



**ITALIAN MEDIA'S REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE SEX  
OFFENDERS  
2008-2014: AN ANALYSIS**

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## Declaration

This thesis is the candidate's own work and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

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# Chapter 1: An Introduction to Female Sex Offenders

This first chapter will express the aims and importance of this dissertation as well as presenting to the reader an introductory knowledge about female sex offenders.

## *Topic of dissertation*

The presented research will analyze the Italian media's perception and representation of the category of female sex offenders – FSOs – between 2008 and 2014. Indeed, although researches and studies aiming at the understanding of this group of criminals have been slowly increasing in the last few years, the academic knowledge on FSOs still remains in its early stages causing, unfortunately, a limited understanding on the public level (Elliott and Bailey, 2014). Additionally, literature seems to focus on the Anglo-Saxon perception of FSOs and very little research has been done with regards to countries like Italy. Indeed, the Italian country rarely appears in statistics, papers or researches on such topic determining a worrying, and very likely misleading, ignorance.

## *Rationale and aims*

The research rationale and aims see the Italian media – particularly newspapers – as the principal subjects in need of deep evaluation for they are one of the major sources of information for the wider population. The leading inputs throughout the whole research will be trying to gain a better insight on what the Italian media's perception of FSOs is and the extents to which they depict this particular group of offenders. It is important to stress the notion that the Italian society presents considerable traits of machoism and patriarchy (Rodotà, 2009) which may lead media to biasedly represent FSOs.

## *Female sex offenders: a heterogeneous group*

As it has been previously mentioned, western societies have reduced knowledge about the characteristics and peculiarities of women who sexually offend (CSOM, 2007). Indeed, academic research is still in its infancy due to the fact that studies have been conducted either onto small samples (Vandiver and Kercher, 2004) or too homogeneous ones (CSOM, 2007). Despite these limitations, similarly to male sex offenders, the female's group can be described as a heterogeneous one: each criminal woman presents numerous and different characteristics, from the psychological to the social level. Indeed, sexually offending women may present histories of victimization during childhood – whether these may be on the mental, sexual or physical level; histories of domestic violence or violent intimate relationships or even parental inconsistent behaviour (Grayston and De Luca, 1999). Some women may suffer from mental issues or depression, personality disorders or PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder – cognitive impairments, low self-esteem or low self-development (CSOM, 2007; Grayston and the Luca 1999). Certain women may fall into alcohol or drug addictions; some may present a given level of cognisance with regards to deviant sexual arousal and some could actually perceive the damages they inflict onto their victims. The socio-economic strata vary as well as their level of education; their age goes from early teens up to late seventies and, additionally, they could be driven by feelings of power, love, rejection, jealousy, anger or loneliness (Grayston and De Luca, 1999).

No woman is like another, and all present personal characteristics. When trying to assess distinguishable traits of this particular offending behaviour it is important to keep in mind the role that *risk* and *resilience factors* play in every individual's life. It is particularly significant to remember that the heterogeneity of FSOs' group is given by multiple factors:

some women may have lived through particularly adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and developed certain risk and/or resilience factors certainly different from sexually victimized (SV) adult women (Ports, Ford and Merrick, 2016).

As such, several typologies of FSOs have been developed by various scholars who tried to organize an apparently chaotic group of criminals. Basing themselves on motive, sexual orientation, type of victim and modus operandi, Sarrel and Masters (1982), Wolfe (1985), Mathews et al. (1989), Mayer (1992) and Syed and Williams (1996), developed a great number of subcategories and levels of analysis in the attempt to efficiently assess FSOs. The following table (Table 1) will show these subdivisions.

Table 1. Typologies of FSOs developed throughout the years

<b>Author/s (year)</b>	<b>Published Work</b>	<b>Subdivisions</b>
Sarrel and Masters (1982)	'Sexual molestation of men by women', <i>Archives of Sexual Behavior</i> , 11 (2), pp. 117 – 131	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baby-sitter abuse</li> <li>• Forced assault</li> <li>• Incestuous abuse</li> <li>• Dominant woman abuse</li> </ul>
Wolfe (1985)	'Twelve female sexual offenders. Next steps in research on the assessment and treatment of sexually aggressive persons (paraphiliacs)', St. Louis: MO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcontrolled</li> <li>• Normal criminal</li> <li>• Neurotic</li> <li>• Psychopathic</li> </ul>
Mathews et al. (1989)	<i>Female sexual offenders: An exploratory study</i> . Vermont: Safer Society Press	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predisposed molester</li> <li>• Male-coerced molester</li> <li>• Teacher-lover</li> <li>• Experimental/Exploiter</li> <li>• Psychologically disturbed</li> </ul>
Mayer (1992)	<i>Women sex offenders</i> . Florida: Learning Publications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female rapist</li> <li>• Female sexual harasser</li> <li>• Homosexual</li> <li>• Triads</li> </ul>
Syed and Williams (1996)	<i>Case studies of females sex offenders in the Correctional Service of Canada</i> . Ottawa, Canada: Correctional Service Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Male-accompanied (non familial)</li> <li>• Male-accompanied (familial)</li> <li>• Angry-impulsive</li> </ul>

### *Conclusions*

Table 1 shows how, given the heterogeneity of FSOs, it is important to note that there is no one single method which can be used to comprehensively depict this specific cohort of offenders (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2007). Maintaining this as the underlying statement, the following chapters will lead the reader to a critical understanding of the role that mass media have in our societies and the socio-political implications that arise from biased and partially contextualized reports. In conclusion, the research will focus on the Italian media's way of depicting FSOs and deeply analyze the findings in light of the literature review.

## Chapter 2: Social, Legal and judicial Perceptions of Female Sex Offenders

The following chapter will analyze the phenomenon of sex offending and how the social, legal and judicial perceptions change accordingly to the biological sex of the offender. Particularly, an examination on female sex offenders – FSOs – will be carried out.

### *Sex offending: a “males’ business”?*

The phenomenon of sex offending has always been traced back to a rather masculine form of misbehavior (Grayston and De Luca, 1999). Indeed, official governmental reports seem to validate the hypothesis that sex offending is largely a male perpetrated crime which, over the past few decades, has caused an increment in academic research and literature (Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010). Therefore, the increased scholar awareness regarding male sex offenders acted as a catalyst for the development, enactment and improvement of state policies together with treatment and management programs (CSOM, 2007).

However, in order to fully understand the characteristics regarding the social perception on such offenders, it is important to recognize such phenomenon in its entirety. Indeed, research – and more importantly, societies at large – should accomplish the arduous task of accepting that male sex offenders represent only a part of the equation. It should be recognized that women can present the same proneness of men to become criminals; this implying the same responsibilities, rights and duties of male offenders.

Although recently western societies increasingly acknowledged the presence of this particular type of crime amongst the female population and began to study this phenomenon, it has been stated that “research and literature [...] remains in its infancy, and there is no evidence-based guidance or other consensus about the most effective approaches to working with them” (CSOM, 2007, p. 1). Indeed, the little amount of knowledge regarding FSOs determines an erroneous consideration, conceptualization and judgment both on the legal and social level (Elliott and Bailey, 2014).

The reasons as to why the category of females engaging in sexual offences is widely overlooked by scholars, state agencies, societies at large and the media (Javaid, 2014a) are many.

### *Data representation: a small proportion*

Firstly, when compared to that of males, the category of female sex offenders represents only a small proportion of individuals that engage in this particular criminal behavior. International data show that women are responsible for about 4% to 5% of all sexual offences (Elliott and Bailey, 2014). Thus, for too long the assumption that saw FSOs as unworthy of attention – and hence of academic research – has been one of the principal agents compromising investigations and studies (Mathis 1972; Finkelhor, 1984). Investigating international figures, Cortoni and Hanson (2005) analyzed official reports and victimization surveys determining important findings.

Table 2. FSOs officially reported

<b>Country, year</b>	<b>N total officially reported crime</b>	<b>N female reported perpetrator</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Canada, 2002	27,094	813	3.0%
U.S.A., 2002	87,995	5,877	4.9%
England and Wales, 2003	5,700	100	1.8%
Australia, 2004	1,394	107	7.9%
New Zealand, 2001	1,078	6	0.6%

Table 3. FSOs in victimization surveys

<b>Country, year</b>	<b>N surveys</b>	<b>N sexual offences</b>	<b>N female perpetrated crime</b>	<b>Percentage (N female/N sexual offences)</b>
Canada, 1983	2,008	845	24	2.8%
U.S.A., 2002	76,050	96	4	4.2%
Australia, 2002	41,200	206	14	7.0%
New Zealand, 2001	5,147	65	2	3.1%

Table 2 shows how, based on police, prisons and courts reports, the proportion of women committing sexual offences is represented by an average of 3.5% of all reported sexual offenders. Differently, Table 3 determines that the average proportion of female sex offenders based on victimization surveys is equal to 4.3% (Cortoni and Hanson, 2005).

