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Online child sexual abuse by female offenders: An Exploratory study

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Abstract

The expansion of the Internet and the proliferation of information technologies have created new opportunities for the sexual abuse of children. Sex offenders use the Internet to access and distribute indecent images of children and to select victims to groom for the purpose of abuse (Davidson & Gottschalk 2010; Martellozzo, 2010; Martellozzo & Taylor, 2009; Quayle, Erooga, Wright, Taylor, & Harbinson, 2006). It is a commonly held assumption, stated implicitly or explicitly in both public debates and scholarly research, that child sexual abuse is a typically male crime, in so far as offenders are generally held to be men and the level of sexual aggression involved in their offences is seen as closely related to masculine behaviour. This article aims to increase knowledge and understanding of the problem of online child sexual abuse by female offenders. As rehearsed in the literature (Martellozzo, 2011; Webster, Davidson, Bifulco, Pham, & Caretti, 2009), online child sexual abuse is predominantly a crime committed by men and only a small percentage of females sexually abuse children through the Internet. This article presents findings from analysis of qualitative data collected at the Paedophile Unit at the London Metropolitan Police.

Keywords: Online, Child Sexual abuse, Female offenders, Online child sexual abuse.

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Introduction

Recent cases in the United Kingdom⁴ have brought to public light that women do exploit the Internet to sexually abuse children. It is therefore important to lift the taboo surrounding female sex offenders and explore the evidence available to understand this emerging problem. As this subject matter has so far not received any scholarly attention, it is the aim of this article to explore how women are involved as offenders in online child sexual abuse. We address this omission by looking at ethnographic data gathered during several investigations of the London Metropolitan Police. The nature of our argument is exploratory. Based on a detailed exploration of our case study, we seek to generate some initial insights into an under explored social phenomenon and raise questions for its future study. We do not seek to formulate empirical generalisations as to the prevalence and patterns of online child sexual abuse. While academic research on child sexual abuse is dominated by studies geared towards this goal in the context of positivistic methodological moulds, there is a clear case to be made for beginning the debate on online abuse by women with an exploratory, qualitative case study, given the current lack of solid knowledge about female online offenders' understandings and experiences of their acts.

Based on a survey of key academic texts, we argue that, while child sexual abuse is commonly associated with male sexual aggression, women's involvement as offenders is still poorly understood, in particular regarding emergent forms of online abuse. We then substantiate this argument through the exploration of a range of qualitative data, including interviews with male and female offenders, as well as professionals involved in the criminal justice process.

Background and Context

Undoubtedly, new information and communication technologies (the Internet in particular) have opened up opportunities for perpetrators, both male and female, to abuse in a less visible way. In 2005, the Virtual Global Task Force (www.virtualglobaltaskforce.com) defined child sexual abuse online as the sharing and downloading of images of children being physically and sexually abused and approaching children online with the aim of developing a sexual relationship in the 'real world', also known as 'grooming'. Therefore, the risks that children may encounter when online are numerous and rather serious: exposure to inappropriate conversation; unwittingly becoming the subject of sexual fantasy; being sent indecent or obscene images; being asked to send indecent images of themselves or their friends; being engaged in sexually explicit talk; and being encouraged to perform sexual explicit acts on themselves or their friends (so-called cybersex). All these activities and risks form the new reality of cyberspace, where everyday hundreds of children are approached for sexual abuse (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2008).

⁴ For example, in December 2009, in Plymouth, England, a nursery school worker was prosecuted to a custodial sentence for sexually abusing children in her care. She was sentenced also for making and distributing images of the abuse with two other sex offenders (one male and one female). This case illustrates the need to explore women's involvement in online child sexual abuse from an academic perspective.

Whilst the literature available on online sex offenders is growing (Martellozzo, 2010; Webster, Davidson, Bifulco, Pham, & Caretti, 2009), very little research has focused on online female perpetrators; thus the literature available is nonexistent. It is therefore the aim of this article to explore findings on male online offenders and use them as an element of comparison for the empirical data collected for this research.

Research conducted with online sex offenders (Martellozzo, 2010; Taylor, 2010; Webster et al., 2009) suggest that there is no such thing as a typical online child groomer; it is nevertheless both possible and instructive to identify a range of distinctive child grooming behaviours. Sex offenders who target young children are form a diverse group that cannot be “accurately characterised with one-dimensional labels” (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2009, p. 1). Here, the grooming behaviour is understood– as feminists have sought to understand male violence (Kelly, 1988) – as existing across a spectrum of confidence. We have purposively avoided using a positivistic approach underpinned by the often pseudo-scientific classification of people or objects into discrete typologies with rigid boundaries. Positivistic typologies would not have worked in this context; they would have placed online sex offenders’ behaviour into boxes, categorised them and reinforced a stereotypical notion overlooking the nuance and fluidity of human characteristics and behaviours. Furthermore, they would have placed male and female online offenders in the same box, not allowing any room for an accurate explanation of the gendered nature of current debates in female child sexual abuse.

