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Professionals’ Perceptions of Female Child Sexual Offenders

The aims of the current study were to: (1) obtain an in-depth understanding about professionals’ perceptions of female child sexual offenders and (2) identify where system efforts should be focused to better address and acknowledge female child sexual offenders. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one with a diverse group of professionals (police officers, social workers, counsellors, case managers, child and family support workers, and a legal professional; N = 21) involved in the community response and justice sector, which allowed for unique views across diverse vantage points. Four core themes were identified through thematic analysis: (1) female child sexual offenders are a heterogeneous group, (2) negative impact of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, (3) gender of perpetrator is predominantly insignificant in case dealings, and (4) the need for a more open discourse on female child sexual offenders. Professionals in the current study acknowledged that female child sexual offenders can inflict serious and persistent negative impacts on victims and that the gender of the offender is insignificant in their individual professional dealings of child sexual abuse cases. While these findings appear to be a positive step forward, away from earlier perceptions identified in the literature, it was evident that the gender of the perpetrator may still play a significant role in some dealings across professions and among colleagues. Two areas identified by professionals as requiring system efforts were: (1) professional development along with the dissemination of appropriate research to better inform professionals and (2) the need for a more open discussion in society concerning female-perpetrated sexual abuse. The findings of the current study may assist with appropriate recognition, protection, and intervention for victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, female sex offenders, professionals, child protection, justice system

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Professionals’ Perceptions of Female Child Sexual Offenders

While the topic of child sexual abuse (CSA) has gained increasing attention over recent decades, limited research exists on female sexual offenders (ten Bensel, Gibbs, & Burkey, 2016). In fact, in the early 1970s, female child sexual offenders were considered of such extreme rarity that they were, “of little significance” (Mathis, 1972, p. 54). The limited research on female child sexual offenders may be attributable to: (1) the perceived low rate of offending in comparison with male child sexual offenders, suggesting that female-perpetrated sexual abuse is less of an issue (Hetherton, 1999) and (2) the gender roles that society holds regarding females as nurturers and caregivers (Allen, 1991; Anderson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998; Denov, 2004; Hislop, 2001; Saradjian, 2010). Female child sexual offenders are an important area of research because, contrary to popular belief, female-perpetrated sexual abuse can have far reaching impacts for its victims (Cortoni, Babchishin, & Rat, 2016). Victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse face similar traumatic effects to victims of male-perpetrated sexual abuse, including depression, suicidal ideation, rage, difficulties with identity, and substance abuse (Denov, 2004). In fact, research has found that victims sexually abused by both males and females maintained that the female-perpetrated abuse was more psychologically damaging than the male-perpetrated abuse (Denov, 2004). Further, there appears to be no significant difference in the type of abuse perpetrated between male and female child sexual offenders (Peter, 2009), with female sexual offenders capable of inflicting minor and major injuries on their victims (Budd & Bierie, 2017).

While the rate of female-perpetrated sexual abuse appears to be low, the rate differs depending on whether it is calculated from official statistics or victimization data, ranging from 1.2% (e.g., United States Department of Justice, 2002) to 58% (e.g., Fromuth, Burkhart, & Webb-Jones, 1991), respectively (for a review see Denov, 2003). In one study that involved a national survey in the United States of America (USA) of adults with a history of sexual abuse in childhood, Finkelhor, Hotaling, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith (1990) found that 17% of males and 2% of females had experienced abuse by female perpetrators. In a different study that explored a cross-national USA and Canadian sample of 121 sexually abused males who received therapy, Mendel (1995) found 60% of the sample had encountered a female perpetrator: 14% had a sole female perpetrator and 46% had both male and female perpetrators. More recently, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
found in a comprehensive claims survey that 10% of 1,880 alleged perpetrators were female (Royal Commission’s 50th public hearing, 2017). Finally, in their meta-analysis of 12 western countries, Cortoni et al. (2016) found 11.6% of sexual offenses reported in victimization surveys were committed by females in contrast with 2.2% reported to the police. Despite the inconsistency in the offending rates, female child sexual offenders appear to be far more common than they were once thought to be (Cortoni et al., 2016).

Females are perceived as the nurturers and caregivers in western society (Allen, 1991; Anderson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998; Denov, 2004; Hislop, 2001; Saradjian, 2010). As a result of these traditional gender roles, society has difficulty understanding that females are capable of committing sexual abuse (Denov, 2003). Research has explored public attitudes on female child sexual offenders. In one study, Geddes, Tyson, and McGreal (2013) randomly administered one of two short hypothetical vignettes concerning a teacher (offender) and student (victim) in a sexual relationship to a stratified sample of the public. The vignettes were identical except for the gender of the victim and offender being altered (male teacher–female student condition and female teacher–male student condition). The authors found that respondents reported significantly greater anger and demand for harsher consequences in the male teacher–female student condition in comparison with the female teacher–male student condition. Geddes et al. (2013) concluded that attributions made by both male and female respondents were consistent with traditional gender roles.

