

## Female Sex Offenders

ART A. O'CONNOR

Information on 19 women convicted of indecency and 62 women convicted of other sex offences was examined. Those convicted of indecency offences often had poor social skills and had a high incidence of mental illness, mental handicap and alcoholism. Two were convicted of indecent exposure, a rare offence in women. In 39 (63%) of the sex offences with individual victims, the victims were children and in 9 cases the offender was the mother or step-mother. In 25 cases the women were convicted of aiding and abetting a male offender. Of those convicted of indecent assault on persons under 16 and of gross indecency with children, 48% had a previous history of psychiatric disorder.

Sex offences are generally thought of as being committed by men against women or children. However, although rare, sex offences can also be committed by women. According to Home Office Criminal Statistics (Home Office, 1975-1984) 0.95% of all sex offences were committed by women. Table I shows a comparison of male and female sex offences over the 10-year period.

Literature on this topic is very sparse. There are a few case reports of female exhibitionists (Zavitianos, 1971; Hollender *et al*, 1977; Grob, 1985) but there are no previous systematic studies of female

sex offenders. Sarrel & Masters (1982) in their paper concerning 11 male *victims* of female sexual molestation suggest a classification of assaults into: (1) forced assault; (2) baby-sitter abuse; (3) incestuous abuse; and (4) dominant woman abuse. Their paper was mainly concerned with the victims and their subsequent problems.

Sexual offences against children are causing increasing concern to many agencies. Up to 80% of the victims are female and the commonest offence is unlawful sexual intercourse (Davidson, 1983). The victims are most commonly in the 11-15 year age group (Mzarek *et al*, 1981).

The offenders are often from within the family: 34% are parents or surrogate parents, 2% being mothers (Mzarek *et al*, 1981). The mother may be involved by giving active or passive permission either because it relieves her of sexual activity or because of fear of her husband (Davidson, 1983). The literature on incest is well reviewed by Batten (1983) and aspects of management are reviewed by various authors (Ciba Foundation, 1984).

This paper describes aspects of a group of imprisoned women convicted of sex offences.

### Legal background

Crimes of indecency are offences such as indecent behaviour, outraging public decency and indecent exposure. They are dealt with at common law. The act in general has to be lewd, grossly scandalous, outraging public decency or offensive and disgusting. The punishment is a fine or imprisonment or both. There is no limit to the sentence but it must not be inordinate.

Indecent assault is dealt with under the Sexual Offences Act 1956 (Section 14 and 15). An example could be kissing a girl without her consent and suggesting that sexual intercourse take place. Consent

TABLE I

Convictions for sex offences (excluding bigamy, abduction and prostitution) for the years 1975-1984 in England and Wales. (Source: Home Office Criminal Statistics 1975 to 1984).

	Males	Females	Females as percentage of totals
Buggery	2067	4	0.19
Attempted buggery <sup>1</sup> and indecent assault on males	6740	112	1.6
Indecent assault on females	23,640	113	0.48
Rape	3462	9	0.26
USI on girl under 13 years	978	6	0.61
USI on girl under 16 years	5223	13	0.25
Incest	1286	40	3.0
Procuration	2217	124	5.6
Indecency with children	2621	41	1.5
Totals	48,234	462	0.95

USI = unlawful sexual intercourse.

1. Offences in this section were classified as 'attempted buggery etc.' until 1977 and then as 'indecent assault on a male'.

to the act is no excuse if the victim, boy or girl, is under the age of 16. The maximum penalty on indictment for indecent assault on a man is 10 years imprisonment. The maximum penalty, if the victim is female and under 13 years of age, is 5 years imprisonment and if she is over 13 years of age the maximum penalty is 2 years imprisonment.

The Indecency with Children Act 1960 is concerned with acts of gross indecency with or towards children under 14 years of age. An example of gross indecency with a child is when a man allows a child to hold his penis and masturbate him. An example of gross indecency towards a child is when a person masturbates in front of a child. The maximum sentence on indictment is 2 years imprisonment.

Rape (Section 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956) can only be committed by a man but a woman can be found guilty of aiding and abetting rape or any other sexual offence. By the Accessories and Abettors Act 1861 a person who aids, abets, counsels or procures for the commission of an offence is liable to be tried and punished as the principal offender. The maximum sentence for rape is life imprisonment. Unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 13 years and incest with a girl under 13 years also have a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16 years (S6), sexual intercourse with a defective (S7) and procurement of a defective (S9) (male as principal) all have a maximum sentence of 2 years (Cross & Jones, 1980; The Howard League for Penal Reform, 1985).

### Method

Holloway Prison is the main female remand prison for London and South East England. Information was collected on all women committed to Holloway Prison from January 1974 to October 1985, who were convicted of sex offences. They numbered 81 in all. Prison records were examined in all cases and prison medical records in 64 cases. In 17 cases the medical records were missing. Eleven cases were examined personally by the author.

