

Journal of Forensic Social Work, 8.1:48-57, 2024
ISSN: 1936-928X print & 1936-9298 online



Understanding the Characteristics and Motivations of Female Sexual Offenders: A Systematic Review

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Sexual offenses are considered among the most egregious crimes in modern society. While some information is available in the public sphere, most popular conceptualizations of female sexual offenders are more heavily influenced by mythology and popular culture than science. Nonetheless, research helps further identify the characteristics of those who commit these crimes and their relation to those they victimize. This systematic review has been conducted to collect data on female sexual offenders. The initial literature search yielded 5,344 potential articles, 16 of which met the review's eligibility criteria. The data organized from these articles provide this phenomenon's most recent state of science and provide a detailed picture of these women's identities, along with possible developmental and behavioral trajectories. Identifying the characteristics of female sexual offenders and understanding the impact of early trauma on FSOs provides essential insight for future research, practice, and policy. Findings suggest extensive trauma histories and problematic boundary development in personal and familial relationships are critical factors for consideration—data that doesn't necessarily align with portrayals of these women in popular culture.

Keywords: Female Sexual Offenders; Sexual Abuse; Victimization; Sex Offenders

INTRODUCTION

Background

A sexual offense is any act that is sexually directed toward another person when that person does not or cannot consent (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2023). Stereotypes exist of individuals who commit sexual offenses and their victims. Still, research has shown that sexual violence is an offense experienced across all genders and at every level of society (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2023). Female sexual offenders (FSOs) are among the most underrepresented types of sexual offenders in the modern criminal justice system; and until recently, sexual offending by women has attracted relatively little attention from researchers (Bickart et al., 2019; McLeod & Craft, 2015). Researchers have speculated that this relative lack of interest can be attributed to the fact that women are less likely to perpetrate sexual abuse than men (Cortoni et al., 2017; Saradjian, 2010).

Because men constitute the majority of the sex offending population, most people think of male perpetrators when the term sex offender is used. However, female sexual offenders may be responsible for up to 20% of child sexual abuse offenses in the United States (McLeod & Craft, 2015; Solis & Benedek, 2012). One study reported that of all individuals convicted of a sexual crime, only 2-5% are women (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005). However, these numbers may not represent an accurate picture of the rate of sexual crimes committed by women. While the numbers are still lower than those for men, a recent meta-analysis reported that when victim reports are used versus criminal arrests, the rate of sexual abuse incidents perpetrated by women increases to approximately 12% (Cortoni et al., 2017).

Who Are the Women Who Commit Sexual Offenses?

A literature review of this topic suggests little is known about female sex offenders as a distinct phenomenon. Research on sexual offenders has historically been focused on males, with most contemporary research comparing male and female sexual offenders using data derived from male-focused studies. This is a significant limitation, as female-specific sexual offending is unlike male-specific sexual offending in many ways and has a very different impact on victims. Empirical classifications and typologies have begun to establish these differences, but this information is still emerging. Significant gaps exist in the literature, and the topic is understudied.

The prevalence of female sexual offenders is debated and varies throughout the literature. It is difficult to get accurate global statistics on this topic for many reasons, several of which will be explored in this systematic review. Some global estimates show that only about 1-2% (Tsopelas et al., 2011) of individuals who commit sexual offenses reported to law enforcement are committed by females; however, victimization surveys have suggested this number is closer to 12% (Cortoni et al., 2017). Statistics out of the United States indicate a greater prevalence of about 15-20% (American Humane Association, 1987; Faller, 1995). Globally, the largest available meta-analysis of 17 samples taken from 12 countries suggests around 2% of sexual offences reported to police are perpetrated by women (Grant, 2022). Additionally, FSOs are responsible for up to 5% of all sexual offences committed against children in England and Wales (Bunting, 2005).

Female sexual offenders are typically young, tending to offend between the ages of 27-39 (McLeod, 2015). Many identify with having emotional problems; an intellectual, physical, or other type of medical disability; a history of domestic violence; and high levels of trauma and abuse, including sexual victimization. Female sexual offenders are among those who tend to evade detection and prosecution, typically due to the hidden nature of the abuse and a societal perception of females as caregivers and nurturers (McLeod & Dodd, 2022).

Prominent Theoretical Influence

Behaviorist and *psychodynamic* theoretical perspectives are most prominent in modern literature on female sexual offending, both significantly impacting how the phenomenon is understood. Psychodynamic theory emphasizes how the subconscious mind stimulates behavior and how individual deficits are typically due to a person's failure to resolve problems in early life (Malcolm, 2017). This tendency to individualize pathology has been much more evident in the sexual violence field over the past few decades, with approaches focusing on personal deficits that drive offending behavior (Malcolm, 2017). Additionally, Freud's conception of the Oedipus complex—a child's attachment to the parent of the opposite sex—may have been a source of general confusion on this topic historically and may even be a reason for the lack of attention and investigation into female sexual offending until more recent years (Warren & Hislop, 2008). Behaviorist theory does not focus on personal deficit, rather on an offender's behavior, which is considered a byproduct of conditioning due to past life events and experiences, such as trauma and abuse (Malcolm, 2017). In contrast to psychodynamic theory, some behaviorists suggest a person's mind is separated from their behavior (Sheldon, 1995).