Additional information has been given by Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks (2010) who examined the percentage of adult females responsible for hands-on sex crimes determining an average of 1% in the Netherlands. In the United States, Finkelhor, Ormrod and Chaffin (2009) asserted that females are responsible for 7.3% of all juvenile sex crime cases and that 5.4% female adults commit this type of crime against minors. Furthermore, Cortoni, Hanson and Coache (2010) – drawing from Pereda et al. recent analysis in 2009 – revealed that at least 1.4% of all child victims have been sexually abused by a female perpetrator.

Considering statistical data, it is important to remember that each country is defined by different legislations and social awareness on this phenomenon. Hence, a more recent study analyzed information based on 17 samples from 12 countries – between 2000 and 2013 – and determined that females were responsible for 2% of officially reported sexual crimes and, surprisingly, 12% in victimization surveys (Cortoni, Babchishin and Rat, 2017). From these figures it has been asserted that, although percentages show to be slightly different from previous studies – raising questions about the dark figures of crime – data confirm that an increased social recognition of such phenomenon is taking place (Cortoni, Babchishin and Rat, 2017) and that these analysis represent a valid starting point enabling research (Cortoni, Hanson and Coache, 2010).

### *Disclosure issues: under-recognition and false beliefs*

The difficulty in detecting such offences can be considered as the second actor affecting recognition (Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010). Indeed, the crime is almost untraceable despite the victim's age or sex. In cases involving minors (consider child abuse for example), because perpetrator and victims generally know each other, inappropriate sexual contacts and behaviors might be concealed through intimate and daily caring practices – such as bathing, dressing or changing diapers (Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010; Groth and Birnbaum, 1979). Lewis and Stanley (2000) affirm that the under-reporting of cases involving child abuse is, unfortunately, due to the lack of recognition by the victim of the inappropriateness of the behavior that the adult is enacting.

When sexual assault cases against adults are taken into account, instead, a more in-depth analysis is required. Indeed, regardless of the victim's biological sex, it has been stated that the reluctance with which individuals approach and engage with authority figures when reporting such crime heavily affects statistical data (Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010). Firstly, the social belief for which women do not act *that way* results in the assumption that officials would be less incline to believe the offended party (CSOM, 2007; Javaid, 2014a). Victims' reluctance has its roots in mistaken socio-cultural stereotypes for which women are seen as naturally innocent, nurturing, caring and non-aggressive individuals (CSOM, 2007; Gilbert, 2002). Denov (2004) too, asserts that due to the gender-role assumption for which women are sexually passive and submissive recipients, the cultural belief of the 'virgin-whore' duality is reinforced (Gilbert, 2002). Hence, women "cannot be violent [nor] as violent as men" (Gilbert, 2002, p. 1272). Due to this misconception, it has been noted how female's perpetrated crimes undergo skepticism, marginalization and over-simplification by a number of professional figures (Denov, 2004). Professional biases are to be linked to the lack of academic knowledge, which causes a male-centered focus during professionals' training sessions (CSOM, 2007). Additionally, because researches are either designed on the gendered assumption male equals criminal and female equals victim or performed solely on heterosexual individuals (Anderson and Struckman-Johnson, 1998; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003), studies have been limited for too long on male sex offenders (Elliott and Bailey, 2014).

Additionally, victims might hesitate when reporting a woman's sexual abuse due to their perception that no matter what they claim, legal proceedings will not be brought forward (Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010). 'Technical reasons' may cause cases to drop: failed compliance to the normative relationship between defendant and victim by police agencies (Lees, 2002); irretrievable or insufficient evidence; possibility of acquittals and policy reasons – such as the defendant entering psychological therapy – might lead potential accusers to avoid reporting (Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010).

Police inadequacy, considering rape victims, is worsened by the promotion of prejudices and discrimination deriving from social stereotypes (Javaid, 2014a). Indeed, being defined by Reiner as those "values, norms, perspectives, myths and craft rules that inform their conduct" (2000, p. 117), the *police culture* stresses patriarchal features such as conservatism, machismo, discrimination and homophobia (Reiner, 2000). Hence, those ideals about normative masculinity undergo a profound challenge bringing about confusion, embarrassment, shock and disbelief in male victims (Lees, 2002).

### *A 'real man' cannot be raped*

The feeling of being ‘robbed’ of one’s masculinity had been diligently illustrated by Sarrel and Masters’ study in 1982. The authors carried out a research on eleven cases of female sexual abuse on men and highlighted its psychological implications. Victims (especially those exposed to high levels of violence and domination) described how emotions such as terror, confusion, shame and helplessness during the attacks, together with sentiments of abnormality, inadequacy and homosexual anxieties subsequently the abuse, exacerbated their beliefs of disgracefulness and manhood inferiority (Sarrel and Masters, 1982). These perceptions, the authors assert, are the result of societal *sexual myths* wherefore “males are incapable of being physically aroused if they are unwilling participants” (CSOM, 2007, p. 3) and, as such, men should not experience erection nor ejaculation in such instances (Sarrel and Masters, 1982). However, similarly to animals, humans do get sexually aroused even in situations of fear and emotional instability: anxiety and unconscious or childhood forgotten sexual fantasies, along with spinal-cord discharge and erection being a physical response to emotional situations, confirm that men can experience erection and hence be sexually abused (Weare, 2018). Similarly to females’ experience of the so-called *post-rape trauma syndrome*, men can suffer a *post-assault syndrome* which generates depression, an alteration in sexual facility and sexual aversion (Sarrel and Masters, 1982).

#### *What causes the under-reporting affects the under-reporting*

Critically considering radical feminist theories, which always consider men as rape offenders and women as rape victims (Javaid, 2014b), the neglected recognition of female sexual offending derives from the points analyzed above.

As such, Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks (2010) concluded that this under-reporting of cases allows many issues to arise. The lack of numerical evidence and the scarcity of available information to be applied onto assessment and treatment programs (Javaid, 2014a; Grayston and De Luca, 1999) determine unbalanced research methods and findings. Indeed, applying male centered theories on female offenders (Harris, 2010) or developing generalizable features based on small, clinical samples – or on too large and not detailed enough samples – (CSOM, 2007) gravely limit scholarly knowledge in the development of reliable conclusions (Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010). Communities are, therefore, affected onto three different levels: social, legal and judicial.

#### *Social implications*

Gilbert (2002) affirms that the public, unconsciously, fuels gender stereotypes and sexual myths that sees women who act violently as either *mad* or *bad, incoherent* and *discontinuous*. Due to their failure in conforming to the “gendered norms of our culture” (Gilbert, 2002, p. 1274) women who sexually offend come to be regarded as *doubly deviant*. Indeed, their lack of social conformity is associated with the absence of femininity – or rather, failure to comply with the stereotypical concept of hegemonic femininity (Hayes and Baker, 2014). Representing an alternative way of ‘doing gender’ and being considered as toxic individuals worth of societal taboo and denial, women not conforming to the ‘right’ ideal of womanhood are seen as *contaminants* of hegemonic femininity and defined as *pariah femininities* (Shippers, 2007). Deriving from the ‘abandonment’ of traditional femininity, women who commit sexual offences come to be considered neither as sane nor as women at all: by *othering* them (Ballinger, 1996) societies reinforce the disbelief for which powerful men *take control* while women aiming at such power *lose control* (Campbell, 1993).

#### *Legal and judicial consequences*

Hayes and Baker affirm that

*Designating females as passive, innocent, and sexually submissive has aided in both the under-recognition and reporting of female sex offending. Such denial, coupled with the reinforcement of traditional sex scripts, also permeates institutions such as the criminal law and justice system, media, and victims themselves* (2014, p. 3)

This quote is emblematic for the second and third points of analysis about the under-recognition of such offences and offenders. Legal approaches are mined by gender stereotypes resulting in what can be defined as *gender-specific laws* wherefore men cannot be regarded as victims while women are considered as incapable of offending (Javaid, 2014a). Elliott and Bailey (2014) affirm that authority figures reconstruct, minimize and often contextualize women's misbehavior in the attempt to provide grounded reasons – or excuses – for such acts. This conduct derives from the fact that gender-biased stereotypes on womanhood pose a considerable amount of obstacles to criminal justice systems (Rodriguez, Curry and Lee, 2006).

Truly, when sex offenders enter the criminal justice system, the latter applies punitive and restrictive approaches which, however, fail when criminals happen to be women (Levenson et al., 2007). *Get-tough approaches* are hence ostracized by the concept of womanhood in different ways. Farnworth and Teske (1995) hypothesized that, because women are seen as in need of help, men are brought by gallantry to lessen their pains by treating them more leniently. Namely *Chivalry Thesis* – or *Paternalism* – this argument represents only one of the examples on the effects of gender-biased prejudices on criminal justice systems. The *Focal Concern Theory*, for which judges and courts come to a milder verdict due to their belief that women are less-risky individuals basing themselves on three elements – blame-worthiness, dangerousness and practical constraints – embodies an additional model of analysis (Albonetti, 1991). Interestingly, the *Selective Chivalry Thesis*, instead, affirms that women who far trespass conventional norms are treated more harshly by the CJS because they are regarded as 'evil' (Farnworth and Teske, 2006). Rodriguez, Curry and Lee (2006) however, affirm that none of these hypothesis can be fully confirmed and accepted due to the little research and evidence on such matters.