In addition to members of the public, research has explored attitudes of professionals in the field appear. While public attitudes and professionals’ attitudes toward female sexual offenders differ (Gakhal & Brown, 2011), overall, professionals appear to reflect dismissive attitudes and responses toward female child sexual offenders (e.g., Clements, Dawson, & das Nair, 2014; Denov, 2001; Finkelhor, Williams, Burns, & Kalinowski, 1988; Hetherton & Beardsall, 1998). For example, Hetherton and Beardsall (1998) explored whether social workers and police officers who advocated decisions in a child protection capacity took female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases as seriously as male-perpetrated sexual abuse cases. Participants received four hypothetical cases of CSA in which the perpetrator was either male or female and were provided with a questionnaire to advocate their decisions in response to the cases. They found that both social workers and police officers considered case
registration and imprisonment of male perpetrators more appropriate than that of female perpetrators. Hetherton and Beardsall (1998) suggested that victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse might be less likely to receive protection since professionals did not consider female-perpetrated sexual abuse as seriously as they did male-perpetrated sexual abuse.

In a different study, Denov (2001) utilized semi-structured interviews with police officers and psychiatrists regarding their perspectives of female child sexual offenders. She found that professionals viewed female suspects as less harmful than male suspects and minimized the seriousness of the report; that is, the gender of the offender was central to identifying whether the experience was abusive and harmful. Denov (2001) referred to this concept as the “culture of denial” (p. 303), in which professionals involved in the criminal justice system minimized the offending and distorted the reality of female child sexual offending into more conventional representations of women. To the author’s knowledge, this is the most recent study to have explored professionals’ perceptions of female child sexual offenders through in-depth semi-structured interviews. However, given that the role of females in society has changed over the last two decades across social, political, and economic frameworks (Fine-Davis, 2016), it is difficult to generalize these results to the present day.

In a more recent study, Mellor and Deering (2010) explored the perspectives of professionals in the field to identify whether they displayed bias across different hypothetical scenarios and decision-making when faced with female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases. The different hypothetical scenarios that involved men and women who had offended against children were distributed to psychologists, psychiatrists, and child welfare workers. Based on the questionnaire responses, all groups of professionals regarded cases involving female perpetrators as a serious issue, and as harmful and deserving of professional attention as cases involving male perpetrators; however, female perpetrators were more likely to be considered leniently in evaluation and response than male perpetrators. While Mellor and Deering’s (2010) study provides some insight that professionals’ views may be changing away from traditional gender roles of females, it draws from hypothetical vignettes. More recently, in their systematic review of thirteen peer-reviewed qualitative and quantitative studies of professionals and victims’ perspectives of female child sexual offenders, Clements et al. (2014) found professionals perceived female child sexual offenders as less harmful and less serious than male child sexual
offenders. Such perspectives were discrepant to victims’ perspectives – with recurrent themes from victims around the negative impact of the abuse (Clements et al., 2014). The current study had two aims to: (1) obtain an in-depth understanding about professionals’ perceptions of female child sexual offenders and (2) identify where system efforts should be focused to better address and acknowledge female child sexual offenders. Like Denov (2001), this study employed semi-structured interviews with professionals in the justice and community response system. The current study used a heterogeneous group of professionals, which allowed for unique perceptions across divergent vantage points. To the author’s knowledge, this is the first study on the topic to use such a heterogeneous group of professionals (police officers, social workers, counsellors, case managers, child and family support workers, and a legal professional) involved in the sector. The findings of the current study may assist with appropriate recognition, protection, and intervention for victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample comprised 21 professionals (13 females, 8 males) who delivered services in cases of CSA in one jurisdiction of Australia. The service delivery of the professionals ranged from police officers (senior management and operational), social workers, counsellors, case managers, child and family support workers, and a legal professional. Experience in their current field ranged from 1 to 33 years ($M = 11.5$ years). Most professionals had either direct or indirect contact (86%) in cases involving female-perpetrated sexual abuse. To ensure the anonymity of the professionals, and to adhere to legislation, further demographic information has not been included.

Data saturation determined the final sample size: when no novel information was emerging around the topics of inquiry, data saturation was achieved (see Sim & Wright, 2000). Invitations to participate in the study were first emailed to the head of the professionals’ organizations, and after approval, an email invitation was distributed to their employees. Those employees interested in participating in the study then contacted the author, and an interview was subsequently organized.

**Procedure**
Ethical approval was granted by the university’s Human Ethics Advisory Group, the jurisdiction’s police force, and another agency. Interview length ranged from 16 to 63 minutes ($M = 29$ minutes, $SD = 12.14$ minutes). Most interviews ($n = 14$) were conducted in-person at the professional’s workplace or a location convenient for them. All the interviews were conducted by the author.

A semi-structured protocol was utilized to elicit in-depth responses from the professionals. This approach also allowed the author to guide and structure the interview to flesh out textured accounts through further lines of inquiry (Berg & Lune, 2017). The use of open-ended questions encouraged detailed answers concerning professionals’ perceptions and minimized the risk of desirability bias.