Additionally, cognitive distortion is discussed within sex offending literature and the cognitive-behavioral approach plays a crucial role in addressing mental, emotional, and behavioral factors associated with sex offending (Ciardha & Ward, 2013; Harrison et al., 2020). Cognitive behavioral treatment typically focuses on addressing attitudes that support sexual offending, anger management, victim empathy, deviant sexual arousal, and relapse prevention (Rocha & Valenca, 2023; Yates, 2004). Polizzi and colleagues (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of 21 studies to assess the effectiveness of non-prison-based sexual offender treatment programs utilizing cognitive-behavioral treatment methods. Overall, the meta-analysis study provided empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral treatment methods in reducing sexual offense recidivism rates among offenders participating in non-prison-based treatment programs (Polizzi et al., 1999).

Empirical Classifications and Typologies

Since the re-emergence of this topic in modern literature in the 1980s, there have been attempts to categorize female sexual offenders and define specific typologies. In 1991, Matthews, Mathews, and Speltz created one of the first and most consistently cited typologies of female offenders based on clinical interviews and psychometric testing conducted within an outpatient adult female sexual offender treatment program functioning as an alternative to long-term incarceration (Matthews et al., 1991). Since then, several other typologies have emerged, focusing scholars' attention on the mental health, behavioral, and offense characteristics of female sexual offenders. Vandiver and Kercher (2004) distinguished six types of offenders (e.g., heterosexual nurturer, homosexual offender, female sexual predator, young adult child exploiter, homosexual criminal and aggressive homosexual offender) by examining information about the nature of the sexual offenses, the sex and age of the victims, and the age and criminal history of the offenders. On the other hand, Sandler and Freeman's study attempted to test the analyses and findings of Vandiver and Kercher's sample (Sandler & Freeman, 2007). Sandler and Freeman's study (2007) revealed that the results of the present study and those of past female sex offender typologies clearly show female sex offenders to be a heterogeneous group. Additionally, Gannon et al. (2008) developed the Descriptive Model of Female Sexual Offending (DMFSO) to identify how cognitive, affective, behavioral, and contextual factors contribute to female sexual offense.

In forensic social work, typologies can provide a structured framework for forensic social workers to understand the diverse profiles of female sexual offenders and to develop evidence-based practices that promote both public safety and offender rehabilitation. By integrating typology-specific knowledge into their practice, social workers can contribute to more effective risk management and intervention outcomes.

Offense Patterns and Prosecution

In the United States, approximately 20% of child sexual abuse cases involve a female as the primary offender (McLeod & Craft, 2015). Female sexual offenders offend across all ages and genders (Freeman & Sandler, 2008), but some distinguishing patterns have been found. While the victims of FSOs range from newborn to 18, the average victim's age is between 5 and 9 years (McLeod et al., 2021). There is some disagreement in the literature over the FSO's target gender preference. Some studies suggest male; others suggest a female preference; and still others suggest FSOs are indiscriminate and have victims of both genders (McLeod et al., 2021). However, in one major study, it was found that around 70% of victims were female (McLeod, 2015). Additionally, in many child sexual abuse cases, FSOs are related to their victim (McLeod, 2015; Vandiver, 2006). One study found that FSOs are likelier than male offenders to be the victim's biological or adoptive parent, close relative, or caretaker (McLeod, 2015).

Child protective and criminal justice systems respond to male and female sexual offenders quite differently. Many sexual abuse cases involving female sexual offenders go unreported (Banning, 1989; Tsopelas et al., 2011; Wong & Van de Schoot, 2012). McLeod and Craft (2015) found that FSOs comprise less than 1% of all incarcerated sex offenders in the United States.

Forensic social workers can play a crucial role in addressing sexual female offenders within the justice system, encompassing assessment, intervention, treatment, and rehabilitation (Robbins et al., 2015). Their responsibilities are multifaceted and involve navigating various challenges and implementing best practices to effectively manage cases. Despite challenges such as limited research and stigma, best practices involve holistic assessments, tailored interventions, collaborative approaches, and ongoing professional development to enhance outcomes for offenders and promote community safety. Additionally, effective interventions can decrease recidivism rate and improve other outcomes such as victim awareness, empathy and emotional regulations (Barros et al., 2022).

Purpose of Study

The phenomenon of female-specific offending characteristics must be explored further to understand the impact of this type of offending on its victims and our society. Therefore, this systematic review aims to explore current literature to get an idea of what exists and where there may be research gaps and to pose questions for future studies. Understanding the characteristics and motivations of FSOs is significant as it directly informs both practice and policy. By emphasizing the significance of understanding FSOs' characteristics and motivations, practitioners and policymakers can foster a more comprehensive and effective approach to addressing sexual offending. Therefore, the research question of this current study is “What are the female sexual offender characteristics and motivations in current literature?”

METHOD

Search Strategies

The systematic review was conducted to identify any existing review on the FSO's characteristics to be explored further to understand the impact this type of offending has on its victims and our society. The present review is based on a search utilizing the following databases: Web of Science, ProQuest, Social Work Abstract, PubMed, and SocINDEX. The researchers employed manual and electronic search techniques, including the Boolean search strategies (Brunton et al., 2017). Search terms included the keywords "female sexual offenders," "criminal justice," and "criminology." Additionally, terms were included to search various forms of the keywords, such as "reporting" and "police."