Research and experience have repeatedly shown that sex offenders cannot be easily ‘picked out’ of a crowd (Grubin, 1998; Stanko, 1990). There is no consistent model or typology into which they can be accurately placed for the purpose of identification and isolation – and public denunciation. In other words, “*it is not possible to describe the ‘typical’ child molester*” (Grubin, 1998, p. 14). This contention can also be applied to online forms of child sexual abuse for both male and female online offenders.

Understanding online sex offenders

By using the Internet, individuals have the opportunity to explore the dark side of their sexuality by pretending to be whoever they feel like being, and by disclosing as much or as little about themselves as they wish to others (Cooper, McLaughlin, & Campwell, 2000 b). A man can be younger or older, a woman, a child, or a cartoon character. Moreover, by hiding behind their fictitious profile, they explore any opportunity cyberspace may offer, including that of sexually abuse children (Martellozzo, 2010; Taylor, 2010).

During one of the first Metropolitan Police undercover operation at the High Technological Crime Unit, Martellozzo (2010) found that more than 1300 individuals visited the fictitious girl’s profile. Of these, more than 450 individuals with adult male profiles initiated contact with the child, and 80 became virtual friends and prolonged their relationship. Findings showed that the vast majority of male adults contacting the girl’s profiles would do so for sexual purposes (Martellozzo, 2010). Some are simply interested in having sexual conversations. Young (2001, p. 300) defines these individuals as ‘fantasy users’, and distinguishes those who utilise online chat room and instant messaging for the express purpose of role-playing in online fantasy sex chat. However, many suspects go beyond the fantasy stage; they distribute indecent images, expose themselves and travel to meet a child to sexually abuse.

Offender research: justifying the offence

Sex offenders tend to share similar distorted assumptions about their victims, the nature of the offences committed, and their responsibility for their offending behaviour. Furthermore, they are often not cognisant of their wrongdoing (Middelton, 2004), as they neutralise the consequences of their actions (Matza & Sykes, 1961). However, to enhance understanding of online offending, another key characteristic could be added to the list, that of Internet addiction (Young, 2008).

Based on the analysis of forensic interviews (N=22) with virtual sex offenders, Young's (2008) research on Internet addiction found that all her clients met the basic criteria of Internet addiction. She claims that, "similar to an alcoholic who consumes greater level of alcohol in order to achieve satisfaction, clients routinely spent significant amounts of time online" (Young 2008, p. 301). She used a model which follows five stages of developing Internet addiction: discovery, exploration, escalation, compulsion, and hopelessness or regret (Young, 2008, p. 301). Unlike classic sex offenders who go through cycles of abusive behaviour by their distorted thinking (denial, blaming, omitting and believing the child enjoys and wants to be sexually active) (Salter, 1995 see also chapter 3), Young's offenders were first time offenders, with no previous history of sexual activity towards children (however the research was based on small sample and the results may not be typical). This characteristic was found in the female offenders explored in this research. Furthermore, the offences committed by Young's sample were not entirely confined to the realm of cyberspace. That is to say, offenders went beyond the fantasy and discovery stages and committed some serious offences in the real world. They detached themselves from the Internet and travelled with the intention to sexually abuse a child. It was found that the models proposed by Young and other scholars (Salter 1995; Salter, McMillan et al. 2003; Sullivan & Beech 2004; 2008) contain key emergent themes also present in the case studies examined in this research.

The two themes of coercion and denial have been used as guidelines to inform the analysis of the data gathered throughout this research. The two themes were explored separately and respondents' accounts sought to directly address these key themes and focused upon online offending behaviour.

Gendered nature of current debates on child sexual abuse

In order to appreciate the gendered nature of debates specifically regarding online child sexual abuse, it is useful to begin with a critical analysis of general debates on child abuse. This is important in so far as specific discussions of online child sexual abuse cannot be detached from the social, academic and empirical context in which they take place. Here it is necessary, first of all, to emphasise the cultural association of gender and sexuality. Public debates on child sexual abuse are often characterised by assumptions about 'natural' and 'deviant' sexual behaviour. In contrast, it is important to view understandings and practices of sexuality as situated in historically and culturally specific formations of gender.

The social positions which women and men occupy in the different areas of their daily lives such as the household, work, or an intimate relationship, are not somehow fixed and natural, and therefore unproblematic and unquestionable. Rather, it seems helpful to understand them as the outcome of processes of social construction, which are historically specific and shaped by the different cultural, economic and social contexts in which they take place (Alsop, Fitzsimons, & Lennon, 2002; Butler, 1999; Kimmel, 2000; Oakley, 1972; Ortner & Whitehead, 1981; Walby, 1990). In this sense, Kessler and McKenna

(1978) and West and Zimmerman (2000) argue from an ethno-methodological viewpoint that sex and gender are much less a stable internal property of individuals than an emergent feature of individuals' performances in particular situational and institutional contexts.