#### *Public opinions and policy makers*

Pickett, Mancini and Mears (2013) analyzed the impact that public opinion has on sex crime policies developing three distinguished models of interpretation. The *victim oriented concerns* model confirms the hypothesis for which, although the general public expresses solidarity with the victim and supports retributory justice, when females are perpetrator of sex crimes their behavior is regarded as less harmful than it is claimed to be and that the victim – when being a man – "should consider himself lucky to have been approached [...] in this manner in the first place" (Elliott and Bailey, 2014, p. 9). As such, reduced concern with regards to the victim is witnessed. Second is the *sex offender stereotypes* model for which popular misconceptions and misbeliefs result in aggravated hostility towards 'evil', 'crazy', 'monstrous', 'mentally defective' and 'sexually depraved' women. Indeed, "while male sex offenders are demonized [...] female sex offenders are demonized and sexualized" (Elliott and Bailey, 2014, p. 15), this conforming Denov's (2004) ideal on the reconstruction and rationalization of such offences. Finally, low offending and recidivism rates allow the belief that FSOs are a category unworthy of attention because do not pose a 'valid risk-management concern'. The *risk-management concern* model sees the CJS tackling the

subject of male sex offending at a higher degree than that of females regardless of the technical and practical issues which may arise (Pickett, Mancini and Mears, 2013).

Having deeply analyzed these figures, it can be asserted that the under-recognition and under-reporting of females' criminal activities, especially sex offending, derives from multiple factors which can be regarded both as its causes and its effects.

## Chapter 3: Female Sex offending in Italy and the Country's Law

The next section will bring the reader to develop an understanding on the phenomenon of FSOs in the European, and more specifically Italian, context and to critically consider the need for gender-specific laws.

### *European and Italian official data*

Before delving into a more specific analysis of the Italian context, it is important to stress the latest European statistical figures representing female sex offending and male victimhood rates. Always considering that the development of statistics heavily relies on official reports along with the general awareness and attitudes of a given country with regards to sex offending (European Commission, 2017), in 2015 Europe witnessed 215,000 cases of violent sexual crimes, one third of which was classified as rape. Statistics show that circa one in ten of rape crimes were committed by a female offender; approximately two in ten were the women perpetrators of sexual assault cases and less than 1% were the female offenders imprisoned (European Commission, 2017). The following tables will show the top four European countries for number of male victims of reported crimes – regardless of the offender's gender – (Table 4) and number of female individuals convicted for violent sexual crimes (Table 5).

Table 4. Male victims of recorded violent sexual offences, 2015

Country	N Recorded violent sexual offences (rape and sexual assault)	N Male Victims (rape and sexual assault)
England and Wales	64,066	8,395
Germany	38,083	5,981
France	32,390	4,901
Sweden	14,863	1,587

Table 5. Female individuals convicted for violent sexual crimes, 2015

Country	N Total prisoners (males and females: sexual assault and rape)	N Females prisoners (rape and sexual assault)
England and Wales	11,490	88
Germany	3,715	29
France	Data unknown	Data unknown
Sweden	388	3

Tables 4 and 5 respectively assert the extent to which men are sexually victimized and women perpetrate sexual assault. Furthermore the European Commission (2017) provided useful data on the Italian country: between 2008 and 2015 Italy recorded the number of male victims of sexual assault – regardless the offender's gender – (Table 6) and between 2008 and 2014 the number of females convicted for violent sexual offences was calculated (Table 7).

Table 6. Reported Italian male victims for violent sexual offences, 2008 – 2015

<b>Italy</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
N tot reported (males and females)	4,595	4,242	3,982	4,411	4,390	4,390	4,003	3,825
N Male victims	442	411	380	422	416	416	341	347
Average %	9.6%	10.4%	9.5%	9.6%	9.5%	9.5%	8.5%	9.1%

Table 7. Italian female convicted for violent sexual offences, 2008 – 2014

<b>Italy</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>
N tot convictions (males and females)	2,227	2,469	2,614	2,708	2,718	2,645	2,567
N Female imprisoned	106	101	113	103	88	86	89
Average %	4.8%	4.1%	4.3%	3.8%	3.2%	3.2%	3.5%

The given data shows that between 2008 and 2015, Italian males reported being sexually assaulted at an average rate of 9.5% and that – between 2008 and 2014 – Italian females have been sentenced for the offence of sexual assault at a rate of 3.9% (European Commission, 2017). Although the former data, shown in Table 6, does not specify the offender's biological sex, it proves that Italian men report sexual assault. Additionally, data from Table 7 confirms the hypothesis that Italian women are brought into the light of the criminal justice system for offences such as violent sexual assault.

#### *Italy and Ireland: a comparison on laws*

This information allows further research to be carried out for it provides evidence on the phenomenon of female sexual offending within the Italian context. However, it is important first to contextualize the meaning and definition of the crime of sexual assault both on the historical and legal area. Indeed, the Italian *Codice Penale* – Penal Code – defines the crime of sexual assault as a misbehavior perpetrated

*“Whenever anyone [that], with violence or threat, or through abuse of authority forces another person to perform or undergo sexual acts is punishable with imprisonment from five to ten years”* (Law no. 66 art 609bis)

This definition, however, dates back to 1996 when the crime shifted from being a matter of public morality to the category of personal independence around the sexual sphere (Balloni, Bisi and Sette, 2012). Indeed, previously to the 1990s, the crimes of *violenza carnale* – rape; *coniunzione carnale commessa con abuso della qualità di pubblico ufficiale* – sexual intercourse aggravated; and *atti di libidine violenta* – indecent assault – were legally defined as three distinguished offences (Van Cleave, 2007). These crimes concerned the safeguard of collective ethics whereby the harm caused reflected the victims' families rather than the attacked individuals. Hence, the law cited

*"[I]t would not be good for public morals [...] to cast the large light of justice on intimate events too readily [...]. Thus, it is more prudent to allow those who have been armed decide how best to protect themselves."* (Virgilio, 1997 in Van Cleave, 2007, p. 282)

For instance, the so-called reparatory marriage was one of the most adopted methods safeguarding the reputation of the family's name and allowing criminal proceedings to drop once the victim married the perpetrator (Van Cleave, 2007).

As time passed by, however, it became no longer relevant to decide *how* the crime was perpetrated but, rather, legislators decided to focus on Beccaria's (1764) ideals on the establishment of certain punishment. As such, the 1996 law condemns any form of sexual misconduct regardless of the personal situations or connections between victim and offender (Van Cleave, 2007).

It is important to note how the Law no.66 does not include any gender-specific references, thus allowing any individual – whether male or female – to be the perpetrator of the crime of sexual assault. In contrast, for example, the Irish Statute Book defines the crime of rape as

*"a sexual assault that includes a) penetration (however slight) of the anus or mouth by the penis, and b) penetration (however slight) of the vagina by any object held or manipulated by another person"* (Irish Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act, 1990, section 4).

Amending the Criminal Law (Rape) Act 1981, the new definition of rape under section 4 defines that no woman can ever be charged of rape – and, hence, never be labelled as a rapist – because biologically does not possess the penis. This definition is rather important when considering the liability on conviction due to the fact that being charged for rape implies an indictment to imprisonment for life. Women who commit such offences in Ireland can be charged for *sexual assault* – with a maximum of five years imprisonment – or *aggravated sexual assault* – life imprisonment – only if their perpetrated crime includes the use of force, threat, injury, humiliation or degradation of the victim (Irish Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act, 1990, section 2; Irish Criminal Law (Rape) (Amendment) Act, 1990, section 3). As such, if none of the above mentioned characteristics were to be found by judges or courts, women would not receive life imprisonment because they would fall into the category of criminals responsible for sexual assault rather than aggravated sexual assault or rape.

This distinction is rather fundamental when attempting to define the responsibility of individuals on such offences. The fact that the Italian Penal Code does not categorize perpetrators by their biological sex – unlike Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland (Weare,

2018) or even America until 2012 (Walfield, 2018) – allows to a greater extent the possibility that women can be charged for sexual assault or rape and, additionally, can receive convictions that resemble those of men.

## Chapter 4: The Media's Representation of Female Sex offenders

Chapter 4 will first explore the impact that mass media have on wider societies and, subsequently, the differences in their perception, and representation to the public, of male and female sex offenders.

### *Media's impact on society*

Television shows, books, radio broadcasts, films, newspapers – these are only some of the myriad of sources individuals use in their daily routine to know about economy, politics, crime and societies in general. Indeed, Marsh (2014) affirms that the public – including scholars and researchers – heavily relies on mass media and their representations of reality so as to gain information, and form its own opinion, on such matters. Thus, issues in relation to accuracy, bias and audience context arise: the media often report inaccurate and heavily biased news to the general public, who can easily misinterpret the language employed and reinforce prejudiced beliefs (Windle and Silke, 2019). This leads to the phenomenon of *social constructionism* (Surett, 1998), which is rather important when analyzing the stands that societies uphold with regards to sex offenders and, particularly, female's criminality.