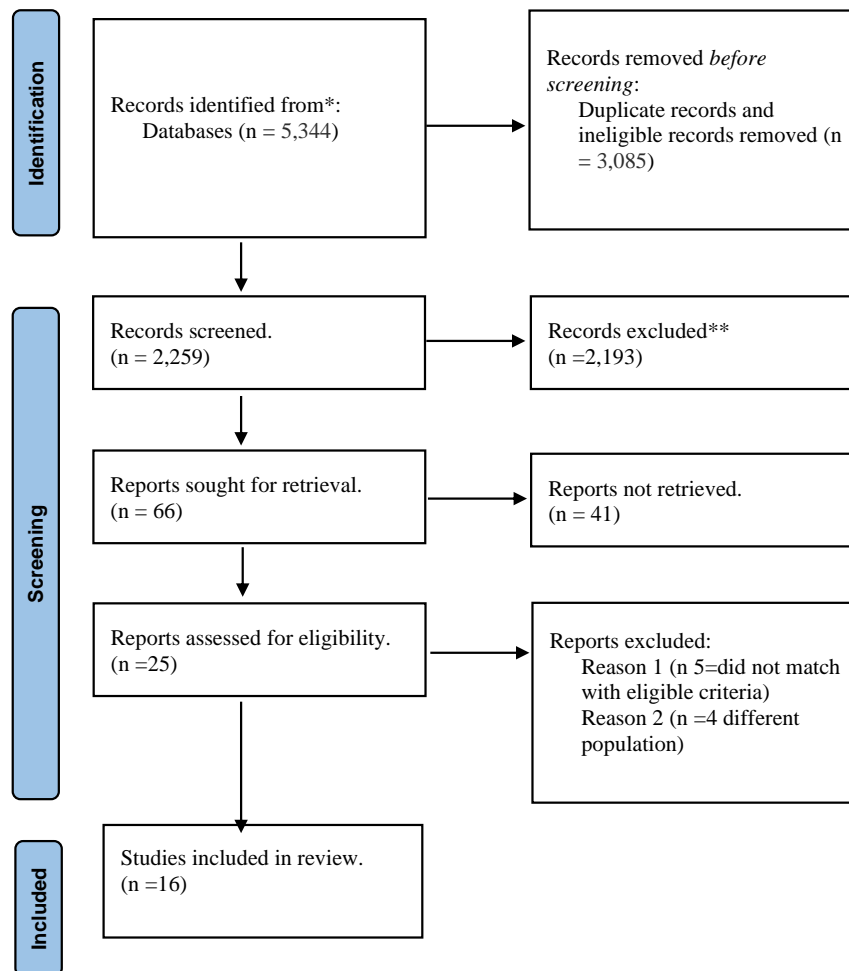
Selection Process

For inclusion, studies were required to (a) be written in English, (b) include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies, (c) focus only on adult female sexual offenders, and (d) be published between 2012 and 2022. This review explores the motivations and characteristics of female sexual offenders in the criminal justice system. Researchers included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research in scholarly peer-reviewed journals based on the research goal. The scope of the present study has been limited to articles published between the years 2012 and 2022. This focus has been chosen to ensure that the study examines the most current literature available. It is important to note that this study exclusively considers the subject of female sexual offenders, which represents a limitation regarding the exclusion of other age groups. This limitation is acknowledged and serves as an area for potential future research. Studies were excluded if they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Figure 1 depicts the study selection process in the PRISMA flow diagram (Liberati et al., 2009).

Reviewing Process

Two researchers first screened titles and abstracts to address the review study's research question, followed by subsequent searching for full texts. Two researchers identified and coded the study's title, the participants' demographic features, author and publication information, and the study's aims in the data extraction form. The researchers had multiple debriefing sessions to discuss the selection of articles. In case of disagreement, they reviewed the eligibility criteria and full-text articles to resolve any issues. The data were analyzed from the included articles.

The initial search yielded 5,344 potential articles. During the initial search, we hit 409 in Web of Science, 4,840 in ProQuest, one in social work abstracts, 70 in PubMed, and 24 in SocINDEX. After removing duplicates and ineligible records, 2,259 articles were screened by title and abstracts by two researchers. Following the first round, the first and fourth authors reviewed the title of the articles in the initial search to remove any articles not related to female sexual offenders' domestic violence. After this process, 66 articles were screened by the first and fourth authors by reviewing the titles and abstracts. After reviewing these 66 articles, 25 were determined to fit the eligibility requirements to be included for further review of the full-text by three researchers. After carefully reviewing the 25 included articles and references, the authors ended up with 16 articles that met the eligibility criteria of this study.

Figure 1: Selection Process

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

The eligible studies for complete review were reported in the data extraction paper, including the study's title, author name and year, method, participants' demographic information, study country settings, and topic by two authors. Two authors initially screened the titles and abstracts independently. Following this initial screening phase, they reviewed the full texts of articles whose titles suggested relevance to female sexual offenders. Next, they extracted relevant information from these articles to assess their eligibility based on pre-defined criteria. This process involves systematic screening and data extraction to identify studies that meet specific eligibility criteria for inclusion in the review or synthesis, ensuring a rigorous and structured approach to gathering relevant literature on the topic. Also the first author analyzed the data using the thematic analysis method to identify themes among the included studies. To increase the study's trustworthiness, the first author discussed and reported the emerging themes with other authors.