The preceding arguments clearly open pathways for the conceptualisation of gender differences in child sexual abuse. Nevertheless, this problem remains under-theorised and poorly understood, even though it has been widely documented. In comparison with males, only a small percentage of females sexually abuse children (Matravers, 2008). This common knowledge has fuelled the misconception that female sex offending is so rare that the problem simply does not exist. However, research suggests that, although rare in comparison with male perpetrated offences, females are involved in a significant minority of sexual offences (Bunting, 2007). Given that the majority of reported child molestations are committed by men, the issue of the female sex offender has been virtually ignored (Elliott, 1993; Finkelhor, 1984; Mathews, 1989). This is evident in literature which dates back to the late 1980s. Prior to that, scant attention was paid to the female sex offender, and this has made victims of female child sexual abuse feel, "more isolated than those abused by men" (Bass & Davis, cited in Elliott (1993, p. 220). Research into the participation of women in child sexual abuse has varied widely from 0 per cent in research carried out by Jaffe et al. (1975), 24 percent in the National Incidence Study (1981), to 70 percent in research carried out by Fromouth and Burkhart (1989).

One of the reasons for mainstream criminology's lack of interest in gender differences in crime in general is the fact that "women's crimes are fewer, less serious, and more rarely professional than men" (Heidensohn, 1995, p. 998). Furthermore, in-depth research in Canada (Denov, 2004) showed that female sexual abusers were treated much less seriously than their male counterparts by all the professionals in her study including the police and therapists. Similarly, research conducted in the UK found that "whilst child sexual abuse perpetrated by females ...[was] a serious issue warranting investigation, a number advocated decisions [that] suggested they did not consider female-perpetrated abuse to be as serious as male-perpetrated abuse" (Hetherington & Beardsall, 1988, p. 68). However, in order to understand why people commit certain crimes, it is equally important to understand why others do not. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the various attempts to explain why women seem to be involved in child sexual abuse less than men. But how much less are women involved in child sex offending in comparison to men? Brian Corby (1998) found that women accounted for just over four percent of sexual abuse perpetrators, with mothers accounting for two percent of this number. However, it should be noted that, like cases of sexual abuses in general, a large number of abuses carried out by women may go unreported.

Cultural taboos surrounding female sexual abuse

The cultural taboo surrounding sexual abuse by women makes it more unlikely that children would report such crimes (Elliott, 1993). This taboo is fuelled by society, which

romanticises and minimises the impact female molesters have on their young male victims. If a boy discloses abuse, he may not be believed. If he physically enjoyed the molestation, he does not perceive himself as a victim, despite the fact that he may be suffering from the effects of abuse. Many will suggest that he should have enjoyed the experience. If he did not enjoy aspects of the abuse, he may fear he is homosexual. Either way the young male victim of the older

female is placed in an untenable position (Mayer, 1992 in Bunting (2007, p. 256).

This suggests that there is a great lack of awareness about the emotional damage that female sex offending can cause to the victims, which may also increase the risk of sex offending in adulthood (Salter et al., 2003). This might be attributed to the way in which contemporary Western understandings on child sexual abuse have been shaped by neoliberal discourses of deviance, crime, and punishment. According to Wacquant (2009), these discourses have categorically separated debates on the causes and consequences of crime from the consideration of crime's social circumstances. In other words, explanations of crime are reduced to individualistic arguments about individuals' legal and moral responsibilities, with no regard for the social structural contexts that have shaped both society's definitions of crime and the law, and the biographical trajectories which lead some individuals to act outside established moral and legal boundaries.

This discursive mechanism renders mediated high-profile crimes such as child sexual abuse inhospitable to a sociological critique which seeks to conceptualise them in terms of their social meanings, causes, and implications rather than simply attributing them to individuals' moral failings. Thus freed from the need for a socially sensitive interpretation of crime, authorities across the Western world have participated in a "punitive upsurge" (Wacquant, 2009) characterised by the ever harsher penalisation of an ever increasing range of behaviours judged to be deviant. This punitive upsurge has crystallised around a set of cultural types – the 'child molester', the knife murderer, whose invention and constant demonization through popular mass media provide the lynchpin for the implementation of draconic penal policies. In particular, the complex socio-cultural phenomenon of child sexual abuse has been reduced to the stereotype of the aggressive male paedophile, thus closing off from public consideration other manifestations of the problem, namely the issue of female offenders. Wacquant's respective observations on the American 'penal state' to some extent apply to the United Kingdom as well:

Sex offenders are, along with young black men from the neighbourhoods of relegation in the big cities, the privileged target of the penal panopticism that has flourished on the ruins of America's charitable state over the past three decades. [...] [P]aternalistic assistance schemes and punitive criminal programs turn out to consistently converge onto dangerous categories in the double register of control and communication: 'welfare mothers,' believed to pose a moral threat to the ethic of work and sexual propriety in the domestic sphere [...], and 'gang bangers' and assorted street criminals from the hyperghetto, perceived to represent a diffuse physical menace in public space [...]. A third figure has joined and embodied the sulphurous combination of physical and moral perils in the collective mind of America at century's close: the sex offender, and especially the roving, unattached paedophile (Wacquant, 2009, p. 209f).