It has been demonstrated that, in the last twenty years, societies witnessed a rise in reported news concerning the phenomenon of sex offending. That is because communities slowly became more aware of this type of crime rather than witnessing an actual rise of such criminal behavior (Zack, Lang and Dirks, 2018). However, due to social constructionism, a realist but critical approach to the role that media have in shaping our societies' beliefs should be employed for they have the ability to cause negative effects on viewers reinforcing myths and misconceptions about sex offenders (Jewkes, 2004).

Indeed, media have been found to respond to the societal addiction to such crime in an unusual way: the more the 'case' is unheard or atypical and the greater is the extent to which the criminal behavior breaches society's norms and values, the more media consider it as interesting and newsworthy (DiBennardo, 2018). This over-sensationalism and amplification of deviancy derives from media's ability to extrapolate each 'story' from its context (Greer, 2003) and reality (Marsh, 2014), oversaturating, as such, an already extraordinary behavior (Jewkes, 2004; Surett, 1998). Hence, narratives about women or – even "better" – children being sexually victimized permeate newspapers and newscasts, enhancing mass media ability to instill fears or hysteria amongst individuals and enabling incitation. This fuels what Cohen in 1972 originally defined as *folk devils* and *moral panics* (DiBennardo, 2018; Surett, 1998).

Surett (1998) perceived mass media as powerful agents able to criminalize behaviors more than the criminal justice system itself. This, added to the fact that more than often politicians and legislators aim at the majority's consensus, results in the increment of punitive and severe actions against sex offenders (Levenson et al., 2007). *Get-tough approaches* are witnessed both on the social and political level of any given society attempting to deal with such individuals: social policies and legislations (i.e. on and off-line sex offenders registration, community notifications, civil commitment, residence restrictions, electronic monitoring and mandatory minimum sentences) cause, and are caused by, the increment of anxieties, myths and false beliefs that the wider population adopts so as to feel safer in their everyday behavior (DiBennardo, 2018).

For the purpose of this research, it is important to stress the notion that biased ideals both on victims and perpetrators produce, and are affected by, a gendered media coverage (DiBennardo, 2018) and that “media approach to sex offences cannot be applied to both genders” (Zack, Lang and Dirks, 2018, p. 63). Indeed, mass media represent victims and perpetrators of both sexes in a very different manner, too often bypassing scholarly and academic literature – which might offer a more confident understanding of this phenomenon – in order to ‘make it to the headlines’.

#### *Mass media and male sex offenders*

Although enough literature has been written on this topic, media representation of male sex offenders should be analyzed so as to gain a better insight on how mass media present female sex offenders to the wider population.

Male sex offenders are often referred to as *dangerous* and *morally depraved* individuals (DiBennardo, 2018). Additionally, being described by media as *predators*, *pathologically ill*, *violent*, *evil perverts* and *pedophiles* (Zack, Lang and Dirks, 2018), the cultural stereotypes about their nature is reinforced. Indeed, as DiBennardo affirms, “the way news media use the term sexual predator [...] constructs part of its socially constructed meaning” (2018, p. 2) strengthening the paradoxical continuation of the so-called ‘bogeyman fallacy’ for which sex offending men present unique and unknown monstrous characteristics (Leon, 2011). Additionally, other than gendering this criminal conduct, media are culpable of perpetuating racial and aged generalizations, particularly when considering men: DiBennardo affirms that media reassert the stereotypes for which, by the mere art of wording, white males are associated with pedophilia while black males with violent predatory sexuality (2018).

#### *Female sex offenders and media*

When considering women – both as victims and as perpetrators – media have been found to be the cause of reinforced stereotypical views about gender norms and sex roles proper of western societies (Chiotti, 2009). Many scholars such as Meyers (1994) and Gitlin (1979) found this gendered coverage deriving from the patriarchal (under)structure of our societies: beliefs and ideals about the concept of womanhood and the right way of ‘doing gender’ are heavily affected by everyday language which intensifies a so-called *gendered rhetoric* (Chiotti, 2009). Hence, analyzing the different ways with which mass media portray female sex offenders in comparison to males, both Chiotti’s (2009) and Landor’s (2009) studies should be considered.

Chiotti affirms that women committing sexual offences are represented to the wider society in a focused way for which “childhood trauma (particularly sexual abuse), abusive partners, hormonal imbalance, and male influence [might] explain the causes of physical aggression in females and [...] lessen their culpability” (2009, p. 36). Hence, the language employed by mass media depicting ‘unusual’ criminal behaviors, reflects an astonished society experiencing naturally caring and sexually passive women engaging in novel, often dramatic, violent sexual acts (Chiotti, 2009).

On a more practical level, in 2009 Landor critically analyzed newspaper articles, which depicted female sex offenders, detecting the previously mentioned gendered rhetoric. Indeed, defined as *vulnerable*, *lonely*, *depressed* or even *heartbroken* individuals, media

constantly ignored the power discrepancies between victims and perpetrators justifying, as such, their criminal behavior (Landor, 2009).

Differences in the usage of language have been found in relation to the women's type of victim: if young men happened to be targeted, media defined their relationship as an 'affair' between 'lovers' or as a 'couple' performing 'sex' (Landor and Eisenchlas, 2012). The public reaction to a breaking news such as the *teacher-lover* relationship, has been studied by numerous scholars: Dollar et al. (2004) found that the public upholds the misconception for which such relation is considered to be 'cool' and that both the psychological harm and the power differences were amply dismissed by the wider audience. Similarly, Zack, Lang and Dirks found that the label of *sexual offender* was not applied onto the characteristics of the female perpetrators and that – although the vast majority of the public completely ignored them – when considered, the victims were either denied their status, regarded as 'willing participants' or blamed even more (2018). Yet, it can be asserted that the younger the victim is, the more the crime is considered as an abuse. Indeed, pre-pubescent victims raise the media's and public perception on female sex offenders on a very negative and conservative tone: committing 'disgusting' and 'vile' crimes, these women are considered as *evil, unnatural, monstrous* and *mad* individuals who *lost their feminine gene* (Hayes and Carpenter, 2013).

Either way women are represented by media, it has been found that these offenders are always given a family role within the articles: Landor and Eisenchlas (2012) found that 20% of the papers mentioned the word 'mother' at least once, and that the word 'married' appeared at a higher degree than if compared to articles related to male sex offenders.

### *Conclusions*

Having analyzed these features, it can be asserted that the gendered media coverage causes numerous issues. Beginning with an over-lexicalization concerning victims and perpetrators of both sexes as well as an over-romanticism of circumstances, silences and marginalization regarding the experiences of female's abused victims – especially if males – are to be found. Finally, as the paper previously examined, disparities in sentencing permeate western societies on the social, political and legal aspects (Zack, Lang and Dirk, 2018). Indeed, while male sex offenders are generally targeted by *get-tough* approaches on all societal levels, females are often subject to a contradictory rhetoric which depict them either as completely mad or totally pleasing and seductive individuals. What is evident, however, are FSOs' criminal and gender-role transgressions – deriving from some sort of 'madness' – which are perceived as factors in need of governance or, at least, containment (O'Neill and Seal, 2012).

## Chapter 5: Methodology

This chapter presents the reasons that led to the birth of the study and the methodology – with its strengths and limitations – employed to achieve the research's goal. It will show how the author found the 18 articles that will be analyzed in the next chapter.

### *Introducing the questions*

Having discussed the characteristics of FSOs and the role of mass media in our societies, the study aims at the clarification of the following research questions:

- Q.1** How do the Italian media portray female sex offenders?
- Q.2** Do Italian media represent only certain categories of FSOs, do they dismissing other categories?
- Q.3** What offenders' characteristics are not appropriately addressed by the media?

Additionally, the investigation targets two principal hypotheses. In light of Greer's (2003) analysis of media over-sensationalism and amplification of deviancy, and Jewkes' (2004) idea of an oversaturation of extra-ordinary behaviors, the first hypothesis sees Italian media focusing on FSOs only when under-age, physically disabled or mentally impaired individuals happen to be the victim. As a result, the second hypothesis suggests that media rarely cover FSOs perpetrating domestic abuse on males or commit violence against other women due to the fact that these crimes are not newsworthy (DiBennardo, 2018).

### *Media content analysis: instruments and ethics*

A media content analysis appeared to be the most suitable approach for it can be successfully applied onto numerous areas of inquiry, both on the quantitative and qualitative level (Krippendorff, 2004). Thus, a media content analysis was considered suitable for the study of "messages that are intended for a relatively large, undifferentiated audience" (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 22) such as newspaper articles, due to its systematic and objective nature.

