-based risk assessment tool is better than no tool at all. Unfortunately, such a practice produces invalid risk assessment results. Currently, given the status of our knowledge, an empirically-informed structured clinical approach to the assessment of female sexual offenders is the only option to assess their risk of sexual recidivism. Such an approach requires an understanding of the research on factors related to recidivism among women. To that end, this presentation will incorporate current findings on criminal features of female sexual offenders with prior research on gender-specific risk factors to provide an empirically-informed guideline for the evaluation of risk of recidivism among female sexual offenders.