The first author followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis technique. In the first step, all the included studies were read and re-read to become familiar with the data. In the second step, the data were organized meaningfully and systematically. After the data were organized, the authors examined and highlighted the codes, some of which fit into a theme. In the fourth step, the data were reviewed, and the research team developed preliminary themes. The authors then defined the themes and defined the concepts

included within each. The themes were summarized, patterns identified by the first author, and any discrepancies were resolved by discussing transitoriness with all the authors.

RESULTS

The initial search across the different databases retrieved 5,344 articles, of which 2,259 were irrelevant based on the screening criteria. Twenty-five articles were assessed at the complete text screening stage, and 16 articles were selected to be included in the systematic review; the overview is presented in Table 1. The included studies focused on the characteristics and motivations of female sexual offenders.

Table 1. Summary of the Included Studies

Article Name	Author name/Year	Participants Demographic Age, Ethnicity	Research Method	Topic	Study Country Setting
Motivational and cognitive factors in pathways to offending amongst women who have sexually offended	Abulafia & Epstein, 2022	FSO over a 12-year period. Mean age: 35 40% married or divorced, 20% single. 60% had sexual abuse earlier in life. Several were employed. Few had a previous history of crimes or substance abuse.	Quantitative with qualitative aspects for specific behaviors	Test gender-specific models instead of gender-neutral methods for treatment.	Israel
Female sex offenders: An analysis of crime scene behaviors	Almond et al., 2017	73 Female Sex Offenders (FSOs) from U.K. and U.S. law reports. Age range: 18-60 years old. Multiple victims were reported in 29 of the cases. Twelve involved a male co-perpetrator, and 13 were related to their victims.	Quantitative	Study to find out if the behavior of the sexual offense could be put into one of three categories.	The United States & United Kingdom
Female sex offenders: Is there a difference between solo and co-offenders?	Bensel et al., 2019	223 FSOs were convicted and sentenced to prison or placed on probation from 1995-2013 in Arkansas. Ages ranged from 18-56 years old. The majority were white with a high school diploma and employed at the time of conviction (a	Quantitative	Comparison between solo and co-offenders	The United States (Arkansas)

		minimum-wage position). The majority were married with children. Several had no criminal history or prior sex offenses with drug or alcohol abuse history. 64% were solo offenders, while 35% were co-offenders. 52% reported being a victim of sexual abuse before their own offending			
A descriptive study of psychosocial characteristics and offense patterns in females with online child pornography offenses	Bickart et al., 2019	Ninety-eight females were convicted of online sexual offenses in U.S. federal prisons. The majority were Caucasian. The age range was 20-57 years old. The length of the sentence was 276 months.	Quantitative Research	Find out what led to the offense of child pornography and examine the similarities between the crimes.	The United States
Comparing women's and men's sexual offending using a statewide incarcerated sample: A two-study design	Comartin et al., 2021	Women and men currently incarcerated for a sex offense in one state using administrative data and subsample surveys.	Quantitative	Compare men's and women's sexual offending to understand FSO's perpetration	The United States
An ecological process model of female sex offending: The role of victimization, psychological distress, and life stressors	DeCou et al., 2015	24 female sex offenders. Age range: 23-49 years old. 83% white American, 8% Hispanic. 58% heterosexual, 29% bisexual, and 12% lesbian/gay. A majority had completed high school and had a stable income. All women were incarcerated at the time of the interview. Minority reported offense histories.	Qualitative Research	Understand FSO offense-related experiences and internal/external factors contributing to the offense.	The United States

Women who sexually offend display three main offense styles: A reexamination of the descriptive model of female sexual offending	Gannon et al., 2014	A small sample (36) North American women convicted of sexual offending. Age range 22 to 63 years old. A majority had a high school diploma and were white.	Quantitative	Descriptive model of female sexual offending	The United States and Canada
Characteristics of females who sexually offend: A comparison of solo and co-offenders	Gillespie et al., 2015	20 solo and 20 co-offending female sexual offenders in the U.K. 18 years or older at the time of offense. Majority were white.	Quantitative	framework for use with women who sexually abuse children	United Kingdom
Female sexual offenders in child sexual abuse cases: National trends associated with child protective services system entry, exit, utilization, and socioeconomics	McLeod & Craft, 2015	National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System: Abuse Allegation was listed as "Substantiated," "Reason to Suspect," or "alternative Response-Victim," "Maltreatment Type 1" was listed as sexual abuse, Person listed as "perpetrator 1" was responsible for the sexual abuse and the gender was known.	Quantitative	Used CPS reports to find sexual abuse report data and alleged or substantiated investigations. Measured whether they were referred to CPS systems, Counseling service utilization, family-related service utilization, and economic service utilization.	The United States
Modernized female sex offender typologies: Intrapsychic, behavioral, and trauma related domains	McLeod & Dodd, 2022	Female Sexual Offenders (FSOs) typologies: Relational, Predatory, and Chaotic	Qualitative	FSO typology exploration	The United States