The research was based on an on-line investigation of newspapers' databases. Indeed, because FSOs and their victims represent a critical category of individuals, an analysis based only on secondary sources was regarded as the best approach so as to protect their personal information and avoid contact with vulnerable people. Hence, although no ethical approval was needed, the researcher decided to anonymize the retrieved data: its divulgence may lead to further stigmatization (e.g. see Becker's *Labelling Theory*, 1963) and incapacitate the success of rehabilitation programs on behalf of the offender, as well as increase the status of victimhood of the offended party.

### *Sample strengths and procedure*

In order to gain sufficient and representative data, the technique employed was that of *purposive sampling* which aims at producing a representative sample based on expert and logical knowledge. Thus, this technique allowed the author to reduce the number of analyzable articles by applying certain criteria to the general pool of texts related to women's offending behavior. Indeed, "by following a conceptual hierarchy, systematically lowering the number of units that need to be considered" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 119) the sample was ultimately a non-probabilistic one.

The initial issue encountered was that of finding relevant articles. Google news was initially searched, although this produced an excessive number of hits (Table 8).

Table 8. Google search, up to 2019

Google searched words - translation	N of results (circa)
Donne e abusi sessuali – women and sexual abuses	176,000
Abusi sessuali sugli uomini – Sexual abuses on men	119,000
Abusi sessuali commessi da donne – sexual abuses perpetrated by women	25,000

Given the considerable number of results, as shown in Table 8, the researcher narrowed the search to three of Italy's most famous and highly circulated national newspapers: *La Repubblica*, *Il Messaggero* and *La Stampa*. The author first analyzed *La Repubblica*'s online database using its 'advanced research' section, the search was limited to 2008-2014 so the data could be compared with the available ISTAT's data on FSOs. This approach, however, produced over two million (2,030,429) articles. The search was thus narrowed further from *La Repubblica* to *La Repubblica.it* (Table 9).

Table 9. *La Repubblica.it*, 2008 – 2014

Attempt n.	Words – translation	Time frame	N of words looked for in the articles	N of pages	N of results
1	Abusi sessuali – sexual abuses	2008 – 2014	At least one	390	3,898
2	Abusi sessuali – sexual abuses	2008 – 2014	Exact phrase	39	383
3	Molestato professoressa – molested + professor	2008 – 2014	At least one	81	803
4	Donne predatrici sessuali – predator women	2008 – 2014	All words	No results	No results

The author then analyzed each result pages – shown in Table 9 – one by one. From this 18 articles were found to be relevant. Articles referring to the same cases and any case that saw the woman not directly involved in the sexual act were then dismissed. As a result, using only one article per case, the sample size was reduced to 10 articles, each depicting a different case.

The second issue concerned whether or not *Il Messaggero* and *La Stampa* reported the same cases found in *La Repubblica* allowing a comparison of viewpoints. However, as it was not possible to search their databases, Google News search engine was searched to identify articles discussing the chosen cases. The author only considered reliable Italian on-line

sources retrieved from the 29 national and 34 local newspapers (Farnesina, 2019). Within the original sample of 10 leading articles, only six could be effectively compared with support articles from reliable sources. When more than one support article was found for the same case, only one was selected to be included in the support sample based on the notoriety of the source.

Because the researcher believed that the six cases represented a limited sample, an attempt to reshape the spectrum of cases was made using for the third time the Google engine (Table 10).

Table 10. Google search, 2008 – 2014

Attempt n.	Words – translation	N of results (circa)
1	Madre abusa dei figli 2013 – mother abuses her children 2013	828,000
2	Madre abusa dei figli 2011 – mother abuses her children 2011	146,000
3	Maestra abusa studente 2011 – teacher abuses her student 2011	175,000
4	Professo – professor + sex	1,980,000

By analyzing the first and second pages of Google results, the researcher identified eight articles to be added to the original group. Ruling out repetitive and unsupported articles, the author combined three new cases to the six previously found, for a total of nine cases. Subsequently, support articles were found using the previously described method on the Google search engine.

Thus, the research will analyze nine cases through nine leading articles – eight of which derived from *La Repubblica* and one from *La Nazione* – and nine support articles retrieved from both national and local newspapers, for a sum of 18 articles. Table 11 will thoroughly explain the research sample.

Table 11. Leading and Support Articles

Leading Articles	Supporting Articles	
Article (deriving from)	National (deriving from)	Local (deriving from)
A (La Repubblica)	a (TGCom24)	
B (La Repubblica)		b (Il Tirreno)
C (La Repubblica)	c (Il Giornale)	
D (La Repubblica)		d (Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno)
E (La Repubblica)	e (Il Giornale)	
F (La Repubblica)	f (Il Corriere)	
G (La Repubblica)		g (Il Corriere del Mezzogiorno)
H (La Nazione)	h (Il Giornale)	
I (La Repubblica)		i (La Repubblica di Milano)
9	5	4
9		9

### *Limitations*

It should be acknowledged that the study presents some limitations. First, the reduced size of the sample does not allow an in-depth spectrum of viewpoints. Secondly, the selection process poses too some limitations: admitting that the researcher was unsure where to access relevant articles and that an initial skim read was used to select the leading sample (Krippendorff, 2004), it should be noted that some cases may have gone unnoticed. Thirdly, the researcher acknowledges that the leading group includes one article from a different national newspaper other than *La Repubblica* and that, in order to efficiently analyze the differences between local and national newspapers, the support group should have been made up of nine local and nine national support documents. Fourthly, although the researcher did come across Italian newspapers mentioning foreign FSOs, only one of these texts was included in the 2008 – 2014 time frame and could be included in the study. Indeed, a larger time frame would have been more producing in the gathering of data concerning both national and international FSOs. Lastly, the study can be applied only onto the ISTAT data representing Italian females convicted (Table 6). Because date depicting male victimization (Table 5) did not mention the sex of the offender, the research findings cannot be analyzed in light of such information.

### *Data analysis*

This investigation analyzed the data quantitatively based on the following parameters:

- The number of reliable articles found in the time frame between 2008 and 2014;
- The type of offences represented the most/least:
  - Against prepubescent/adolescent/adult individuals;
  - Against adult or child male/adult or child female; and
  - Financial gain/revenge/paraphilia reasons.
- The type of offenders represented the most/least:
  - Solo offender/more than one woman; and
  - Male accompanied/coerced.

This last parameter was then associated with a qualitative analysis, focusing on features such as:

- Marital status;
- Name and age mention;
- Religious/ethnicity references;
- Family background/living context mentions;
- Presence of mental issues; and
- Employment/educational level references.

The author then searched each article for the presence of the following words:

- Pedofilia – Paedophilia;
- Pedofila – Paedophile;
- Amore – Love;
- Vittima/e – Victim/s;
- Stupratrice/i – Rapist/s;
- Mostro/Orco – Monster;
- Criminale – Offender;
- Relazione – Relationship;
- Mamma/Madre – Mom/Mother;
- Pazza – Crazy;
- Sexy – Sexy;
- Sesso – Sex;
- Maestra/e – Teacher/s;
- Professoressa/e – Professor/s; and
- Abuso/i – Abuse/s.

### *Conclusions*

The gathering of data proved itself to be a quite arduous task due to the fact that FSOs are a small and under-detected category of individuals. However, despite the popular belief that sees them as individuals unworthy of attention, the next chapters will analyze the findings of this research and aim at a deeper understanding of such group in light of academic knowledge and literature.

## Chapter 6: Findings and Discussion

This final section will analyze the research findings and will subsequently compare them to the scholarly literature outlined in the earlier chapters. Finally, the author will answer the research questions, as well as proving the research hypotheses.

### *Quantitative findings*

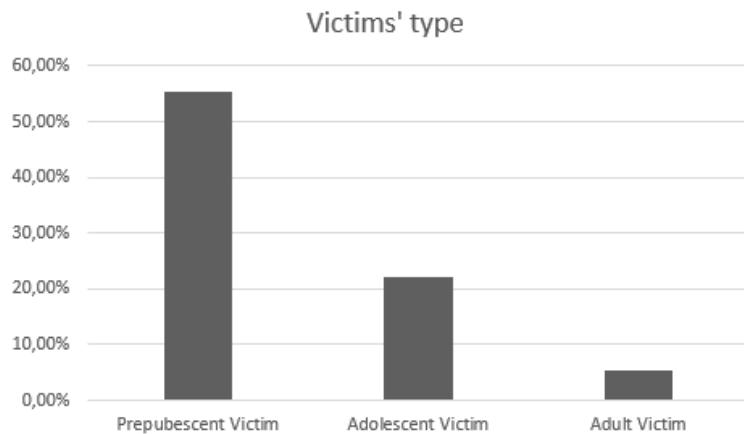
During the research process only 18 articles were considered suitable for the study due to their references to females offenders directly involved in the sexual act within the time frame 2008 – 2014. When searching for support articles the researcher had to reshape the sample size down to nine cases. Hence, the study availed itself of 18 reliable articles divided as such: nine leading articles (eight from *La Repubblica* and one from *La Nazione*) and nine support articles (five deriving from national sources and four coming from local sources).