Each interview began with demographic questions about the professional, followed by a question concerning how they perceived the public’s stereotype in relation to female child sexual offenders; this question allowed the participants to become comfortable with, and committed to, the interview process through a less sensitive and threatening question (Berg & Lune, 2017). Next, professionals discussed (1) their own perceptions regarding female child sexual offenders (e.g., demeanor, motivations, and justifications of the perpetrator); (2) their affect and communication style when dealing with (or if they were to deal with) such cases in comparison with cases involving a male perpetrator; and (3) the system efforts that could be incorporated to better address and acknowledge female child sexual offenders.

**Data Management and Analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The author immersed herself in the data, reading each transcript carefully to attain an understanding of the professionals' experiences and perceptions, and thereby develop a coding scheme. Pursuant to the principles of grounded theory, the themes were inductively derived and grounded within the data (Browne & Sullivan, 1999). The data was coded into thematic categories. For example, the thematic category “Professionals’ indifference in affect regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases” is used to describe the statement, “Emotionally, it does not really resonate anything with me, personally … we see an adult sex offender as a predator, male or female.”

**Results**
Within the data, four core themes were identified: (1) female child sexual offenders are a heterogeneous group, (2) negative impact of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, (3) gender of perpetrator is predominantly insignificant in case dealings, and (4) the need for a more open discourse on female child sexual offenders. The last two themes had several sub-themes.

**Female Child Sexual Offenders are a Heterogeneous Group**

When questioned about their own perceptions, professionals acknowledged the diversity of female child sexual offenders in terms of their backgrounds, offense motivations, and the severity and breadth of the crimes they commit. Professionals highlighted various cases they had managed that ranged from mothers masturbating while watching their children be sexually abused, right through to females inflicting sadistic abuse on children. They explained that, like male child sexual offenders, there is not “one-type” of female child sexual offender:

> My experience has been that there is just as many varieties for motivations for females to commit sex offenses as there are for males, ranging from compulsion, through to their own sexual interest, and some of the ones we have been involved with probably take on an element of sadism and torture. *(P6)*

> You see people that are married, have families, and then you also see people that are single, that are on websites, or social media trying to, obviously, groom younger people … you see a variety of different people from different aspects of life. *(P10)*

Professionals made a concerted effort to highlight that female child sexual offenders can sexually offend against children out of sexual interest and pleasure, rather than solely because of the coercion of a male partner. One professional provided the example of a female child sexual offender that she interviewed who was visibly becoming sexually aroused when disclosing the offense:

> She was aroused, that was the first thing, because she was talking about her offending, how could she not be? It is what she gets off on. I mean, it is not going to be any different to when you talk to a male sex offender about his offending and you can see them and you will watch their face, and you will watch their body language … she was exactly the same as any male sex offender. *(P5)*

In addition to females being capable of offending on their own, several professionals acknowledged female child sexual perpetrators may be the *primary* offender in male accompanied child sexual abuse. While in some instances females can offend when coerced by a partner, professionals also acknowledged that females can *purposefully* offend concomitantly with a male perpetrator. One professional believed these females may intentionally co-offend with a male so that, if
detected, the female can attempt to deny her responsibility by suggesting that she was under the duress of an “abusive” male:

Women are great manipulators which makes them, I think, such great sex offenders … What better way than to distance yourself from your own behavior than to bring somebody else into the mix, bring a male into the mix, that you can actually manipulate and then when you are caught, or if you are caught, go “do not look at me, look at him … I was manipulated by him because he is big and strong and he threatened me”… it is strategic, it is so smart, and it is so manipulative. (P5; participant’s emphasis)

Negative Impact of Female-Perpetrated Sexual Abuse

Most professionals acknowledged the negative psychological impact female child sexual offenders have on their victims. It was suggested that the impact has a variety of outcomes, for example, some victims become hyper-sexual while others become hypo-sexual; in one instance, a professional recalled a case where the victim, now an adult, had not had sexual intercourse with his wife for more than fifteen years. Professionals indicated that the abuse often has pervasive and life-long impacts on the victim and can be as psychologically damaging if not more damaging than male-perpetrated sexual abuse; particularly, when the victim’s mother perpetrated the sexual abuse, because of the deep sense of betrayal the victim feels:

When it is committed by their mother, it is beyond almost anything else that you would experience … it becomes even harder for the child to comprehend this because this is the one, the one person who should have never of harmed the child … it is this sense of betrayal, this trust, that shattering of connection, it is so profound. I have heard it from a couple of guys, the betrayal, it is almost impossible to get past. (P1; participant’s emphasis)

They will talk about it impacting on their enjoyment of sex, they will talk about having all sorts of sexual hang-ups or ruining their relationships, their marriages, and so on … they have all expressed some level of distress, quite serious distress, and life-long consequence of abuse, that has been my experience. I haven’t met anyone that said, “oh it was a good thing.” (P3)

Children that have been offended by their mothers tend to be more traumatized than anything else. That is what I have observed over the years … the impact that it has on the kids is far worse, the mental health, how they develop into the future, the impact on their attachment – all sorts of things. (P15; participant’s emphasis)