Female-perpetrated sexual violence: A survey of survivors of female-perpetrated childhood sexual abuse and adult sexual assault	Munroe & Shumway, 2022	Individuals who had at least one female-perpetrated experience. Age 18-74 years. Diverse in racial identities, gender, and sexual orientation. Bisexual women comprised 16.7% of the sample. 30% had completed an undergraduate or graduate degree. Over half made less than \$35,000 per year. Less than 50% were employed full-time. 47% had reported an emotional disability. 39% were married, 37% single, 19% in a relationship and 3% divorced, widowed, or other. 67% were women, 28% men, 4% transgender/nonbinary.	Quantitative	Explore the role of ACES and the difference between female and male perpetration	The United States
Adverse childhood experiences of violent female offenders: A comparison of homicide and sexual perpetrators	Pflugrad et al., 2018	Female homicide offenders, female sex offenders, and nonoffender community sample. 76% were Caucasian, 66% were between the ages of 30 and 60, 53% had earned a high school diploma or GED, 30% had a college degree, 58% reported less than \$30,000 a year. 53% were divorced or separated, 15% were married, 30% had never been married. 54% women. Sentence of 21 to 30 years or a life sentence comprised most of the sample.	Quantitative	types and number of ACES for homicide perpetrators and sexual perpetrators	The United States

		Most victims were significant others or friends.			
Child sexual abuse within educational settings: A qualitative study on female teachers who sexually abuse their students	Steely & Ten Bensel, 2020	Interviews with female sex offenders who used their position as a teacher to engage in sexual abuse of underage students from 1995-2016 in Texas. The average age was 32 years old. 94% were white. 83% had a college education. 91% no prior arrests. Had been a teacher for an average of 3.6 years. 72% were married at the time of the offense. 74% were convicted of sexual assault in the 1 st or 2 nd degree. 91% claimed child abuse incidents were consensual. 49% happened at the offender's residence. Victims average age was 15 years old, the majority were white (60%), male students (94%).	Qualitative	Interviews with female sex offenders who used their position as a teacher to engage in sexual abuse of underage students	The United States (Texas)
The unusual suspects: Female versus male accused in child sexual abuse cases	Weinsheimer et al., 2017	Sample of 70 cases that involved female accused with a randomly selected sample of 70 male accused. Female accused were on average 30 years old when the offense began. They most often had a family connection. Complainants were about 10 years old around the time the reported offense began and about 17 years old at the time	Quantitative/Mixed Methods	Sample of 70 cases that involved female accused with a randomly selected sample of 70 male accused to understand the differences and similarities.	Canada

		of the crime. Most complainants were female, with little difference in age of the male complainants. Vaginal or anal penetration was the most common offense. The average duration of the crime was 2 years.			
Multiple perpetrator rape committed by female offenders: A comparison of solo, duo, and 3+ group offenders	Wijkman & Silva, 2020	246 female sexual offenders regarding their co-offending pattern and the differences in offender, offense, and victim characteristics. Obtained from the Netherlands Central Prosecution Service from 1994-2011. 83% were ethnic Dutch. Other backgrounds were Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Dutch Antilles, South American, and Asian.	Quantitative	differences between solo, duos, and 3+ group offenders	Netherlands
An incident-based comparison of female and male sexual offenders	Williams & Bierie, 2015	National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) to compare male and female sex offenders among all 802,150 incidents of sexual assault reported to police across 37 states between 1991 and 2011.	Quantitative	Compare male and female sex offenders with reported incidents	The United States (37 states)

Characteristics of the Study Population

Among the 16 articles included in this review, some studies provided demographic information about the participants, such as their gender, age, and race/ethnicity, but not all. Two studies included diverse sexual orientations, such as bisexual and transgender/nonbinary (DeCou et al., 2015; Munroe & Shumway, 2022), while the other studies in the review reported that the female offending participants did not specify their gender identification. Seven of the studies reported the ages of participants, and the age range was between 18 to 74 (Table 1). Additionally, most of the studies in the review mentioned that the participants identified as White or Caucasian (Bickart et al., 2019; Pflugradt et al., 2018; Steely & Ten Bensel, 2020). Two studies reported the participants' marital status as single, married/non-married, or divorced/separated (Abulafia & Epstein, 2022; Pflugradt et al., 2018). Only two of the included studies reported participants' employment status and education level (less than high school, high school, college, or higher education) (Pflugradt et al., 2018; Steely & Ten Bensel, 2020). The studies were conducted in five countries—Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Netherlands.

Offender Characteristics

All 16 of the studies reported various characteristics of female sex offender participants. Two studies discussed specific types of female sex offenders: relational, predatory, and chaotic (Almond et al., 2017; McLeod & Dodd, 2022). In behavior, control, or predatory offenders, the perpetrator showed a lack of empathy and drive for power and control through exploitation (Almond et al., 2017; McLeod & Dodd, 2022). In relational offender involvement, female sex offenders did not see their behavior as wrong. They built an emotional connection with their victims, developing what they believed to be intimate and social connections, and considered their relationship with the victim to be reciprocal (Almond et al., 2017; McLeod & Dodd, 2022). The chaotic offenders believe themselves to be relatively powerless in their situation and have a higher degree of general life dysfunction (McLeod & Dodd, 2022).

Three studies compared female and male sexual offenders' differences and similarities (Comartin et al., 2021; Weinsheimer et al., 2017; Williams & Bierie, 2015). Weinsheimer and colleagues (2017) revealed that even though male-accused cases were most commonly fondling over clothes and exposure, female-accused were most commonly anal or vaginal penetration. In addition, the same study mentioned that female-accused perpetrated abuse for a shorter period than male-accused (Weinsheimer et al., 2017). The female sex offenders included in the study had assaulted more than one victim, and penetration was performed by the offender using physical and verbal violence (Wijkman & Silva, 2020).