As a result of this highly gendered narrative of child sexual abuse, offences by women are rendered a cultural, almost unintelligible phenomenon. With such a small percentage of child sexual abuse cases being attributed to women, it is assumed that women are less likely to commit this crime against children. Many ascribe this to women's instinctive feminine protectiveness (Heidensohn, 1987). In other words, societal perceptions of females as sexually harmless and innocent appear to have an impact on victim reporting

practices (Denov, 2003). However, as pointed out by Kelly, “even if arguments that there is a hidden iceberg of female abusers have some validity to them, to reverse the gendered asymmetry would require an iceberg of literally incredible proportions” (1996. p. 46).

Our preceding arguments apply to the more specific field of online abuse. While this subject matter has only been explored to a relatively limited extent, throughout the past decade it has captured the attention of media, policy makers, academics, and the general public and engendered moral panics and public debates on a massive scale. These debates have to be understood in the context of wider debates over intimate citizenship in contemporary British society. As Plummer (2003) argues, late modern society has witnessed the gradual disappearance and systematic contestation of previously hegemonic cultural discourses and social practices of intimate life. In particular, the scope and limits of culturally intelligible and socially acceptable forms of sexuality have been challenged through the emergence of new technologies – reproductive technology, technologies of mediated communication, etc. – that allow individuals to experiment with forms of sexual practice unfeasible and unimaginable only a short time ago. These new possibilities have also brought about new uncertainties and fears (cf. Plummer 2003, 5ff.), which are manifest in frequent moral scares and media frenzies around online child sexual abuse and the dangers the internet poses to children. In order to deal with these scares and understand their cultural roots and consequences, it is indispensable to conduct systematic in-depth research on the ways in which emergent technologies are redefining the meanings, uses, and risks of sex. In this context, the gendered nature of online child sexual abuse deserves particular attention.

Methodological considerations

Data Collection

The objectives of this article are exploratory. It seeks to address the outlined knowledge gaps through the analysis of a range of qualitative data on female sex offenders, as well as on practitioners’ respective perceptions and experiences. The data presented here have been drawn from a number of primary and secondary sources. First, our argument relies on transcripts of 15 post-arrest interviews conducted by the Metropolitan Police with convicted female sex offenders. These post-arrest interviews took place throughout the last five years. They were recorded and transcribed by members of the police. These transcripts were made available to us upon request. Second, we draw on six expert interviews conducted in 2010 with practitioners in the criminal justice field, including members of the police and the judiciary. These expert interviews offer important insights into the current state of knowledge about female online sex offending and are thus of particular significance. Third, our argument relies on an analysis of police reports on cases of female and online child sexual abuse throughout the second half of the 2000s. These reports offer further insights into the state of knowledge about women’s involvement in online abuse and respective assessments made by Metropolitan Police. Access to these confidential and highly sensitive documents was formally granted by police after appropriate background checks. Fourth, a part of the data presented here are accounts of online sex offenders which have been collected during separate research conducted on policing online sexual abuse by one of the authors (Martellozzo, 2010).

The triangulation of these data sources offers important and unprecedented insights into women's involvement in online child sexual abuse. The scope of our dataset is obviously limited, both in terms of the number of documents we obtained and their focus on particular police operations in the UK, and we hence emphasise that we do not seek to formulate empirical generalisations as to the phenomenon of female online child sexual abuse. These limitations notwithstanding, against the backdrop of a complete absence of generalisable data or detailed in-depth case studies on our subject matter, our research amounts to a basic starting point for future research.

Data Analysis

The case study discussed later in this article is unique since, for the first time, a dedicated team of police officers and analysts debriefed convicted female offenders. It is important to note, however, that police interviews with female offenders were conducted to gather intelligence on the subject matter. Therefore, the questions asked were exploratory which, at times, required answers of a descriptive nature. However, given the qualitative, open nature of the interviews, other relevant information emerged at various points. Fifteen female offenders were interviewed during this operation. Therefore, our findings are based on a relatively narrow dataset. This raises important questions as to the validity and generalisation of our findings.