It is important to note that only eight of these cases related to Italian women committing such offence in the Italian territory; one case (hence two articles) referred to foreigner individuals.

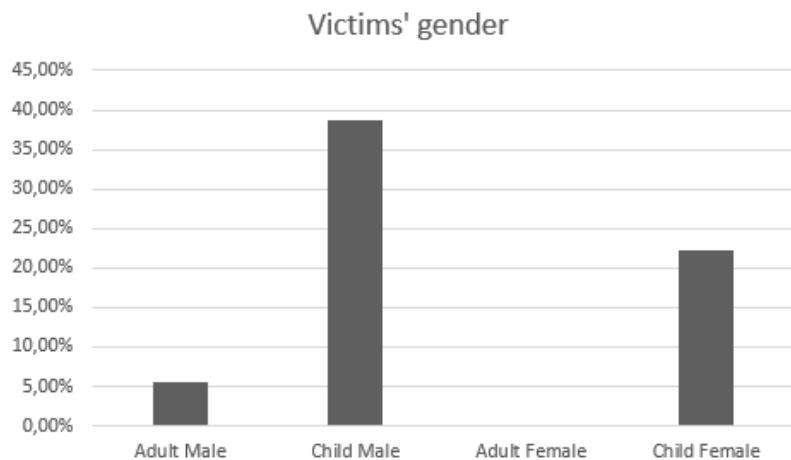
### *Type of offences represented the most/least: victim's type and gender*

By trying to assess the extent to which some categories of victims are presented by the media, the author distinguished between age (Graphic 1) and gender (Graphic 2) of victims so as to draw useful conclusions.

Graphic 1. Victims' age – prepubescent/adolescent/adults (over 18 years of age)



Graphic 2. Victims' gender – adult/child male and adult/child female

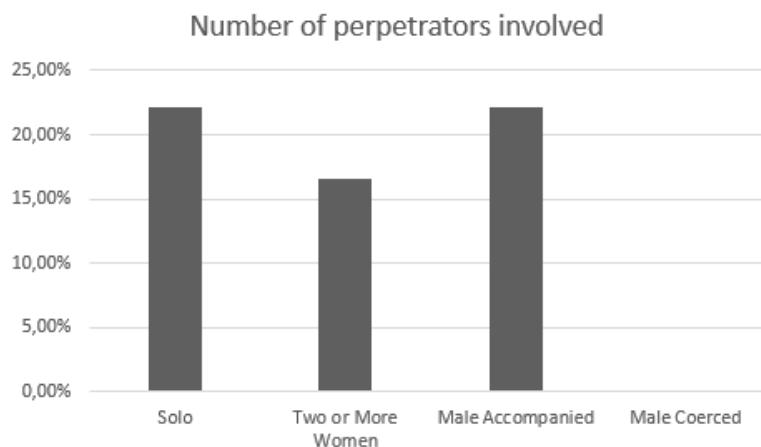


The first graph showed that, with an average of 55.5%, prepubescent children represented the majority of victims and that adults (those individuals over 18) constituted only 5.5% of sexually offended victims. Graphic 2 instead, indicated that amongst prepubescent and adolescent victims, males appeared to be the target of the majority of offenders: with an average of 38.8%, young males were followed by young females (22.2%). Furthermore, for what concerned over-18 individuals, females were totally absent from the findings (0%) while males made up only 5.5% of adult victims.

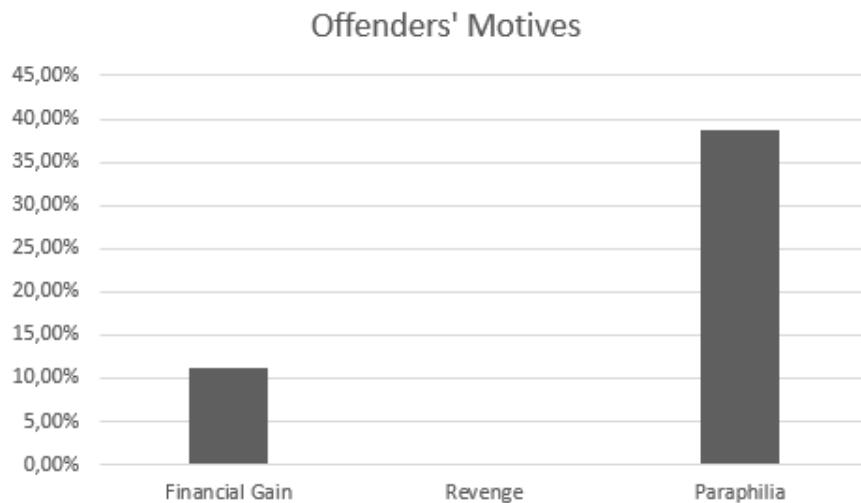
#### *Type of offences represented the most/least: number of perpetrators and motives*

The author attempted to understand the media's representation of FSOs by analyzing also the features concerning the type of offenders – whether they acted alone, in group or coerced (Graphic 3) – as well as the motives for such actions (Graphic 4).

Graphic 3. Number of perpetrators involved – solo/two or more women/male accompanied/male coerced



Graphic 4. Offenders' motives – financial gain/revenge/paraphilia



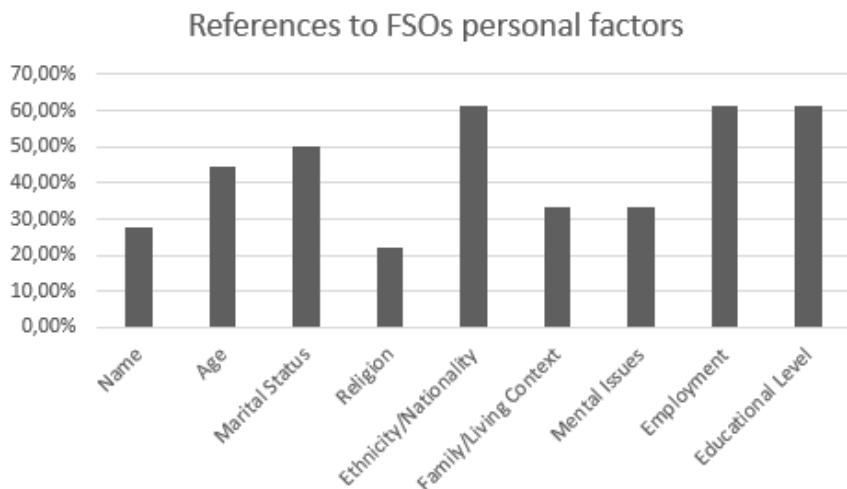
The last part of the quantitative level of analysis has been shown by graphs 3 and 4: the former highlighted that solo and male accompanied FSOs represented the highest percentage of cases (22.2%), two or more women were responsible for 16.6% of offences and male coerced FSOs were apparently nonexistent (0%). The latter graph indicated that FSOs primarily offend due to paraphilic tendencies: indeed, while conducting the study, each article not directly mentioning causes of revenge or financial gain brought the researcher to classify the case as a paraphilic driven crime. Hence, revenge was never found in any of the articles (0%), financial gain represented 11.1% of officially reported motives while, with 38.8%, paraphilia presented itself as the main driving cause of offence.

#### *Qualitative findings on the quantitative level*

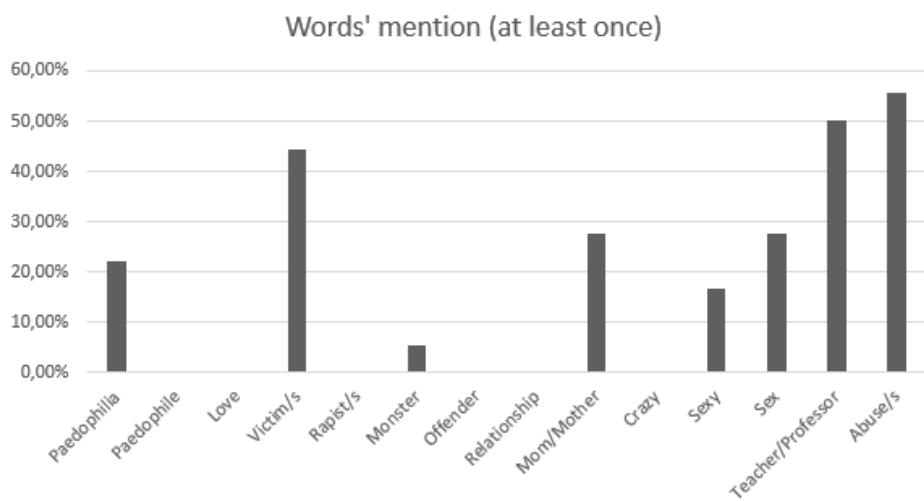
As expressed in the methodology chapter, the parameter concerning the type of offender would have been associated to a qualitative analysis. Particularly, the author focused on the mentions that each chosen article would make regarding definite features. This investigation was perceived as particularly important in order to understand what kind of characteristics were considered worthy of media's attention so as to be presented to the wider society.