Information was obtained about basic socio-demographic items and also details of the offences and outcome in court. Where possible, information concerning past psychiatric and criminal history was obtained. Psychiatric reports, hospital and probation reports were all consulted where available.

One of the problems of a retrospective study such as this is the incompleteness of case notes. However, it would seem reasonable to document the information available as there is no substantial descriptive study of female sex offenders in the psychiatric literature.

### Results

The offenders were divided into three groups according to the legal definition of the offence:

- (1) Indecency (19 cases)
- (2) Indecent Assault and Indecency with Children (39 cases) and
- (3) Unlawful Sexual Intercourse (23 cases).

There were no individual victims in the indecency group but there were in the other two groups.

### Indecency

There were 19 cases of indecency: indecent behaviour (14 cases), outraging public decency (three cases) and indecent exposure (two cases). Their average age was 35.9 years. Thirteen were single and six were divorced or separated; nine were of no fixed abode. Five had concurrent convictions for prostitution and four for being drunk and disorderly.

Eight had previous committals to Holloway Prison for similar minor offences such as being drunk and disorderly. Psychiatric diagnoses were made in eight of the group of 19. One had chronic schizophrenia, one had recurrent hypomania, two were mentally handicapped, two were alcoholic and two were dependent on drugs. The remaining 11 had no formal psychiatric diagnosis recorded.

As would be expected, the sentences were very light. Five were sentenced to imprisonment for periods ranging from 5 to 21 days. Five received 1-year conditional discharges, one received a Probation Order, seven were fined sums under £15.00 and one was put on a Hospital Order.

#### Case 1

M. was a 46-year-old single woman. She was mentally handicapped with an IQ in the range of 46–52. She was an illegitimate child and her mother was a long-term patient in a psychiatric hospital suffering from schizophrenia. M. spent periods in hospitals for the mentally handicapped and also sleeping rough. She had previous convictions for being drunk and disorderly and one conviction for actual bodily harm. The index offence was of outraging public decency by urinating in public. She had taken some alcohol and urinated in the street. She was given a conditional discharge for 1 year. At a later date she was charged with assaulting a policewoman and urinating in public. She was dealt with under Section 37 of the Mental Health Act 1983, and admitted to a hospital for the mentally handicapped.

#### Case 2

F. was a 25-year-old single chambermaid. She had a history of recurrent hypomanic episodes. She had several hospital admissions for this but also several criminal convictions for offences such as theft (4) and breach of the peace (1). The index offence (outraging public decency) involved exposing her genitals in public and inviting passers by to commit acts of indecency with her. All the offences occurred during hypomanic episodes. These rapidly resolved with treatment while on remand and a Hospital Order was never required. She was fined £5.00 for the index offence.

#### Case 3

H. was a 21-year-old single woman. She was second in a family of five. All her family were hard working and



*Case 4*

L. was a 36-year-old woman of West Indian origin. She was separated from her husband and her four children. The index offence was of attempted gross indecency with a child under 14 years of age. She made improper suggestions to a four-year-old boy within earshot of his parents. She had a past history of schizophrenia for which she had several admissions to hospital. At the time of the index offence she had several bizarre delusions and one of them was that the child was her own. She had a previous charge of child stealing and at the time of that offence she also thought the child was her own. She was dealt with under Section 37 of the Mental Health Act.

*Case 5*

J. was a 40-year-old separated woman of West Indian origin. On three consecutive days she was arrested for outraging public decency. She called at peoples' houses and asked to use the telephone. When admitted to the house she took all her clothes off and asked to have sex with the man of the house. On the fourth day she exposed her breasts in public and held them close to a young boy who was passing with his mother. She was charged with outraging public decency and indecency to a child. She had a long history of recurrent hypomanic episodes and seemed obviously mentally ill to all concerned. However, she was committed to Crown Court for trial but was regarded as unfit to plead. The charges were withdrawn because the court was reassured that she would get psychiatric treatment under Section 3 of the Mental Health Act 1983. This was achieved by the co-operation of the Crown Court and the area psychiatrist.

*Case 6*

C. was a 23-year-old woman separated from her husband. Her marriage had been a very unhappy one because of her husband's alcoholism and his violence, including sexual violence, towards her. There was one child, a 3-year-old girl, from the marriage who lived with C. and her common-law husband. This relationship was a loving and caring one and they intended getting married. They had sex on several occasions while the 3-year-old was present and once the man allowed the child to hold his penis. He was convicted of gross indecency towards the child and she of aiding and abetting him. She was sentenced to 2 years imprisonment and he to 3 years imprisonment. She naively felt that she was educating the child by exposing her to loving sex rather than the violent variety she had experienced before. No psychiatric abnormality was found in this woman by the doctors who saw her initially nor by the author who interviewed her while she was serving her sentence.