In general accordance with the stances taken by Plummer (2001) and Riessman (1993), we would like to point to the social standpoint of all research and the unavoidability of particular, contextually specific standpoints it implies on the part of the researcher. Plummer frames this issue concerning sociological research in terms of issues of bias, distinguishing between "those arising from the subject being interviewed, those arising from the researcher and those arising from the subject-researcher interaction" (2001, p. 155). He concludes that the idea to eliminate all forms of bias from research so as to achieve a stance of 'objectivity' is fundamentally misleading:

A close examination of all bias in research could only be possible if researcher and informant were mechanical robots. To purge research of all these 'sources of bias' is to purge research of human life. It presumes a 'real' truth may be obtained once all these biases have been removed. Yet to do this, the ideal situation would involve a researcher without a face to give off feelings, a subject with clear and total knowledge unshaped by the situation, a neutral setting and so forth. Any 'truth' found in such a disembodied, neutralized context would be a very odd one indeed. It is precisely through these 'sources of bias' that a 'truth' comes to be assembled. The task of the researcher, therefore, is not to nullify these variables, but to be aware of, describe, publicly and suggest how these have been assembled a specific 'truth' (Plummer, 2001, p. 156f).

In this sense, there is no easy stance of objectivity for us to assume and no simple and unequivocal truth about 'the way child sexual abuse really happened to' or was witnessed by, our participants. Rather, the narratives we obtained were particular in many senses and shaped by the specific social situations from which they emerged.

As to the generalisation of our findings, the main merit of our work lies in the deep and systematic understanding it offers regarding the general possibility of child sexual abuse by female offenders rather than in facilitating empirical generalisations on this topic. Following Plummer (2001, p. 153), we presume a "continuum of representativeness" of

sociological data, ranging from statistically representative surveys to interview narratives of particular, sometimes eccentric, individuals which are revealing mainly on their own terms. As to our data, it seems possible to assume a position somewhere in the middle of this continuum: The quite particular accounts we acquired through our research represent different ways by which online child sexual abuse by women may occur under current social, economic, and cultural conditions, without allowing statements as to the generality or particularity of these ways. Our findings thus serve a primarily heuristic purpose, highlighting the possibility of this crime and paving the way for further, more extensive research.

Anonymity and confidentiality were, of course, guaranteed to all those who participated in this study. It was agreed that all transcripts would be made anonymous and that individuals who participated in the study would not be identifiable from the way in which the findings are presented. Furthermore, assurance was provided that extremely sensitive data contained within documents such as transcripts of police interviews e.g. names and addresses of convicted offenders would not be revealed.

Results

Our empirical findings further point to a central ambiguity in public discourses and debates on child sexual abuse. On the one hand, scholars and practitioners correctly highlight the predominance of crimes committed by male offenders. On the other hand, their understandings of these crimes seem to be simultaneously shaped by a prior understanding that child sexual abuse is an inherently male crime in which, consequently, women are unlikely to actively participate. As argued by Hilsop (2001), professionals, including clinical, social, legal and research often struggle to see women as aggressors towards children, particularly sexual aggressors. Indeed, viewing females as perpetrators of sexual abuse goes against every stereotype that society has of women: women as mothers and caregivers and not as people who abuse and harm. This point was reinforced by a practitioner with decades of experience in the criminal prosecution of child sexual abuse:

“Whenever a female is involved in crimes which are not considered to be consistent or compatible with femininity or being within the woman like harming children, being involved in sadistic type murder cases, sexual abuse of children or animals or anything, I think there is always probably more impact, shock public outrage” (Interview with criminal prosecutor).

Women are often viewed as victims rather than perpetrators of sexual abuse. Therefore, indecent images of children abused by women may come across as ‘doubly disturbing’, both in relation to the act of abuse itself and the fact that a woman seems to be actively involved in it. One possible solution for aligning such perceptions with prevalent common sense is to attribute women’s actions to coercion or coaxing by a man acting behind the scenes with ultimate responsibility for the crime. As this practitioner claims:

“In the cases of online abuse I have dealt with there’s usually a male somewhere in the background. They (women) usually have a male accomplice or a male instigator who is encouraging them or participating with them. It is very rare that I come across a lone female acting without any relationship with or without any involvement of a male” (Interview with criminal prosecutor).

Research carried out by the National Centre of Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) showed that the sexual abuse of children by women, often mothers, was once ignored because it was rare, constituted 25% (approximately 36000 children) of sexually abused victims (Boroughs, 2004). What is very worrying is that with the advent of the Internet this phenomenon may increase even further. Up until relatively recently, child sexual abuse has been considered to be a hidden crime, as it mainly takes place within the family, social circles or in specific institutional settings and it goes, far too often, unreported. However, the arrival of the Internet has facilitated this crime to take place on a much larger scale. Today, child sexual abuse also occurs in cyberspace and the repercussions it has on children are as serious as those consequences in the real world. Child sexual abuse has a gender and it is male (Butler, 1985). It can be argued that this is also the case for online abuse. Research conducted at the Metropolitan Police Paedophile Unit revealed that there are very few women involved in the making and production of such images (Martellozzo & Taylor, 2009).