Additionally, the author attempted to understand the language employed by news reporters and hence searched each article for the presence of given words – practice employed by other researchers such as Landor (2009). This level of analysis would allow the researcher to compare the findings with academic knowledge in the next section. The following graphs will thoroughly explain the findings (Graph 5 and Graph 6).

Graph 5. References to FSOs personal factors (in each of the eighteen articles)



Graph 6. Words' mention (at least once in each of the eighteen articles)



Graph 5 defined some interesting findings: mentions to family and/or living contexts, together with references to mental impairments, composed only 33.3% of all analyzed articles; allusions to the professed religion of the offender also represented a low figure (22.2%). On the other hand, mentions to age and marital status – respectively 44.4% and 50% – proved that the articles' authors were evenly concerned with these specific features. Particularly high percentages, instead, were found with the categories of ethnicity/nationality, employment and educational level of the offenders. Indeed, all of these features were present at a rate of 61.1% amongst all analyzed articles. Finally, mentions to the name of offenders showed to be particularly low (27.7%). Particularly, references to the names appeared at a higher degree when the article treated a relatively old case; while, on the contrary, the closer the article was to the offence, the lower were the chances of retrieving mentions to the names.

The practical analysis shown by Graph 6 highlighted how words such as ‘paedophile’, ‘love’, ‘rapist’, ‘offender’, ‘relationship’ and ‘crazy’ did not appear in any of the eighteen articles (0%). The word ‘monster’ appeared in only one of the chosen articles representing, as such, 5.5% of the final findings. With an average of 16.6% the word ‘sexy’ appeared at least once in three of the articles, while the word ‘paedophilia’ was considered at an average of 22.2%. Although the words ‘mom’/‘mother’ and ‘sex’ appeared at a relatively low level (27.7%), the frequency with which they were repeated in each article appeared to be quite

high. Indeed, ‘sex’ could be found up to three times in one single article, while ‘mom’ and ‘mother’ up to seven. The words ‘teacher’ and ‘professor’ were also mentioned numerous times within each article. Constituting 50% of the retrieved evidence, these words were repeated up to ten times in one article. Additionally, the word ‘abuse’ could be found at a rate of 55.5% representing the highest feature amongst all findings. The most controversial figure could be considered that of the word ‘victim’. Indeed, while presenting at a rate of 44.4%, it actually did not refer to the offenders but rather to the real victims. However, one of the eighteen articles referred to the offender as a ‘victim’ lowering the actual average down to 5.5%.

#### *Academic knowledge and criminal justice policies mentions*

Although the author aimed at the detection of references to academic literature or mentions to on-going criminal justice policies, the results showed no expressions of such features in any of the eighteen articles. This, could have been useful to better understand the kind of message the media wanted to convey to the general public. Yet, a broad assumption can still be made: the absence of mentions to academic research evidence, together with the lack of discussion on criminal justice reforms, could indicate the inadequacy – or even the unwillingness – of media to portray a comprehensive and contextual picture of this cohort of offenders.

#### *Discussions: importance of the study*

As it has been analyzed in the previous chapters, the validity of this study could be traced back to Cortoni, Hanson and Coache (2010) perception on the importance of such research. They asserted that, due to the discrepancies between official statistics and social awareness, there is a need for further studies. Indeed, the lack of in-depth evidence and research could be considered as one of the major deficiencies in this arena which could be responsible for unbalanced, or even biased, information as well as limited knowledge on treatment and assessment programs (Javaid, 2014a; Grayston and De Luca, 1999; Wijkman, Bijleveld and Hendriks, 2010).

It has been seen how FSOs, in international settings, are accountable for circa 4% to 5% of all sexual offences (Elliott and Bailey, 2014). However, more recent studies, affirm that women could be responsible for up to 7% of all sexual crimes (Cortoni, Babchishin and Rat, 2017). Confirming these figures, the European Commission (2017) declared that, in 2015, females were liable for one in ten rapes and circa two in ten sexual assaults. For the purpose of this study, Italian ISTAT data were considered: between 2008 and 2014 a total of 686 women were convicted for violent sexual offences at an average of 3.9% (European Commission, 2017). This finding is particularly important because it could confirm Elliott and Bailey’s (2014) hypothesis on FSOs.

The presented research aims at the understanding that, although the category of FSOs in the Italian context is a relatively small cohort, between 2008 and 2014 a total of 686 individuals have been convicted for the crime of sexual violence. The fact that only eight Italian women have been officially reported by reliable newspapers – both on national and local level – gives this study a strikingly powerful importance because it shows that only 1.1% of cases are presented to the wider Italian society. Additionally, as Rodotà (2009) states, the Italian media may represent FSOs at such a low rate due to society’s embedded concepts of machoism and patriarchy.

#### *Discussions on the qualitative level*

As analyzed in Chapter 4, mass media employ a gendered rhetoric when describing FSOs to the larger society (DiBennardo, 2018). Able to reinforce stereotypical – and patriarchal – points of view both on sex and gender roles (Chiotti, 2009; Meyers, 1994; Gitlin, 1979), media could be considered as one of the principal agents capable of increasing anxieties and myths (Jewkes, 2004) by over-sensationalizing, over-saturating and amplifying deviancy (Greer, 2003; Marsh, 2014; Surett, 1998).

This study attempted to verify Chiotti's (2009) and Landor's (2009) hypotheses on media's representation of FSOs. Hence, it could be confirmed that media depict *unusual* women in a way that tries to excuse them (Chiotti, 2009). Having found no – or very little – references to words such as 'paedophile', 'paedophilia', 'rapist', 'offender' and 'crazy', this study confirms that Italian media might not want to label FSOs the same way they usually do with males. Apparently, abusive Italian women are neither paedophiles nor rapists; they are not offenders nor mad criminals.

On a similar note, Italian FSOs are somehow excused for their behavior especially when they are enrolled in high school settings: they are 'sexy professors' that perform 'sex' with their 'students'. Indeed, some of the articles' headlines cited as such: *La bella trentenne e i ragazzini* (*The beautiful thirty-years-old and the guys*), or even *Condannata la sexy-docente protagonista del video su YouTube* (*Condemned the sexy-teacher protagonist of a YouTube video*). These, certainly do not look like headlines that aim at discrediting the perpetrators. In one of the cases the perpetrator was even referred to as *amica di famiglia* (*family's friend*), *acqua e sapone* (*water and soap beauty*<sup>1</sup>), *giovane amica* (*young friend*), *puntuale* (*punctual*) and *signorina* (*young lady*).

Dollar et al.'s (2004) teacher-lover relationship appears, hence, applicable not only onto the public perception but also onto the media representation of female professors committing sexual crimes. Power discrepancies, as well as the psychological harm inflicted, do not recur in the articles, confirming Landor's (2009) and Zack, Lang and Dirk's (2018) theories on the justification of (apparently non) sex offenders.

However, as it has been asserted by Hayes and Carpenter (2013), the younger the victim is the worse the criminal behavior is perceived. Indeed, the words 'monster' and 'abuse' appear at a higher rate when prepubescent children happen to be the victim. As an example, one article's headline cited *Sette anni alla mamma-orco di Afragola* (*Seven years conviction to the ogre-mom of Afragola*). The negative tones employed by newspapers' authors violently emerge in cases of abuse on primary school or kindergarten children – despite the offender being a mother or a teacher. Referred to as *madre degenerata* (*degenerated mom*), *aguzzina* (*slave driver*), *fredda* (*cold woman*), *streghe* (*witches*) and *seviziatrice* (*torturer*), those women that sexually abused young children were portrayed by newspapers as unnatural individuals committing horrible crimes (Hayes and Carpenter, 2013).

Attempting to confirm Landor and Eisenclas (2012) theory on the mention of family roles in newspapers' articles, the author searched for the frequency with which the words 'mother' and 'mom' were appearing in the chosen papers. Hence, it has been found that at least 27.7% of cases mentioned the role of motherhood and that it was repeated from two to seven times, accordingly to the article. Furthermore, references to the marital status of the offender are

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<sup>1</sup> *Water and soap beauty*: it translates the Italian version of "bellezza acqua e sapone" which refers to somebody so beautiful than does not need make-up; on a more metaphorical level it stands for innocence and guiltlessness

shown to be quite high: 50% of the articles referred to FSOs as married, divorced or accompanied women.

Having analyzed these features, it is possible to conclude that Italian FSOs are either sexy professors, evil teachers or mothers. Certainly, they are not ‘victims’. The study found only one article referring to the offender as a proper victim – even though the percentage of mentions to the word itself appeared to be quite high (44.4%). However, when comparing the findings of Graph 5 and 6, there seem to be some incongruencies. Although references to victimhood on behalf of the offenders appear at a very low rate (5.5%), Graph 5 shows that mentions to family/living contexts and mental issues raise up to 33.3%. Living in a deprived area or being unable to feed their family are not forms of victimhood? Cannot mentally impaired individuals be considered as victims of a society that left them behind? Apparently not. Apparently, in the exact moment a woman gives birth, becomes a teacher or gets married, she abandons any entitlement for the status of victimhood. To better explain, it appears that a married, employed woman who has children automatically becomes a perfectly functioning individual despite social, economic or cultural discrepancies. This implies that females either *are* victims or *have* victims; they can never show both characteristics.

