

Female-Perpetrated Child Sexual Abuse

OUR POSITION:

Female child sexual offenders represent a heterogeneous and under-researched population whose offending is often under-recognised due to societal and institutional gendered assumptions Bravehearts advocates for:

- **Enhance research and data collection.**
- **Improve detection and reporting.**
- **Implement gender-aware justice practices.**
- **Develop and evaluate gender-responsive treatment.**
- **Adapt risk assessment and management.**
- **Promote professional and cultural awareness.**
- **Support early intervention and prevention.**
- **Victim and Survivor Support.**

Background

Female-perpetrated child sexual abuse is an under-recognised yet serious aspect of child protection. Female offenders are often in positions of trust, such as caregivers, family members, or educators, and their actions (ranging from direct sexual abuse to facilitating or enabling abuse) can have profound and lasting impacts on children. Societal assumptions that women are less harmful contribute to underreporting, delayed intervention, and often more lenient legal outcomes.

Addressing this issue is critical for strengthening child protection systems, improving detection and reporting, and ensuring that victims receive justice and support. Understanding the prevalence, characteristics, and impacts of female offenders helps inform more effective prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation strategies, ultimately reducing harm and promoting safer environments for children.

Societal and Cultural Factors

Female sex offenders represent a relatively under-researched and often misunderstood group. Historically, societal perceptions of women as nurturing, passive, and morally protective have contributed to the stereotype that females are less capable of sexual offending. These deeply ingrained gender norms influence both the detection and reporting of female-perpetrated abuse, as victims, families, and professionals may struggle to recognise or acknowledge harmful behaviour when it involves a woman. As a result, female offenders are often under-identified, their actions minimised, and intervention delayed, which can exacerbate harm to victims (Christensen & Woods, 2024).

Media portrayal of female offenders further shapes public perception and policy priorities. Cases involving women are often framed in sensationalist or conflicting ways, emphasising the “shock” of female-perpetrated abuse or portraying offenders as victims of circumstance rather than as accountable individuals

(Christensen, 2018; Christensen & Pollard, 2022). Such coverage reinforces the notion that female sexual offending is rare.

Structural factors, such as limited empirical research on female sexual offenders and the dominance of theories based on male offending patterns, affect how professionals conceptualise risk, motivation, and treatment needs. Because women are under-identified and under-studied, existing frameworks may inadequately capture the complexity of female offending (Wijkman, Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2010), perpetuating gaps in assessment, policy development, and survivor support.

Prevalence and Demographics

Sexual offenses actioned by the police in one jurisdiction of Australia between 1 January 2012 and 30 June 2021 (N = 37,864) were analyzed to explore the prevalence of sexual offenses and types of sexual offenses perpetrated... Consistent with previous research, (predominantly adult) males were responsible for most sexual offenses before police. Females were responsible for 12.2% of all offenses over this period, with juvenile females (10–17 years) implicated in a significant proportion (10.2%) of all offenses.

(Hull et.al., 2024)

Literature on female child sex offenders underscores that they represent a diverse population with varied offending contexts, motivations, and relational dynamics, challenging stereotypes of female offenders as passive or exclusively coerced participants. A key distinction in contemporary research is between solo offenders, who commit abuse independently often exhibiting distinctive psychological and offense characteristics, and co-offenders, who perpetrate abuse in conjunction with one or more individuals, frequently male partners or intimate acquaintances, sometimes influenced by relational power dynamics or external pressure (Miller and Marshall, 2019; Hull et al., 2024; McLeod, 2015). Emerging studies extend this typology to include technology-facilitated offenses, highlighting that some women engage in online child sexual abuse material (CSAM) production or distribution either alone or alongside co-offenders, complicating traditional typological boundaries (Hull et al., 2025). Other research points to the role of trauma histories in shaping both solo and coerced offending pathways, where prior childhood and adult adversity correlates with the likelihood of co-offending and perceived coercion during the offense (e.g., Miller & Marshall, 2019). These distinctions have important implications for risk assessment, gender-responsive treatment, and targeted prevention strategies, as solo, coerced, and co-offending profiles may require different clinical and correctional approaches.

Research on the prevalence of female child sexual offenders indicates that, while they represent a minority of perpetrators, their presence is more substantial than commonly assumed. Victimization surveys suggest that female perpetrators account for up to 20% of cases of child sexual abuse (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022), although official criminal justice records often report lower percentages (Christensen & Jansen, 2019; Steely Smith & Ten-Bensel, 2024). Research indicates that women are disproportionately represented among “abuse of trust” offences (defined as sexual offences in which an adult in a formal position of trust or authority engages in sexual activity with a

young person aged 16 or 17 under their care) accounting for approximately 13% of female-perpetrated child sexual offences, compared with only 1.6% of male-perpetrated offences (Christensen & Darling, 2019).