Recently, the NSPCC has found that more than two million indecent online images of children were circulated by 100 child sex offenders convicted in the last 20 months. An analysis of 100 cases reported in local and national news of people convicted or cautioned between September 2008 and April 2010 for possessing, making or distributing indecent images of children and/or child sexual abuse showed that all but one convicted offenders were male (NSPCC, 28 April 2010). However, as highlighted in the quote below, women are indeed involved although the actual extent of the problem is even more difficult to determine than it is for male offenders because part of the difficulty is in the definition of child sexual abuse (Grubin, 1998). This convicted sex offender claims:

"[...] (the trader) sent me pictures of a young girl and a female, a woman. That sticks in my mind. He did sent me a picture of a very young girl 3 maybe younger than that, I don't know 18 months 2 years, 18 months to 3½ years old and female and a fully grown women and that picture sticks in my head. [...] it's highly unusual the amount of, weight and I explained it to the officers, the weight, when I say weight, the amount of photographs I would have been sent was outrageous. But they were all male and then this one, obviously it's a female it's like wait a minute, and obviously I'm married and I've got kids and all the rest of it. F...ing hell what's that about, pardon my French get rid of all of them as fast as you can, but that sticks in my mind because it was, yeah I think it was the only time I've seen a female, in that sort of photograph, paedophile type photograph" (Male Sex Offender).

It is apparent that the impact of the single image of a woman abusing a child on this offender was far greater than any of the other thousands of images of abused children he had collected on his computer. This perception reflects what Hilsop (2001) suggests that the societal schema of women and femininity is inconsistent with women as sexual offenders, in so far as common sense holds women to be sexually passive by nature.

Coercion

It is therefore often assumed that women abused children as a result of being coerced or influenced by a male partner. However, as Elliott's (2004) study shows, more than three

quarters of the women and men say they had been abused by a woman acting on their own with no male intervention.

It is difficult to prove or disprove claims of coercion put forward by women, as usually it cannot be ascertained who controls the taking of indecent images and directs the acts displayed in them. As research on online sex offenders (D'Ovidio, Mitman, El-Burki, & Shumar, 2009; Martellozzo, 2011) have shown, it is emotionally and cognitively much easier to shift blame onto another person than to accept responsibility. In her study, Martellozzo (2011) found that in relation to indecent images of children, the great majority of the offenders recognised the illegality of the images but failed to understand the damage caused to the child by making, downloading, viewing and distributing them. For example, one sex offender (ID:8) explained:

"I never saw them (indecent images) in the way you are describing them to me (as abuse). To me it was just a file [...] it was an individual having sex on camera to me. I separated myself away from that". (Sex Offender N8 in Martellozzo, 2011)

"I didn't go hunting for anything in particular. I wasn't like that's the real turn to me. I will go for the title, that you know it has to be that type of girl or that age or anything, I never saw it like that I never saw the twist thing. To me it was something to add to the collection"(Sex Offender N5 in Martellozzo, 2011).

Male offenders seek to blame other factors, rather than accepting that they have a sexual interest in children. Men are not in such a strong position to claim coercion and duress, etc. as women are, due to the aforementioned common stereotypes of male sexual aggression and female passivity. However, maybe a woman's claim of having been coerced is too readily accepted without substantial proof. Many, for instance, would find it difficult to accept that anyone could be ordered, forced or coerced, to commit sexual acts against children on the direction of somebody they have never physically met. Does it fit better with common-sense views of society that women cannot commit such acts unless they are forced? A criminal justice practitioner interviewed on this topic claimed:

"It would probably be men, I would be very surprised if you have a female gang of child abusers without some male involvement because the males use the females to get the children to trust them because children are less wary of females than they are of males, it's like the Moors murders the Hindley case where Brady used Hindley to pick up the children because they trusted her, they got in the car with her and then he was able to do these evil things with the children, so that's my perspective, I don't know whether that's a police perspective, but you would usually find the man in the background when a female is involved in sexual offences against children and that's been borne out by the photographic video material that I have seen and the cases that I have dealt with or the cases I know about" (Interview with criminal prosecutor).

The statement that 'probably' a male offender is responsible for the commission of abuse is grounded in the practitioner's extensive experience in assessing and prosecuting relevant cases. This empirical grounding is evident in the last sentence of the preceding

quotation, which refers explicitly to the scant frequency of lone female offenders in cases encountered by the practitioner. Our conversation also seemed to point to certain presuppositions about violent sexual aggression as a uniquely male form of behaviour.

Nevertheless, online female offending seems to be in an embryonic stage. As argued by this practitioner:

“We’ve only just started to see them being caught for these types of offences (online offences). We’ve known they’ve participated because there’s material from the 60s and 70s of women in pornography with children but they are only now, I think, starting to come out as a result of investigations into offences on the internet. So maybe if you interviewed me again in 5 years time, I hope it’s not, it will be very sad if it is, but I fear that we will have a different landscape” (Interview with criminal prosecutor).