Substantiated female offenders were roughly four times more likely than male offenders to be documented as living in inadequate housing, which indicates the complexity and economic vulnerability associated with FSOs (McLeod & Craft, 2015). Especially for child sexual abuse cases, females tended to be the primary parental caregivers at a higher rate than males, meaning they were accessing numerous family system services, such as daycare, education, transportation, family planning, and legal services. McLeod and Craft's (2015) study revealed that these services were all significant predictors that the perpetrator was female due to their association with the primary caretaking of their children. In addition, some of the female sexual offenders reported they sought sexual and emotional intimacy in their relationships with their victims due to experiencing previous relationships with controlling and jealous men (Abulafia & Epstein, 2022; Gannon et al., 2014; Wijkman & Silva, 2020). Furthermore, when the offender was a teacher, they often gave their victims gifts as leverage to encourage them to keep the relationship hidden. FSOs also reported continuing sexual abuse because they had low self-esteem, had experienced traumatic events in their own lives, and had a lack of self-confidence (Abulafia & Epstein, 2022; Steely & Ten Bensel, 2020).

Finally, the included studies reported that sole and co-offenders reported similarities and differences. Physical, sexual contact was more likely to occur with solo offenders than with co-offenders (Bensel et al., 2019). Another included study mentioned that a significant difference between solo and co-offenders was the

co-occurrence of substance use, abuse, depression, and other personal and socio-affective problems (Gillespie et al., 2015). So, solo offenders presented with more personal and socio-affective problems, and co-offenders presented a more significant presence of substance abuse and depression-based problems (Gillespie et al., 2015). However, the included studies mentioned that there were no significant differences among solo and co-offenders in parental relationships, childhood environment, emotional abuse, violent abuse, sexual abuse, and previous sexual convictions (Bensel et al., 2019; Gillespie et al., 2015).

Victim Characteristics

Studies included in the review also mentioned the victim's characteristics. Most of the victims knew the offender as their parent/guardian, teacher, friend, neighbor, and other relatives (Comartin et al., 2021; McLeod & Craft, 2015; Bensel et al., 2019; Munroe & Shumway, 2022; Wijkman & Silva, 2020; Steely & Ten Bensel, 2020; Pflugradt et al., 2018). The included studies mentioned that most victims were intrafamilial (Comartin et al., 2021; Munroe & Shumway, 2022; Wijkman & Silva, 2020).

Trauma and Addiction History

The included studies' findings mentioned that female sexual offenders reported mental health issues such as depression, PTSD, anxiety, and drug use in their lifetime (Abulafia & Epstein, 2022; Bensel et al., 2019; Bickart et al., 2019; DeCou et al., 2015; Gillespie et al., 2015; McLeod & Craft, 2015; McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Munroe & Shumway, 2022; Steely & Ten Bensel, 2020; Williams & Bierie, 2015). The participants from five of the included studies reported they had experienced a male sexual assault, were victimized once or more, or had experienced sexual abuse as a child (Comartin et al., 2021; McLeod & Craft, 2015; McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Munroe & Shumway, 2022; Pflugradt et al., 2018). The included studies also highlighted that if the female perpetrators had experienced traumatic events during their childhood, they were more likely to include physical violence in the abuse of their victims (McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Pflugradt et al., 2018).

DISCUSSION

Two critical findings emerged as thematic clusters from the included studies. These included the impact of trauma on the social and behavioral development of female offenders and the relationships between these women and their victims (See Table 2). While these were the two primary areas of identified scholarly concentration, both were multifaceted.

Table 2: Critical Findings

Theme 1	The Impact of Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma manifests differently across typologies of female offenders • Trauma Experiences are extensive and often life-long • Trauma histories complicate mental, social, and behavioral health among FSOs
Theme 2	Victim Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female offenders typically know their victims and have pre-established relationships with them (often familial) • There is a correlation between mothers who were victimized and those who victimize their own children • When mothers work to resolve their own experiences of trauma, they are less likely to victimize their own children

Trauma's Impact on Female Offenders

There is much to learn about female sexual offenders from this systematic review of current literature. First, understanding specific characteristics and behaviors that describe the different types of FSOs can provide important information about potential identification and intervention efforts. In the current literature, McLeod and Dodd (2022) created a modernized cluster of typologies by identifying, analyzing, and coding themes from historical and modern research that included psychodynamic, behavioral, and trauma-informed perspectives. The three types detailed in the McLeod and Dodd (2022) study described very different motivations and approaches to enacting sexual abuse on victims. It is important to note that many of these typologies are unique to female sexual offenders, as it has been found that the typologies that fit them are unlike the typologies that include male sexual offenders (Pflugradt & Allen, 2010). Incorporating trauma-informed care and specific interventions tailored to FSOs' needs can significantly enhance outcomes and promote effective rehabilitation.