Professionals made a determined effort to acknowledge that adolescent male victims – not just young children – can also suffer serious negative impacts as a result of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, despite some members of the public misconstruing these cases as fantasy-like:
I know personally that in the most recent case the child, the … adolescent boy, is suffering significant emotional harm as a result of this. Even though at the time that child thought that the ‘relationship’ was wonderful. (P12)

When he came forward, it was very much treated like, “mate, you had sex with a hot teacher, you should be happy” and he got made fun of and quite seriously bullied … but we know working with these people that trauma affects these people exactly the same because you have been taken advantage of at a young age by an adult who should know better. (P13)

In addition to the psychological harm, one professional acknowledged the physical sexual torture female child sexual offenders can inflict upon their victims. This professional disclosed an incident in which the victim, who had been sexually abused by both males and females, found the abuse perpetrated by the females more damaging both psychologically and physically:

One of them was abused by [women’s group] … they were cruel, they stuck objects up his … Probably one of the worst cases of physical torture and trauma that I have come across … He said, “all of what I went through with [men’s group], it does not compare to what [women’s group] put me through.” And I think that was because he had a belief that he would be safe with women. (P3)

Only one professional did not perceive female child sexual offenders to be harmful to their victims. This professional indicated that the severity of sexual abuse lies in the act of penetration and, as females do not conduct the act of penetration, the abuse does less – or no – damage:

I see sexual misbehavior, women with boys, in very different terms than males with girls, because in the case of a boy, the penetration takes place by the boy. In the case of the girl, it is the penetration of the girl. I think that is where the real difference lies. (P2)

I think most practitioners would have pretty much my view on it, probably a woman does less harm than a bloke does … they are really being punished for something that probably has done no harm at all. (P2)

**Gender of Perpetrator is Predominantly Insignificant in Case Dealings**

Most professionals highlighted that the gender of the offender is insignificant in their individual dealings of CSA cases. However, they suggested that the gender of the offender can sometimes play a significant role in their dealings with other professions and even colleagues. The insignificance of gender was comprised of three sub-themes: (1) professionals’ indifference in affect regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases, (2) professionals’ indifference in communication in female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases, and (3) minimization or disbelief of female-perpetrated sexual abuse from other professions or colleagues.
Professionals’ indifference in affect regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases.

When questioned about their emotionality when managing cases involving female-perpetrated sexual abuse, most professionals indicated that they did not feel emotionally different compared with managing cases of male-perpetrated CSA. For the few participants who had not had direct or indirect experience with female child sexual offenders, they indicated that they did not believe they would feel emotionally different if faced with a case involving a female perpetrator. Participants emphasized that the gender of the offender is irrelevant since the abuse of a child, perpetrated by a male or female, is a crime:

We have several female child sex offenders in our district … it does not matter who the person is, if you are inappropriately dealing with the child or you are breaking a trust, then it does not matter if you are male or female. (P8)

At the bottom, it is a betrayal of trust, so I do not feel differently about the perpetrator. I want them to be held accountable if that is what the person [victim] wants … to take advantage of a child is the same, whether you are male or female, it is still a breach of human rights. (P3)

One professional indicated that although she might appear to be more empathetic in some instances involving female perpetrators, she does this strategically to elicit more information during the interview:

To them, I might look like I am being a little more empathetic with them than I would be with the male but that is just because I am playing to what they want to play, and if you are going to tell me something because I play to that, then go for your life! (P5)

Some professionals did acknowledge that they experienced a sense of curiosity, and even surprise, when they came across cases involving female perpetrators. They suggested the reason for their curiosity was due to the infrequent nature of cases involving female perpetrators in comparison with the amount of cases involving male perpetrators that they come across. Several professionals suggested that they are often inquisitive to know more about the case:

I guess there is a certain curiosity about the incident and the circumstances surrounding it because it is not a usual thing. (P8)

It is intriguing. I know when we do get jobs like that, it sparks an interest, because it is less common. (P12)

Regarding surprise, some professionals acknowledged that they have felt caught off-guard at some points in their dealings of female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases. Professionals explained that in these instances, they had to make additional efforts not to appear surprised when conversing with offenders about the topic:
I was doing my job, you just get a little bit robot-mode, but during the interview I was shocked at one of the answers when we were talking about the offenses where she was present whilst watching her child… get offended against and I asked her, “what were you doing at that stage when you were watching your daughter?” and she said, “well I was masturbating,” and I can remember my reaction was, “oh I was not expecting that!” It threw me. (P9)

Professionals’ indifference in communication in female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases.