*Case 7*

M. was a 23-year-old divorced woman. Her marriage had been very unhappy because of her husband's drinking, beatings and sexual violence towards her. She drank heavily and abused sedatives towards the end of her marriage. They had three children and they lived with her ex-husband. She never knew her real father and there was a history of sexual

abuse by her step-father over several years in her early teens. She had several previous convictions for theft. For approximately 1 year before the index offence she had been living with a man and he was planning to end the relationship. He had an 8-year-old daughter who lived with them. M. did housework for a 60-year-old man whose wife was an invalid. She had an affair with him and says that he threatened to tell her common-law husband about it if she did not agree to the sexual assaults on the 8-year-old step-daughter. The offence involved M., the 60-year-old man and the child engaging in various sexual acts and taking photographs. They were both convicted of gross indecency with the child. He was sentenced to 6 months imprisonment and she to 2 years 6 months as it was thought she was the instigator.

*Cases 8, 9 and 10*

In this case there were three female and two male co-defendants. The first two girls were aged 16 and 17 years and had a history of being in care and previous minor convictions. Both had a disrupted background with paternal alcoholism. The third girl was aged 17 and had no previous criminal background. The boys were aged 14 and 15 years and had known the girls for several months. The first two girls had been in a hostel but moved into a flat with the third girl some months previously. The victim was 16 and was known to the three girls as she stayed in the hostel. She absconded from the hostel several days prior to the offence and the girls were hiding her in their flat. On the afternoon in question the three girls, the victim and the two boys were in the flat. An argument broke out and the victim started teasing the boys, daring them to have sex with her. Everyone became angry towards the victim and took her clothes off. She was held down by the girls while the boys repeatedly rammed a candlestick up her vagina. She subsequently needed treatment for vaginal injuries. The five were convicted of causing actual bodily harm and indecent assault. They were each sentenced to four months Youth Custody. No psychiatric diagnosis was made on any of these three young women by the doctors who saw them initially nor by the author who interviewed them during the course of their sentences.

**Unlawful sexual intercourse**

There were 23 cases in this group and some details, including the outcomes, are given in Table IV. In all but two of the 23 cases the woman acted as aider and abettor of a man committing a sexual offence. The average age of the offenders was 33 years. Thirteen were married, six were divorced or separated, three single and the marital status of one was unknown. Fourteen had no previous psychiatric contact but there was no information concerning past history on seven. One woman was treated as an out-patient for depression and one had several admissions for immature personality disorder.

In 14 of the 23 cases the victims were under 16 years of age. In four cases the mother was involved in the crime, and in one, the step-mother. In one case both parents were involved and the boy and girl victims were both under 13

TABLE IV  
*Details of cases in the unlawful sexual intercourse (USI) group*

<i>Offences</i>	<i>No. of cases</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
USI	2	19, 19	3 months, Probation × 3 years
AA USI	2	42, 35	3 months, 9 months
AA rape	1	20	1 year
AA USI – victim under 16 years	8	Average 34 years	5 years, 4½ years, 2 years, 1 year (2) 3 months, suspended sentence (2)
AA USI – victim under 13 years	2	59, 29	1 year, 4 years
AA rape – victim under 16 years	2	32, 32	5 years, 4 years
AA buggery and abduction	1	21	6 months
AA incest	2	43, 36	4 years, 18 months
Unlawful administering of drug to AA USI victim under 16 years	1	39	18 months
Procure defective and AA USI	2	31, 25	9 months, 15 months
	23		

AA = aid and abet. Periods of time in the outcome column refer to sentences of imprisonment.

years of age. Some example of reasons given for the behaviour were: prostitution of a child; another woman claimed she was persuaded by her 14-year-old daughter to allow her to have sex to get money; another aided and abetted rape to punish her 14-year-old daughter for being naughty and disobedient.

#### *Case 11*

P. was a 51-year-old separated woman. She had a very unhappy marriage because of frequent violent attacks on her by her husband. They separated 10 years prior to the offence and he subsequently became a chronic psychiatric patient. She had six grown-up children and a 13-year-old daughter. For several years prior to the offence she was living with a 65-year-old man. Her 14-year-old daughter knew the man wanted to have sex with her and tried to persuade her mother to agree to this over several weeks. She said they could get money for a holiday that way. P. claimed that she agreed one evening when she was intoxicated. The girl told a visiting social worker and they were arrested. He was convicted of unlawful sexual intercourse and she of aiding and abetting him. She was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment and he to 6 months because of his age.

#### **Discussion**

Of those convicted of gross indecency with children and indecent assault on persons under 16, 48% had a psychiatric diagnosis and a history of psychiatric treatment. Little information was available on those convicted of indecent assault and one wonders if these also had a similar high incidence of psychiatric disorder. In the unlawful sexual intercourse group only two were recorded as having had previous psychiatric contact. Only one of this group was examined by the author and she was alcoholic. It is

difficult to accept the low rate of psychiatric contact that the case notes suggest in this group.