Relational offenders did not intend to harm their victims but sought emotional connection and partnership. This type of FSO did not consider their behavior as harmful to their victim or even morally wrong (McLeod & Dodd, 2022). These FSOs saw their actions as a demonstration of kindness or love. They believed they engaged in a consensual romantic relationship with their victims, even if those relationships were technically illegal. Most of the time, the victims of a relational offender are adolescents (McLeod & Dodd, 2022). Furthermore, McLeod and Dodd (2022) found that most relational offenders experienced severe trauma during or close to their own adolescence. Therefore, it is critical to understand that this type of FSO has most likely been significantly impacted by early trauma and may be maneuvering their adult experiences with delayed social and emotional development (Levenson & Grady, 2016; McLeod & Craft, 2015; Neofytou, 2022).

The second type, predatory FSOs, operates from a drastically different perspective than the relational FSO. This offender behaves and interacts with their victims with a significant lack of empathy (McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Van Langen et al., 2014). These offenders are motivated by power and control and are more likely to intentionally seek out vulnerable individuals to exploit (McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Weizmann-Henelius et al., 2003). Additionally, this type of offender is more likely to recruit and sell children for sexual trafficking purposes (McLeod & Dodd, 2022). From a diagnostic standpoint, the predatory offender can resemble antisocial personality disorder, narcissism, or psychopathy (McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Van Langen et al., 2014). Where does this type of motivation and behavior come from? Studies examining predatory offenders suggest an extensive abuse history that started in early childhood and continued throughout their lives (Deesing et al., 2021; McLeod & Dodd, 2022). This motivation and impact from early trauma require a different approach to treatment, but it still highlights an increased association between early trauma and sexual acting out.

The final offender type is the chaotic FSO. Historical data suggests that chaotic offenders view themselves as victims, believing themselves relatively powerless in their situations (McLeod & Dodd, 2022). Because of this perception of their lack of control over their own lives, they justify their acts of sexual abuse with any number of cognitive distortions, including the belief that their victim is an entirely different person (McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Stathopoulos & Quadara, 2014). Chaotic offenders may be in violent, abusive relationships with other adults and are the most likely of all typologies to offend in collaboration with another offender. Data suggests a range of aggression among chaotic offenders, with some taking a more prominent role in the abusive acts and others allowing their co-offenders to lead (McLeod & Dodd, 2022). Once again, trauma-informed literature around this type of offender suggests a high likelihood of early trauma and dysfunction in their home of origin (McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008; Stathopoulos & Quadara, 2014). For example, childhood trauma has been linked to psychological intimate partner violence in adulthood because of its effect on a person's emotional and cognitive processes, like emotional regulation and communication abilities (Dugal et al., 2018).

Most of the studies included in this systematic review discuss the experience of significant trauma in the female offender's history and ongoing mental health challenges faced throughout adulthood. Notably, the traumatic experiences female offenders reported experiencing in their lives included being victims of sexual abuse themselves, whether earlier in childhood or later in adulthood (Comartin et al., 2021; McLeod & Craft, 2015; McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Munroe & Shumway, 2022; Pflugrad et al., 2018). Additionally, the more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) an FSO had experienced earlier in their lives, the more likely their abusive behavior was acted out with violence (McLeod & Dodd, 2022; Pflugrad et al., 2018). These findings highlight the significant impact experiencing trauma has on future decisions, relationships, and behavior. Experiencing early trauma typically impacts a person by creating challenges with emotional regulation, avoidance behaviors, and difficulties with emotional expression (Gruhn & Compas, 2020). Policymakers and practitioners must understand the pervasiveness of how this traumatic history impacts FSOs in their pursuit to develop and implement the most effective interventions, ultimately seeking to decrease re-offense.

The Victims of FSOs

One of the key characteristics found from this study of current literature on FSOs is the high probability of the victim knowing their offender (Bensel et al., 2019; Comartin et al., 2021; McLeod & Craft, 2015; Munroe & Shumway, 2022; Pflugrad et al., 2018; Steely & Ten Bensel, 2020; Wijkman & Silva, 2020). These relationships ranged from the offender being the victim's teacher or neighbor (a relationship close in proximity) to being the parent or guardian of the victim (a relationship close in proximity and relation). An offender being the victim's parent or guardian is perhaps the closest and most detrimental to the victim as the parent/guardian is the one adult in the world who is supposed to protect and defend the victim. Yet, in these situations, the parent/guardian is the source of pain, confusion, and fear in the victim's life.

Borelli and colleagues (2019) explored the associations between mothers who had experienced childhood sexual abuse and their children's experience with sexual abuse or the impact of their mother's trauma on their lives. In this study, the researchers determined a significant association between a mother's sexual victimization and their child's likelihood of sexual victimization (Borelli et al., 2019). This finding is supported by years of study in this area (McCloskey, 2013; Oates et al., 1998; Testa et al., 2011; Testoni et al., 2018; Wearick-Silva et al., 2014). This finding correlates with the above discussion in highlighting that the impact of early trauma on a woman's life is significant and pervasive. Therefore, as victims of FSOs are likely to have an established relationship with their offenders and experience their victimization early in their lives, the impact of this traumatization must be considered. Furthermore, Borelli and colleagues (2019) found that "mothers who were able to speak in greater depth about their thoughts and feelings related to their own [child sexual abuse] exposure were less likely to have children who had been exposed." In other words, when victims of sexual abuse can process and express themselves about their own traumatic experiences, the risk of their own children being exposed to trauma decreases.