When sex crimes happen, then, Shippers’ (2007) explanation of the *pariah femininities* becomes useful: because society cannot cope with the idea of a victim woman generating victims, it adapts to these ‘corrupted’ individuals by *othering* them. Societies overcome the ‘abandonment’ of hegemonic femininity (Shippers, 2007; Ballinger, 1996) by considering FSOs as *doubly deviant* (Gilbert, 2002).

#### *Research answers*

The last section of the chapter aims at the answering of the three fundamental questions that led to the birth of this research. As such, the first question – concerning the tone and style employed by Italian media so as to portray FSOs – will be answered in light of DiBennardo (2018) and Zack, Lang and Dirks (2018) theses on the gendered media coverage. Indeed, the presented research confirms their hypothesis for which mass media convey to the wider audience a rather biased picture of FSOs. Italian newspapers can be held accountable for such process due to the fact that they present sexually offending women either as mothers, sexually appetitive professors or horrible teachers. However – as the findings showed – the labels of paedophile or rapists are rarely, if ever, used, this implying a hard, but not too hard, perception on FSOs. It could be argued that media may want to excuse or, to some extents, protect these women because – deep inside – they are women. Even when othered, blamed, perceived as mad or sexy, these individuals may be in need of chivalry; somebody that saves these poor doubly deviant women. Italian media portray female sex offenders in an unbalanced, but not too much, way: they are mad, but not too psycho; sexy, but not too libidinous; monsters, but not too beastlike; abusive, but not too desecrated; miserable, but not too victims.

For what concerns the second research question, the answer is simple. Yes, Italian media represent only certain categories of FSOs dismissing others. Indeed, although a relatively high number of articles were initially found, due to reliability issues only nine cases could be employed for the research – being appropriately described and supported. None of these nine cases described crimes of domestic abuse on males nor sexual violence against aged-like women. All of the eighteen articles related to a crime committed onto under-age – or just over 18 years of age – victims. DiBennardo (2018) hypothesis for which these are the

perfect victims, worthy of newspapers headlines, is confirmed with this research and, most importantly, can be applied to the Italian context. Hence, the two initial research hypotheses are confirmed, although with a slight variant: it appears that between 2008 and 2014, only eight out of 686 women were deemed worthy of Italian society's attention; only those crimes against adolescent or prepubescent victims were appropriately addressed.

Finally, the offenders' characteristics worthy of media's consideration seem to be only those concerning their role as mothers or teachers. The status of victimhood – both on the personal and societal level – appears to be highly disregarded by Italian media. Yet, the fact that a perpetrator is too often a victim should be considered when presenting such crimes to the wider society. This factor could be traced back to what Windle and Silke (2019) affirmed in relation to issues of accuracy and bias: media, being often able to cause negative effects at a higher degree than the criminal justice system itself (Jewkes, 2004), can be held accountable for the misinterpretation of reality as well as the reinforcement of prejudices and wrong assumptions. Hence, bypassing fundamental aspects such as the status of victimhood or academic literature, Italian mass media over-saturate extra-ordinary behaviors and fuel anxieties and hysteria (Surett, 1998).

## Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

This last chapter will summarize what has been analyzed throughout the whole thesis and will finally provide some recommendations for future researches.

### *Dissertation's overview*

The presented dissertation aimed at the understanding of the approaches employed by Italian mass media when presenting female sex offenders to the wider society. The first chapter generally described the category of female sex offenders as a rather heterogeneous cohort of criminals. However, various scholars attempted at the categorization of such group by introducing several sub-categories: from Sarrel and Masters (1982) to Vandiver and Kercher (2004), academics divided FSOs by motives, sexual orientation, type of victim and modus operandi. Yet, despite scholars' efforts to bring about an apparent coherence within the group of sexually abusive women (see Table 1), each offender presents individual characteristics that amplify the spectrum of disparities and add heterogeneity to the whole (Bureau of Justice Assistance, 2007).

Chapter 2 examined how FSOs' crimes are particularly hard to detect. Hence, when involving minors – especially young children – the offences could be concealed in daily practices (Groth and Birnbaum, 1979) as well as aggravated by the fact that the victim may not recognize the abnormality of the behavior (Lewis and Stanley, 2000). On the other hand, when adults happen to be the victim, they undergo numerous challenges: the reluctance with which they approach authority figures may be undermined by three major factors. Firstly, socio-cultural stereotypes which see women as naturally caring and sexually passive individuals (Denov, 2004; CSOM, 2007; Gilbert, 2002) lead to the wrong assumption that females simply do not behave *that way*. Secondly, the sexual myth for which men cannot be raped – deeply analyzed by Sarrel and Masters in 1982 – adds to the perception that legal proceedings would be useless in cases of sexual assault perpetrated by women (Lees, 2002). Finally, the promotion of prejudices and discrimination perpetrated by policing agencies may be held accountable for the under-recognition of such offences. Homophobia, conservatism and machismo, proper of patriarchal societies, are all features stressed by what Reiner defined as the *police culture* (2000).

The third chapter identified strikingly important data in the European context: females convicted for rape and sexual assault amounted at 88/11,490 in England and Wales; 29/3,719 in Germany; 3/388 in Sweden, with an average of 0.77% during 2015 (European Commission, 2017). Although some European countries' data were unavailable (see. France and Italy), statistics showed that in 2015 one in ten rapes and two in ten sexual assaults crimes were committed by women perpetrators. Additionally, less than 1% were the females imprisoned for such crimes (European Commission, 2017). The chapter highlighted how between 2008 and 2014 the Italian country statistics reported female sex offenders as individuals convicted at a rate of 3.9%, hence confirming Elliott and Bailey (2014), Cortoni, Babchishin and Rat (2017) and the CSOM (2007) statements on FSOs. Subsequently, the chapter highlighted the importance of non gender-specific laws: the Italian Law no.66, in fact, allows the possibility that women receive charges and convictions to the same extent as male sex offenders. Countries such as Ireland, America, England, Scotland and Wales had – or continue to have – laws that, being gender-specific, retain the stigma or label of 'being a rapist' only onto men and contribute, in one way or another, to reinforce gender-roles and wrong assumptions on the liability or culpability of sexually abusive women.

Chapter 4 investigated the role of mass media in western societies and analyzed their methods and procedures when having to present both male and female sex offenders to the public. It has been asserted that the role of media in western societies is a particularly important one: representing the main source of information for the majority of the population, individuals count on media's representation of reality so as to know about society and form their own opinion (Marsh, 2014). However, mass media are known to be the best interpreters of social life able to extrapolate any happening from its own context and presenting it in an over-sensationalized, over-saturated and over-lexicalized manner (DiBennardo, 2018; Greer, 2003; Surett, 1998; Meyers, 1994). Hence, when presenting to the public sexually offending individuals, mass media employ a gendered rhetoric which differentiate between men and women, both as victims or perpetrators (Chiotti, 2009; Landor, 2009). In the case of FSOs, either way they are presented – positively or negatively – female-perpetrated crimes undergo strong biases and gender stereotypization which lead to confusion and disorganization on the social and political spheres.

Finally, Chapter 5 discussed the methodology of research while Chapter 6 examined the findings. Without analyzing again the retrieved data, the presented research intended to unpretentiously further develop the modest amount of information that – still in 2019 – western societies have on female sex offenders. Particularly, the author tried to expand the bulk of existing knowledge on the perception that mass media have, and project on wider societies. Indeed, having discussed the importance and validity of this research, it should be reiterated that investigations and studies of this particular cohort of offenders still remain in their infancy (Elliott and Bailey, 2014). Unfortunately, when comparing UK, Irish or even American understandings of FSOs to that of the Italian country, it can be asserted that the underdevelopment and lack of comprehension heavily weaken and undermine researches, as well as assessment and rehabilitation programs. The widespread lack of knowledge might foster, and be fostered, by the male-oriented attitudes proper of the Italian State (Rodotà, 2009). The results shown in Chapter 6 highlighted that Italian media represent FSOs in a biased and unbalanced way; only certain categories of crime are presented to the wider society; and, finally, that characteristics of victimhood of offenders and relevance of academic literature are amply dismissed by Italian newspapers.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that more analyses and discussions are needed – on various levels – so that Italy may develop a deeper understanding of female sex offenders enabling social and clinical approaches. Hence, future research should tackle the topics of Italian public perception together with a more in-depth analysis on media's representation. Broader ranges of sources – i.e. TV shows, radio broadcasts, magazines, online forums, etc. – should be considered; a wider spectrum of offences – e.g. versus males, aged-like women or prison settled crimes – should be examined; and socially based surveys as well as interviews to authority figures could enhance further studies.

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