A recent internal study of the Metropolitan Police analysed fifteen cases of female offence in depth. Only two used the Internet to abuse or as a ‘playground’ to search for children. One of the two offenders pleaded guilty to seven offences made up of facilitating the commission of online child sex offences, making and possession of indecent images of children with the intent to distribute and attempted sex with a dog. She and her partner were also members of a number of sex websites where they would be in contact with other couples with children whom they would have allowed the couple to abuse. When interviewed after arrest she blamed her co-defendant for downloading the indecent images, for coercing her in sadomasochistic acts and photographing other sexual experiments. The same study by the Metropolitan Police found that in thirteen out of fifteen analysed cases the female offenders had been coerced by a man, typically an intimate partner. In the two cases that involved online abuse, both female offenders had been compelled by their male partners.

Offenders’ Denial

The element of denial is common among sex offenders. Denial is generally best perceived as the failure of sex offenders to accept responsibility for their offence. Levenson and Macgowan (2004) claim that, whilst denial of offending behaviour, to the offender himself and to others, is a prominent theme in all types of offending, it is a common aspect of sex offending. Schnider and Wright (2004) defines denial as “the acceptance of explanations that reduce accountability and are reinforced by distorted belief and self-deceptive thinking process”(p. 3). Generally, sex offenders tend to blame society, the circumstances of the offence, the victim for their offending behaviour (Gudjonsson, 1988) and their partners. We found that the great majority of the women in our study offended with their partners (N=12) and blamed them for coercing them, thus seeking to avoid responsibility for their actions. These findings support the seminal work of Mathews et al. (1989) who claimed that the small sample of women who participated in their study were male-coerced. These women tended to be dependent on their male partners with history of sexual or domestic abuse. Fearing abandonment, they felt compelled to obey the pressure of their partners to commit sexual offences against children, often their own.

In this study, an online female offender who was convicted of making and distributing indecent images of her own children also took very little responsibility for her actions and deflected blame wherever possible.

“He asked me would I hold my son this time and my son just had swimming trunks on because he was playing in the garden so again I was like ‘no, I don’t want to do that’ and eventually he convinced me, if I loved him, if he was going to take care of me and the kids then” (Female sex offender).

When confronted by the police with the recorded evidence found in the offender’s computer, she admitted her offence but blamed her male partner. One of the fundamental questions that the authors focused upon in analysing the interview transcripts was: to what extent can these female offenders deny their responsibility and blame their male partners? It is often assumed that if a female has sexually abused a child, she must have done it under the influence of a male partner or in collaboration with a male partner (Elliot, 2004). An important factor that may motivate female sex offenders to abuse is related to their obsessive dependency on their partners (Mathews, 1989).

This dependency is so strong that it increases women’s vulnerability to the point that they become easily manipulated by their male partners and may even be persuaded or coerced into engaging in inappropriate sexual acts against children, often their own children. Of the fifteen offenders, nine abused their own children and one abused her stepchildren. Three abused another family member. As the offences were mostly parental abuse there was little grooming behaviour displayed and victims were chosen because of the access the offenders had to them.

This research found that eleven subjects out of eighteen had long histories of poor and abusive relationships with men and yet continued to be involved with the partner. This shows the necessity to have a man in their lives, as highlighted by one offender. After several failed and abusive relationships, she had met a man on a social networking website. Their relationship grew in intensity, and he eventually persuaded her to take indecent images of herself and her children. She describes her emotional involvement with this man as follows:

“Offender: I don’t know, I suppose I wanted someone to like me, for me, you know, not all the things that supposedly was from my ex [sic] [...].

Interviewer: So how did you feel about taking those photographs?

Offender: I didn’t like it; I hated it; I did hate it.

Interviewer: Did you feel it was the only way you were going to keep in with him?

Offender: Yes, because he kept saying to me ‘I’m really falling in love with you’ – ‘if you really care about me’ – all these like inhibitors that like stop you, you say ‘no, you know, I don’t want to do this’, and he’ll say ‘there’s nothing wrong. You can send in pictures of yourself. There is nothing wrong’. So he wore me down, obviously. I was depressed, still grieving, but at that point not really realising. So, I sent a couple of pictures, yeah, fine. [...]

Interviewer: Did he make you feel good?

Offender: Yes, he did make me feel different, sort of [...].”

This pattern of dependency developed into her sending her online partner indecent images of herself and later of her children as well. It is important to note here that she never met her online partner in real life and that she actively sought to limit it to virtual interaction via online chat and social networking sites. Throughout the interview, she several times stated that she felt afraid of the increasingly forceful attempts of her partner to make her take indecent images of her children. This might seem to suggest that her online relationship was of rather tenuous nature. However, she attributed her inability to end this relationship and the resulting abuse to the fact that this relationship was virtual and therefore ‘not real’:

“Why could I stop a real-life relationship, but not an internet one? Because it is not real, so I sort of remember him being cross with me because [my son] had gone out to play, and I said ‘well, I ain’t keeping my son in if he wants to go out and play’.”