The findings of the present study underscore that understanding the specific characteristics and behaviors that define different types of FSOs can offer valuable insights into potential identification and intervention strategies. With further understanding of the typologies of FSOs and implementing targeted interventions, including trauma-informed care, forensic social workers can effectively translate research into practice. Integrating this knowledge not only addresses the complex needs of FSOs but also enhances community safety and supports the overall goals of rehabilitation and reintegration.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy

Identifying the characteristics of female sexual offenders and understanding the impact of early trauma on FSOs provides essential insight for future research, practice, and policy. Professionals in the field and the criminal justice system should be aware and mindful of the critical need to understand female sexual offenders' history before identifying the response to the FSO's crime. The included studies suggest a strong connection between mental health, addiction, poverty, and complex trauma and their offense type. Trauma-

informed approaches create safer environments for the staff and individuals they serve. According to SAMHSA, the principles of the trauma-informed approach include safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, and cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA, 2023). Utilizing a trauma-informed approach is crucial due to the impact of chronic and early trauma (Edelman, 2023; McLeod & Dodd, 2022). For FSOs, trauma may manifest from various experiences, such as childhood abuse, intimate partner violence, or systemic victimization. Integrating trauma-informed principles into forensic social work practice acknowledges these underlying factors and fosters a supportive environment conducive to healing and rehabilitation. Therefore, applying trauma-informed care for female sexual offenders is essential to their progress in correctional facilities or treatment programs (Lehrer, 2021; McLeod & Dodd, 2022). Furthermore, requiring trauma-informed training for all professionals working with FSOs, including forensic social workers, law enforcement, and judiciary, would support these professionals in providing the best treatment. In addition, training law enforcement on the FSO typologies would be crucial to understanding different criminal behaviors and identifying and evaluating the most appropriate treatment programs.

Furthermore, this review highlights the need for future research to identify and evaluate effective interventions for the victims of FSOs. For example, gender-specific treatment models for sex offending and cognitive-behavioral interventions help FSOs recognize and modify distorted thinking patterns and behaviors contributing to their offending (Abulafia & Epstein, 2022; Harrison et al., 2020). The relationship between an FSO and her victim is not often distant or without complex emotional ties, making the abuse's impact more pervasive and challenging to overcome. Mental health providers should take steps to understand the unique characteristics of FSOs and the different typologies and apply the information to the treatment plans for victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Policy and professionals in the criminal justice system play a significant role in ensuring that victims and their families can benefit from the criminal justice process. Male-centric policies are problematic in dealing with the phenomenon of female sexual offending. Further policy development to address the complexity of intersectionality would provide an impact in the area of female sexual offending. Therefore, professionals in the criminal justice system must be made aware of female sexual offenders' characteristics and their trauma history in design and assist them in navigating the criminal justice system.

Table 3. Implications

Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a significant need for research to evaluate existing interventions and behavioral drivers related to female sexual offending • More research is needed to understand the differential impact of the phenomenon
Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender-specific interventions are needed to facilitate success at the individual level as well as to support community safety • Advances in practice related to complex trauma could be utilized to improve effectiveness in FSO intervention
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male-centric policies are problematic in dealing with the phenomenon of female sexual offending • Further policy development to address the complexity of intersectionality would provide an impact in the area of female sexual offending

Limitations and Future Directions

There are also several limitations existing in the present study. The study only reviewed English peer-reviewed journals. There could be research that is published in a different language. Additionally, the studies

in this systematic review overwhelmingly included most White/Caucasian participants. It is possible that the findings in this systematic review are not inclusive of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) female sexual offenders and their experiences and characteristics. Future studies should expand to include a more diverse sample of FSOs to gain a more complete picture. Cultural norms and systemic inequalities may shape the experiences and behaviors of female sexual offenders differently across diverse populations. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing culturally competent interventions and policies.

In addition, the present study only focused on specific databases. Future research might focus on comprehensive databases and search deeply grey literature to provide more information about female sexual offenders' characteristics. Given the lack of research on female sexual offenders' characteristics, the findings of this study significantly contribute to the literature. However, the study includes adult female sexual offenders; we did not include female juvenile offenders and could not examine subgroups. The small sample size may have limited our ability to detect nuanced differences among subgroups of female sexual offenders, potentially affecting the depth of our conclusions. The future researcher can focus on more details in subgroups based on offender sexual orientation, offender age, victim age, and type of offense. Also, future studies could benefit from larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing female sexual offending behavior.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review explored current literature to understand what exists, where there may be research gaps, and to pose questions for future study. The study's findings supported that understanding specific characteristics and behaviors that describe the different types of FSOs can provide important information about potential identification and intervention efforts. Adopting trauma-informed approaches is essential when working with FSOs, as many offenders have histories of trauma that influence their behaviors and treatment needs. We also recognized that this is a very needed area in literature, and limited studies focus on this population. Recognizing the diverse typologies of FSOs helps forensic social workers tailor assessments and interventions based on specific risk factors and motivations. Forensic social workers can enhance their practices by integrating typology-specific knowledge into risk assessment and intervention planning for FSOs. Moreover, advocating for policy changes to support these approaches ensures that the field of forensic social work continues to evolve in response to the complex needs of FSOs and advancements in research and practice. We hope that this study will encourage further studies to contribute to the literature.

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