Professionals indicated that the gender of the perpetrator did not play a role in how they communicated with female perpetrators (or their victims) in comparison with male perpetrators (or victims perpetrated by males). For the few participants who did not have direct or indirect experience with cases involving female child sexual offenders, they believed that they would not alter their communication based on the perpetrator’s gender. Overall, professionals explained that they tailored their communication style to the perpetrator (or victim) on a case-by-case basis, adapting it to the individual, rather than to the gender of the individual. Many professionals reiterated that female perpetrators, like male perpetrators, are a heterogeneous group, and each incident has many contextual factors; therefore, a blanket approach in communicating dependent on gender is impractical:

I try and tailor my communication style to the suspect so, you know, I try and figure out what this person is going to respond to, to elicit the disclosures, the admissions … It is probably not so much that “a woman is spoken to this way and a man is spoken to that way,” it is, “this person, at this point of time, who is acting this way, is spoken to this way.” (P6; participant’s emphasis)

It would be more around engaging with them at a level that I felt that I was able to draw that information and I wouldn’t do that purely from a gendered perspective because some women can be more aggressive than what men can be in their presentations … So it really would depend upon the personality type, the circumstance, how I felt that I needed to engage with that client to be able to draw that information. (P19; participant’s emphasis)

Minimization or disbelief of female-perpetrated sexual abuse from other professions or colleagues. Some professionals highlighted the frustration they had experienced because of setbacks from other professions and even colleagues in cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Regarding other professions, they suggested that some other professional groups perceive sexual abuse perpetrated by a female to be less severe than sexual abuse perpetrated by a male. They argued that such professionals took an inconsistent approach when dealing with cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse (versus male-perpetrated sexual abuse) because of the gender of the perpetrator:
There is a case that is floating around here at the moment where [Two Organizations] have not believed it. They have even specifically said that there is less they can do because “the offender was a woman” and “because she was a mother.” They just seem to have a very poor understanding that women can actually offend. All the things that they said, if it was a man, they would have jumped on it. (P15; participant’s emphasis)

She [the mother] is a repeat offender, she has done this for a number of years, and she does not show any remorse, she has no will to change … I have heard a [Anonymous Organization Employee] say that, basically that, “she can’t be a sex offender.” So the conversation went along the lines between myself, my colleague, and [Anonymous Organization Employee], “if this conversation was about a father to a young boy or to a young girl, would we even be needing to have this conversation?” The answer was “no.” That is the mindset of some of the Anonymous Organization Employees that we have worked with. (P13; participant’s emphasis)

In addition to the frustration encountered when dealing with other professional groups, some professionals highlighted that they had even experienced criticism or dispute over cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse from their own colleagues who have minimized such cases:

It was probably one of the toughest cases that I have dealt with and complex for a number of reasons … I had a lot of kickback. I don’t know if that is the right word, from people just within my own office … it was full-on, like it consumed so much of my time but it was worth it, you know, it is all worth it in the end but that was, it was very trying professionally and personally because I was being criticized about my decision-making. (P18; participant’s emphasis)

Even take a look at a bunch of [Organisation 1] who have not dealt with them before, or the reports that come through in relation to kind of stuff like that and you think “maybe or maybe not” and they go “oh no it couldn’t be” … If you talk to my colleagues, if you talk about that, they will go, “oh geez, why would you worry about that! I thought that was every male school boys dream, wasn’t it?” Well no, it is not actually. (P5)

In one instance, an individual reflected that the topic of female child sexual offenders had never been discussed among their colleagues, despite their organization having overseen cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse:

Even though I work with other [Anonymous Position] doing the exact kind of work, we never talk about this, this does not get talked about. So, I think, even that, like, you are the first person I’ve ever talked to about this. Don’t you think that is weird? (P16; participant’s emphasis)

The Need for a More Open Discourse on Female Child Sexual Offenders

When discussing the topic of system changes that are required, two sub-themes emerged: (1) the need for professional development on the topic and (2) overcoming stereotypes in the public through a more open discourse.
The need for professional development on the topic. Several professionals suggested that currently there is no, or minimal, training and professional development available concerning working with cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Professionals argued that if they were to receive training and were provided with relevant research, they would feel better informed and more confident in their decision-making when managing such cases:

It would be great to have specific training around female child sex offenders and bringing that more into the training we currently have, I think, because it really does focus more on male perpetrators ... I think if we had more information we could feel more confident in our decision making. (P18: participant’s emphasis)

There are probably opportunities for this to be included in some professional development training ... it is not really something that you ever come across in training that is available or information that gets disseminated through our networks, you will get information on almost every kind of topic related to psychology and therapy, but there is nothing ever really about female offenders. (P16: participant’s emphasis)

It was noted that a by-product of professional development and the dissemination of research on female child sexual offenders would be greater saliency of the topic, both within and across organizations in the sector. Professionals suggested that greater saliency and understanding of the topic would allow for more transparent and consistent dealings in turn, potentially resulting in greater detection, protection, and intervention in cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse.

Overcoming stereotypes in the public through a more open discourse. Most professionals acknowledged that the public do not consider females capable of sexually abusing children. Many proposed that the reason for the public’s stereotype regarding female child sexual offenders is that common thought is hindered by gender roles, with females being perceived as the nurturers and carers in society. Professionals often compared the invisibility of female child sexual offenders in the public’s eyes to the entrenched stereotype of the predatory male child sexual offender:

It is beyond their comprehension ... They cannot imagine that a woman would do these things, they cannot imagine that a mother would do these things to their own children and, because they cannot imagine it, “it can’t possibly have happened.” (P6)

They don’t believe a female can be a sex offender because they do not have a penis. (P13)