The first group of offences described were those of indecency. They were minor offences, there was no individual victim and the offences were against accepted standards of social behaviour. Most of the offenders were women with poor coping skills, often of low intelligence and frequently having associated alcohol or psychiatric problems. A large proportion were homeless people.

Two women were convicted of indecent exposure. Of the 21 215 cases of indecent exposure recorded in Home Office Criminal Statistics between 1975 and 1984 all were male. The two women in this study were charged under Section 28 Town Police Clauses Act 1847 and Section 5 Public Order Act 1936 respectively, offences which may not be recorded centrally by the Criminal Records Office. Exhibitionism has generally been thought of as an exclusively male perversion. In men psychodynamic formulations suggest that castration anxiety is relieved by exposing the penis and eliciting a response from a female victim. It is suggested that because females have no penis to lose they have no significant castration anxiety and so have no need to expose their sex organs. Hollender *et al* (1977) describe a case of female genital exhibitionism and they suggest that while male exhibitionism results from castration anxiety, in the female exhibitionism usually stops short of genital exposure and results from the need for attention. Rarely, as in their case, genital exposure may occur in women as a pregenital attention seeking manoeuvre. They comment that males usually desire an aversive response and that the activity is genital (phallic) in psychoanalytic terms.

Zavitzianos (1971) describes a case of female fetishism and exhibitionism and suggests that there is a close relationship between perversion and some psychopathic personalities. Grob (1985) describes a case of a woman whose emotional deprivation led to feelings of rejection and the inability to develop empathic relationships. Her self-esteem relied on success in her profession, and when she lost her position she sought validation through exposing her genitalia while driving alongside large trucks on the highway. The intense need for attention in this case was stressed. Case 3 in the present study has many features of exhibitionism and the need for attention, especially when under stress, was prominent. The other case of indecent exposure was a woman with a history of many convictions for minor crimes and also alcohol abuse. Her offences could not be regarded as sexually motivated.

In this study 39 (63%) of the sex offences with victims involved children and in nine of these the woman was the mother or step-mother. Of interest also is the fact that in all but two of the 23 cases in the unlawful sexual intercourse group the women were convicted of aiding and abetting a male committing the offence. Sexual gratification was never noted as a motivation for the women involved in sex offences with a victim.

### Conclusions

Sex offences are rare in females. Offences of indecency are relatively minor offences committed by women of poor social skills and with a high incidence of mental illness, mental handicap and alcoholism. While indecent exposure is a relatively common offence in men, only two women were convicted of this offence in the present study. Women who commit sex offences that have individual victims are a more heterogeneous group and of

interest is the number of offences that involve children (63%) and also mothers or step-mothers (nine cases). Of those women convicted of indecent assault on persons under 16 and gross indecency with children, 48% had a past history of psychiatric disorder. Nearly all the women in the unlawful sexual intercourse group were convicted of aiding and abetting a male rather than being the instigator themselves.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Paul d'Orban for advice and encouragement in the preparation of this paper and Anna Stafford BA for secretarial assistance. The views expressed in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Home Office.

### References

- BATTEN, D. A. (1983) Incest — a review of the literature. *Medicine, Science and the Law*, 23, 245–253.
- CIBA FOUNDATION (1984) *Sexual Abuse within the Family*. London: Tavistock.
- CROSS & JONES (1980) *Introduction to Criminal Law*, 9th ed. London: Butterworth.
- DAVIDSON, A. T. (1983) Sexual exploitation of children: a call to action. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 75, 925–927.
- GROB, C. S. (1985) Female exhibitionism. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 173, 253–256.
- HOLLENDER, M. H., BROWN, C. W. & ROBACK, H. B. (1977) Genital exhibitionism in women. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 134, 436–438.
- HOME OFFICE *Home Office Criminal Statistics 1975–1984*. London: HMSO.
- HOWARD LEAGUE FOR PENAL REFORM (1985) *Unlawful sex*. London: Waterlow.
- MRAZEK, P. B., LYNCH, M. & BENTOVIM, A. (1981) In *Sexually Abused Children and Their Families*, (eds P. B. Mrazek & C. H. Kempe). Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- SARREL, P. M. & MASTERS, W. H. (1982) Sexual molestation of men by women. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, II, 117–131.
- ZAVITZIANOS, G. (1971) Fetishism and exhibitionism in the female and their relationship to psychopathy and kleptomania. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 52, 297–305.

Art A. O'Connor, MB, BCh, MRCPsych, Senior Registrar in Forensic Psychiatry, Academic Department of Psychiatry, Royal Free Hospital, Pond Street, London NW3 2QG