Female offenders are heterogeneous (Christensen & Jansen, 2019; Wijkman, Bijleveld & Hendriks, 2010), varying in age, offence type, relationship to the victim, and context, which complicates efforts to establish a “typical” profile. Notably, juvenile females appear to play a significant role in online offending, particularly in the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material (Hull et.al., 2024). Although research on online female offenders remains limited, emerging studies indicate that involvement in technology-mediated abuse may be increasing or, at minimum, becoming more detectable.

Estimating the true prevalence of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse is complicated by under-reporting, detection biases, and societal stereotypes that portray women as nurturing and morally protective. These factors may lead victims, families, and professionals to overlook or misattribute harmful behaviour, thereby distorting prevalence data.

Impact on Victims and Survivors

Research indicates that sexual abuse perpetrated by females can have profound and multifaceted effects on victims, yet the impact is often underestimated due to societal gender norms and stereotypes. Victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse may experience similar psychological, emotional, and social harms as those abused by male offenders, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and difficulties forming trusting relationships (Munroe & Shumway, 2022). However, the gender of the offender can introduce unique dynamics that complicate recognition, disclosure, and processing of trauma. Victims frequently report confusion, shame, and cognitive dissonance, stemming from societal expectations that women are nurturing and incapable of sexual harm (Denov, 2004; Schröder, Briken, & Tozdan, 2023).

Justice System Responses

Research on justice system responses to female child sexual offenders indicates that these offenders are often treated differently from males, influenced by gendered assumptions, offender characteristics, and institutional practices. Empirical studies suggest that women generally receive shorter sentences and lower non-parole periods than men for similar offences, with mitigating factors such as mental health issues, personal histories of abuse, or emotional difficulties invoked to explain leniency (Comartin et.al., 2021; Deering & Mellor, 2009). Courts may lack gender-aware frameworks for sexual offending, and judicial discretion can reflect prevailing societal perceptions that women are less dangerous or more amenable to rehabilitation. Consequently, sentencing outcomes for female offenders frequently differ from those for male counterparts, even when offences are of comparable severity.

Systemic recognition and detection of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse is another challenge. Professionals across justice, social work, and child protection sectors often under-recognise or downplay female offending due to institutional and cultural blind spots (Gerke et.al., 2024). As a result, female offenders are underrepresented in correctional populations, with studies showing that

women comprise only a small fraction of incarcerated sex offenders (Comartin et.al., 2021), suggesting that many cases never reach prosecution or imprisonment. This under-detection can be linked to gender stereotypes, structural gaps in reporting systems, and the tendency to view women as less capable of serious sexual offending.

Treatment, Rehabilitation, and Risk Management

Research on the treatment, rehabilitation, and risk management of female child sexual offenders highlights both the potential for tailored interventions and the significant gaps in empirical evidence. Female offenders are a heterogeneous group, often with histories of childhood trauma, family instability, and other adverse psychosocial experiences (Nathan & Ward, 2002; Priebe et.al., 2025). These factors underscore the need for gender-responsive, trauma-informed approaches that address mental health, relational dynamics, and broader social context, rather than relying on traditional male-centred sex offender models. Some specialised programs exist, combining group and individual work to help participants accept responsibility, understand their offending patterns, develop empathy for victims, and build relapse prevention strategies and life plans (Sousa et.al., 2025). Interventions targeting dynamic risk and protective factors, such as family functioning, aggression management, interpersonal skills, and self-regulation, appear particularly relevant for adolescent female sexual offenders, where family and relational factors strongly influence recidivism risk (van der Put, 2015).

Bravehearts Position

Female child sexual offenders represent a heterogeneous and under-researched population whose offending is often under-recognised due to societal and institutional gendered assumptions. Evidence indicates disparities in justice-system responses, limited availability of gender-responsive treatment, and significant gaps in understanding risk, rehabilitation, and recidivism. Bravehearts advocates for:

- **Enhance research and data collection:** Conduct large-scale, gender-specific studies on prevalence, patterns, and outcomes, including online offending.
- **Improve detection and reporting:** Develop standardised protocols across justice, child protection, and health services to ensure female-perpetrated abuse is accurately identified and recorded.
- **Implement gender-aware justice practices:** Provide professional training to challenge stereotypes, promote victim-centred approaches, and ensure evidence-based sentencing.
- **Develop and evaluate gender-responsive treatment:** Create trauma-informed interventions addressing mental health, relational, and psychosocial needs, with rigorous outcome evaluations to assess effectiveness.
- **Adapt risk assessment and management:** Integrate gender-specific patterns and dynamic risk factors into probation, parole, and post-release supervision.
- **Promote professional and cultural awareness:** Address institutional biases through multi-agency training and collaboration to improve recognition and response to female offenders.
- **Support early intervention and prevention:** Identify at-risk juvenile females and implement proactive strategies, particularly for online sexual offending contexts.

- **Victim and Survivor Support:** Provide trauma-informed, gender-sensitive support for victims and survivors of female child sexual abuse, addressing barriers to disclosure, shame, self-blame, and relational difficulties, while ensuring professional recognition of the seriousness of abuse by female perpetrators.

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