A few professionals acknowledged that while a lack of understanding in the public exists – that females can sexually offend against children – they suggested that some members of the public might perceive
female child sexual offenders in a fantasy-like and glorified situation; for example, the stereotype of the male teenager in a “willing” relationship with an older woman. They suggested that these perceptions held by some individuals would be misconstrued as less severe through the embellishment of fantasy:

There is not really a [female] stereotype except the one that they probably see the most and that is the female teacher. You can see it in popular culture as well, “American Pie,” the older woman … which is different to the experience having worked with guys who have been victimized. (P3)

Professionals explained that while the belief in society continues – that all child sexual offenders are male – the topic of female child sexual offenders will remain invisible. They suggested the invisibility of the topic in society will continue to prevent victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse from disclosing to trusted adults and reporting the abuse to authorities if victims think that they do not fit the stereotype. In addition to female perpetrators avoiding consequences, professionals highlighted that victims forgo the emotional support and intervention they may require:

If the predominant conversation, publicly, is a certain stereotype, then you do not create the pathway to these kinds of conversations, so these guys are not going to come forward … If all they are talking about are these “bad men” … If that is your simple default/binary, then it becomes very difficult for those other people to speak out when they are not fitting with that stereotype. (P1)

They are very reluctant to go forward, “I don’t want to think about it again” … It is not visible publicly, which means that the guys who have experienced the abuse from females see themselves as more of a freak and more isolated because there is not a public discussion around this. (P1)

Professionals highlighted the importance of a more open discourse in society: that child sexual offending is not limited to male perpetrators. However, some indicated that there would be great difficulty because the conversation will need to challenge ingrained gender roles in society regarding females – that is, females are the nurturers and carers in society and therefore cannot sexually offend against children:

You would basically have to go back to changing societal stereotypes and that is never going to happen, it is just not. Women have children, they are the bearers of children, they are the protectors, and you cannot change that stereotype. (P5)

If we cannot debate publicly gay marriage, how are we going to discuss openly the fact that women might commit sex offences. (P6; participant’s emphasis)
While professionals positively acknowledged the educational programs that are currently delivered to students in schools across the jurisdiction, it was suggested that the media appeared to be the only tool powerful enough to promote discourse to society at large:

The media is a powerful thing. If it was acknowledged in a public way that it is just as serious, that might be one way to start to change the public perception. (P8)

The only way I think that it is ever going to really change is when people look at them a little bit differently, as if, say, the media gets involved in it and the media just give it to them. That is about the only other time when people jump on board and go “ok well look maybe what she did is really bad”. (P5)

Obviously, the media is a wonderful creature for getting through information, you know, whether it be posters saying, you know, “it is not always him,” even radio discussions … I would see the media as being the most prominent way of getting that across. (P20)

Rather than directly target and challenge traditional gender roles, several professionals suggested that to address the topic of sexual abuse successfully through the media would mean doing so without a gendered lens; in turn, this would open up the conversation about how there is not “one type” of offender but a diversity of offenders:

Bringing awareness to it would be along the same lines of what we have done with mental illness, in that mental illness does not have a face, like, no one looks like they have depression, no one looks like they are a sex offender, a sex offender can be anyone. (P13; participant’s emphasis)

What we know about abuse is that it is a complex story and so, in a sense, what you want is more of the complexities getting out there, you know, moving from a nuanced discussion to more where you understand the diversity of offending behavior, the diversity of those people committing offences, the diversity of the victims as well. (P1; participant’s emphasis)

The importance of adopting a non-gendered lens as part of a larger discussion in society was highlighted. Professionals suggested that open discourse may allow victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse to feel more comfortable disclosing and reporting the abuse. Also, this awareness of the topic may prevent members of the public from making unsafe assumptions when faced with cases involving female perpetrators:

A child could be displaying the indicators of sexual abuse and unbeknown to let’s say a guidance officer at a school, that guidance officer could be saying, “have you let mummy know about this? Does mummy know this? Have you told mummy when you feel unsafe?” and then maybe that guidance officer may bring that mum into the school and then it is an instantaneous thing that we are suspecting that it is mum’s new partner or it could be dad, or it could be an uncle. As opposed to being open,
transparent, and speaking to that child about a parent rather than stereotyping the woman to be the prime protective factor. (P19; participant’s emphasis)

Discussion

The current study had two aims to: (1) obtain an in-depth understanding of professionals’ perceptions of female child sexual offenders and (2) identify where system efforts should be focused to better address and acknowledge female child sexual offenders. In contrast to the earlier research that found professionals to hold dismissive attitudes of these offenders (e.g., Clements et al., 2014; Denov, 2001; Finkelhor et al., 1988; Hetherton & Beardsall, 1998), most professionals in the current study acknowledged the harm and severity of female-perpetrated sexual abuse and identified the gender of the perpetrator as being irrelevant in their individual dealings of CSA cases. Four themes emerged in the current study: female child sexual offenders are a heterogeneous group; negative impact of female-perpetrated sexual abuse; gender of perpetrator is predominantly insignificant in case dealings; and the need for a more open discourse on female child sexual offenders.