This seemingly contradictory nature of this statement is noteworthy. If she experienced her online relationship as being ‘not real’, how could her virtual partner’s anger have such a visible impact upon her and make her justify herself? It might be argued that the compelling force of her relationship resided precisely in the perception of its virtuality, providing her with a rationalisation for pursuing and disregarding her misgivings about her partner’s requests. While she was driven to end several abusive real-life relationships, her inability to do the same to a partner who had requested her to take nude images of herself and her children resulted from the fact that she had never ‘really’ met her partner, rendering her relationship, in a sense, immaterial and the harm it caused less apparent. This interpretation is quite visible in her way of describing this relationship:

“I think he’d already started asking me about the kids being with me [...] with them with clothes on but me with no clothes. I’m like ‘no, I’m not doing that, I am not doing that. Then my computer broke and I was without a computer for a few weeks anyway. I got a new computer because mine couldn’t be repaired and I couldn’t get MSN to work, so I e-mailed him, and [...] I said to him ‘sorry, my computer’s been broken’. I said ‘I am on a friend’s computer’. I didn’t want to tell him I got a new computer, so obviously part of me was thinking ‘I don’t really want to be talking to this guy, but I still am. Something was pulling me. May it was the attention he put on me. I don’t know.”

These statements suggest, first of all, that she clearly saw her relationship as being limited to the virtual space of computer-mediated interaction. She is equally clear as to the unease this interaction produces in her. However, she never states the reasons for this unease concretely, and she never accounts explicitly for the harm she caused her children by posing with them in indecent photographs. She does not consciously and clearly evaluate the seriousness of her acts beyond statements of vague unease. It might be possible to assume that she might not be aware of the harm caused by taking indecent images of children, creating a potential for their permanent storage, reproduction, and distribution. This conforms to a frequently observed pattern among male online sex

offenders, who do not view the acquisition, distribution and consumption of indecent images as harmful, in so far as they are not immediately confronted with their victims.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is vital to stress that the theoretical views that explain the motivations that lead females to commit sexual offences should not be considered as mutually exclusive; rather “females who sexually abuse children may have a host of motivations that underlie their behaviour” (Jennings, 1993, p. 224). Whilst empirical research suggests that “the majority of reported victims are women, and the majority of reported sex offenders in our society are men” (Jennings, 1993, p. 224), it should not be ignored that women do commit a small yet significant number of sexual offences. However, the literature that explains this phenomenon is new and lacks some basic information necessary for the development of research in this area. If female offenders were not incorporated in the theoretical framework that explains child sexual abuse, there would be a marginalisation not only of the female offender but also of the victims that have being subjected to female child sexual abuse. This should also be taken into account in the study and understanding of online child sexual abuse by women.

The present article is primarily intended as an initial exploration of this subject matter, drawing attention to its significance and raising a number of issues of potential significance for future research. Specifically, our preceding discussion has led us to four conclusions: First, available evidence suggests that women may be involved as offenders in online child sexual abuse, as instigators, facilitators, and participants. This conclusion emerges from both the academic literature and the empirical evidence we gathered. Given the limited nature of available evidence, it will need to be substantiated through further research. Nevertheless, our initial findings suggest that, for a range of motivations, women may actively participate in the online abuse of children, they may coerce or coax children into submitting to acts of abuse, and they may play a significant role in facilitating abuse by male offenders. While women’s involvement in those three roles has been widely documented and rehearsed in the case of real-life child sexual abuse, evidence of women’s involvement in relevant online activities is, as yet, scant. Moreover, the processes through which women come to act as participants, instigators, and facilitators of online abuse are poorly understood and under-theorised. Our findings thus highlight the significance of the issue as well as the need for substantial future research.

Second, given the gendered nature of child rearing practices, women’s advantageous access to children as common primary caregivers may provide them with a privileged base for committing online abuse. The case of the online offender discussed at length above provides some evidence in this regard. A divorced single mother of five, she had exclusive control over her children and was easily able to involve them in the production of indecent images in the private and invisible space of her home. This may render online abuse by women particularly difficult to detect, leading to uncertainty about its prevalence. Given the prevalence of male offenders found to have sexually abused children online, there is a need for further research on the extent to which women become involved in such crimes.

Third, while women may take part in online abuse in a number of different roles, coercion by male offenders might be an important element shaping their involvement. This tentative finding emerged from the quoted study by the Metropolitan Police as well as interviews with female offenders and a prominent criminal justice professional. This

raises important questions for future research: how are women compelled by others – specifically men – to engage in child sexual abuse? Conversely, what motivates women to engage in sexual acts with children on their own and without direct external compulsion? The pursuit of these questions may lead to important insights into the gendered nature of child sexual abuse and its relationship to the wider gender order of contemporary society.

In summary, online child sexual abuse by female offenders constitutes a clearly significant, but surprisingly underdeveloped field of research. The present article has attempted to draw attention to this issue and raise some questions for further empirical research and conceptual debates, in order to facilitate a better understanding of the gendered nature of online child sexual abuse.

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