Professionals identified that, like male child sexual offenders, female child sexual offenders are a heterogeneous group; female perpetrators commit a breadth of sexually abusive behaviors and have diverse motivations and backgrounds. This view is in line with previous literature that has reviewed samples of female sexual offenders and found the population to be very heterogeneous in nature (e.g., Almond, McManus, Giles, & Houston, 2017; Ferguson & Meehan, 2006; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006). Despite traditional sexual scripts that suggest females are harmless and sexually passive (Denov, 2003), professionals made a rigorous effort to acknowledge that females do not solely engage in sexual abuse as a submissive co-offender. They suggested that females can purposefully engage in sexual activity (including sadism and torture) out of opportunity or sexual interest. This finding is consistent with previous research on samples of female child sexual offenders demonstrating that females can have sexual fantasies about children and be sexually aroused by them (e.g., Beech, Parrett, Ward, & Fisher, 2009; Tardif, Auclair, Jacob, & Carbonpier, 2005).

Regarding the negative impact of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, professionals acknowledged the persistent and life-long impact female-perpetrated sexual abuse can have on the victim. Comparisons between professionals in the current study and professionals in Denov’s (2001) study,
indicate that there has been a shift in how professionals perceive the impact of the abuse. In Denov’s (2001) study, professionals perceived the abuse as benign and harmless whereas in the current study, professionals considered the abuse as harmful. In fact, in the current study, many professionals believed that female-perpetrated sexual abuse was just as psychologically damaging as male-perpetrated sexual abuse. This finding is in line with Denov (2004), who found that victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse faced similar (if not worse) traumatic effects in comparison with victims of male-perpetrated sexual abuse. Professionals in the current study acknowledged that even in instances where adolescent children believed that they were “willingly” taking part in sexual activity, these children endured negative psychological impacts. Among many factors, these victims experienced a deep sense of betrayal (particularly when the perpetrator was the victim’s mother); although, one professional did not perceive offences perpetrated by female child sexual offenders to be as harmful as offences committed by male child sexual offenders.

The insignificance of gender had three sub-themes: professionals’ indifference in affect regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases; professionals’ indifference in communication in female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases; and perceived minimization or disbelief of female-perpetrated sexual abuse from other professions or colleagues. In terms of affect, aside from surprise, professionals noted that they do not experience (or did not believe they would experience) any differences in their emotionality when faced (or if faced) with cases involving female perpetrators in comparison with cases involving male perpetrators. They suggested a reason for this might be that they are desensitized to their job and that it relates to the abuse of a child being serious irrespective of the perpetrator’s gender. This finding contrasts with Denov (2001), who found professionals to hold a sympathetic and exonerative tone toward female sexual offenders. As for communication, professionals explained that their style of communication with the perpetrator (or victim) was not dependent (or did not believe that it would be dependent) on the gender of the perpetrator. Instead, professionals suggested that they took a tailored approach in which they adapted their communication on a case-by-case basis.

While these findings appear to more positively contrast with earlier perceptions (e.g., Clements et al., 2014; Denov, 2001; Finkelhor et al., 1988; Hetherton & Beardsall, 1998), some professionals highlighted the frustration they had felt when female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases had been
minimized or disbelieved by other professions and even colleagues; professionals had witnessed incidences in which an inconsistent approach had been taken when managing cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse (in comparison with male-perpetrated sexual abuse) purely because of the gender of the offender. Others described experiences where they had felt their colleagues had criticized them, minimized, or disbelieved the incidents. In Mellor and Deering’s (2010) study, while professionals regarded cases involving female perpetrators as harmful and serious, responses in their study indicated female perpetrators were more likely to be considered leniently in response and evaluation than male perpetrators. Comparisons between Mellor and Deering’s (2010) study and the current study indicate that while there are positive advancements, away from earlier perceptions, the gender of the perpetrator may still play a significant role across professions and with colleagues. Such downplay or inconsistency could have negative impacts, including the exoneration of the perpetrator, an impact on sentencing patterns, and the depreciation of harm inflicted on the victim (Denov, 2001). In fact, research has found that harmful effects of abuse experienced by victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse were intensified when their experiences were dismissed and minimized by professionals, with some victims reporting professional re-victimization (Denov, 2003).

When questioned about system improvements, two sub-themes emerged: (1) the need for professional development on the topic and (2) overcoming stereotypes in the public through a more open discourse. Regarding professional development, professionals explained that if they were better informed about female child sexual offending, they would feel more confident in their decision-making when dealing with such cases. They also suggested that professional development, along with the dissemination of research on the topic, would likely result in greater saliency and recognition of the topic across agencies; potentially reducing the likelihood of inconsistent approaches and minimization or disbelief occurring in cases of female-perpetrated abuse. These findings are in line with a recent report commissioned and funded by the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse which highlighted that to be child-safe, institutions need to understand the dynamics and effects of child sexual abuse in order to recognize and respond effectively (Saunders & McArthur, 2017).
One idea for professional development initiatives is to build in an additional component of training at various agencies on female child sexual offenders. This training would be research-driven and delivered by a team of experts to increase saliency and understanding of the topic. The training could also include education around the dangers of dismissive professional responses to disclosures (Denov, 2003). Positive professional responses are key: research has demonstrated that professionals who held non-judgmental attitudes and displayed sensitivity toward the victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse they encountered, augmented the healing of those victims (Denov, 2003). Such positive professional responses may also, overtime, have a flow-on effect of increased disclosures of female-perpetrated sexual abuse to authorities. Agencies could also receive notifications about research on the topic; this research could be disseminated to employees or could be integrated into discussions at agency meetings.

Another area where professionals suggested efforts need to be focused is on overcoming stereotypes in the public through a more open discourse. Professionals acknowledged the invisibility of the topic and the potential negative consequences for victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. This finding is consistent with research that has found female-perpetrated sexual abuse adds layers of difficulty to the victim’s disclosure process, since the victim is often fearful of not being believed because of the taboo nature of the abuse (Denov, 2003). In fact, research has found that victims who had been sexually abused by both males and females found the disclosure of the female-perpetrated sexual abuse was more difficult (Denov, 2003). In addition to assisting with victim disclosure, overcoming stereotypes through a more open discourse may assist with better identification of the abuse by both professionals and the public.

While professionals highlighted the need for greater discussion in society – that sexual abuse is not limited to male offenders – it was acknowledged that there would be difficulty promoting this because of entrenched societal perceptions around gender roles. It is important to note, while there appears to be a positive advancement in professionals’ perceptions, this does not equate to an advancement in public perceptions. In particular, when drawing from Gakhal and Brown’s (2011) study that investigated attitudes toward female sexual offenders across a public sample, student sample, and forensic professional sample, the forensic professional sample held significantly more positive attitudes
toward female sexual offenders. Many professionals in the current study suggested that the most powerful way to assist with the recognition of female-perpetrated sexual abuse was the utilization of the media as an influential and strong tool; in fact, the media has the ability to shape public beliefs, values, and myths, as well as stimulate or impasse policies (Berkeley Media Studies Group 2003). While there have been recent positive advancements on the reporting of female child sexual offender cases in the print media, away from undertones of romanticisation and sympathy (Christensen, 2017), professionals offered the suggestion of an educative media campaign through a non-gendered lens: that a person can perpetrate sexual abuse. Community media campaigns work as a form of primary prevention by raising awareness about a topic at a universal level rather than just at a secondary or tertiary level (Saunders & McArthur, 2017). The need for broader primary prevention campaigns at the universal level has previously been suggested; with the aim of altering the social conditions that justify or excuse child sexual abuse (Saunders & McArthur, 2017). Such a campaign could raise awareness for both the general public and service providers, as well as act as a deterrent to potential perpetrators of all genders.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The current study is not without limitations. The primary limitation of the study was the sample size and therefore the findings from the current study cannot be generalized to the wider population, particularly outside of Australia. For example, professionals in other countries may have to follow distinctively different protocols when investigating cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse and such protocols may influence their attitudes toward female perpetrators. However, qualitative research is focused on gaining rich and textured data, rather than on generalizing across the larger population (Berg & Lune, 2017). While a quantitative study using administrative data that compared responses and case outcomes across male- and female-perpetrated sexual abuse cases would have also involved a small sample, one idea for future research would be to triangulate several sources to enrich understanding of the topic. A second limitation is that the professionals’ social desirability response bias may have affected their responses. Although anonymous surveys might have reduced the risk of desirability bias, the same level of depth and textured accounts would not have been achieved. Further, the author used open-ended questioning, a non-judgmental approach, and assured participants of their anonymity, in
order to mitigate the risk. Finally, the representativeness of the study may be impacted by self-selection bias. Most participants in the study had direct or indirect contact in cases involving female child sexual offenders which may have incited their interest to participate in the study. Response rates permitting, future research could compare the perceptions of professionals who have had exposure to cases of female-perpetrated sexual abuse to the perceptions of professionals who have not had exposure to such cases.

**Conclusion**

The current study has increased the breadth of knowledge about professionals’ perceptions of female child sexual offenders. Professionals in the current study acknowledged that female child sexual offenders are a diverse group of offenders who can inflict serious and persistent negative impacts on victims. Most professionals highlighted that the gender of the offender is insignificant in their individual dealings of CSA cases. While these findings *appear* to be a positive step forward, away from earlier perceptions, it was evident that gender of the offender may still play a significant role across professions and with colleagues. Professionals identified two areas where system efforts should be focused: (1) professional development along with the dissemination of appropriate research to better inform professionals and (2) a more open discussion in society concerning female-perpetrated sexual abuse.
References


Footnotes


2. Indirect contact included participants who had colleagues that had direct contact in such cases.

3. To ensure the anonymity of this organization, further information has not been provided.

4. Seven interviews were conducted over the telephone because of the location or for the convenience of the professional.

5. Female child sexual offenders included cases in which a female: had been convicted; OR had made admissions to the sexual abuse; OR had been charged; OR there was solid evidence of alleged sexual abuse. Because of the extremely low conviction rate of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, the definition that child sexual abuse offenders are those who have been charged and convicted was impractical for the purposes of this study.

6. Minor editing applied to facilitate clarity.

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