# Sexual Victimization Perpetrated by Women: Federal Data Reveal Surprising Prevalence

**Article** *in* Aggression and Violent Behavior · September 2016
DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2016.09.007



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# Sexual victimization perpetrated by women: Federal data reveal surprising prevalence

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ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Received 11 January 2016
Received in revised form 13 July 2016
Accepted 26 September 2016
Available online xxxx

*Keywords:*
Rape
Sexual victimization
Female perpetration

ABSTRACT

This article examines female sexual perpetration in the U.S. To do so, we analyzed data from four large-scale federal agency surveys conducted independently by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2008 through 2013. We found these data to contradict the common belief that female sexual perpetration is rare. We therefore reviewed the broader literature to identify patterns and provide context, including among high-risk populations such as college students and inmates. We recommend that professionals responding to this problem avoid gender stereotypes that downplay the frequency and impact of female sexual perpetration so as to comprehensively address sexual victimization in all forms.



## 1. Introduction

Sexual victimization perpetrated by women is a form of abuse that has long been misunderstood and minimized (Vandiver & Walker, 2002). While documented in the research literature beginning in the 1930s (Strickland, 2008; Denov, 2003a; Williams, Ghandour, & Kub, 2008; Davin, Hislop, & Dunbar, 1999; Fromuth & Conn, 1997; Saradjian, 1996), the systematic study of female sexual perpetration was not undertaken until the 1990s, and even then, the literature remained underdeveloped, much of it examining only child sexual abuse (Denov, 2001; Strickland, 2008). To date, no clinical studies involving large numbers of female sexual perpetrators exist (Pflugradt & Cortoni, 2015). The last decade has, however, seen a notable uptick in other empirical research on female sexual perpetration (Cortoni, 2015), which has begun to expand the knowledge base on this otherwise neglected topic.

Our own interest in female sexual perpetration was catalyzed by our prior research analyzing large-scale federal agency surveys conducted in 2010 through 2012 which found a high prevalence of sexual victimization perpetrated against men (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). We identified factors that lead to the persistent minimizing of male victimization, including reliance on gender stereotypes, outdated definitions of sexual victimization, and sampling biases. Yet we remained perplexed by some of the more striking findings. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for example, found that women and men reported a nearly equal prevalence of nonconsensual sex in a 12-month period (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). Because most male victims reported female perpetrators, we felt additional research was needed to better understand sexual victimization that runs counter to traditional assumptions about the sex of perpetrators.

Here we turn once again to large-scale federal agency surveys, this time to glean an overall picture of the prevalence and incidence of female sexual perpetration in the U.S. We looked at perpetration against both male and female victims. We examined four surveys conducted independently by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 2008 through 2013 (Table 1). Ours is the first study to examine together large federal data sets, obtained from nationally representative samples (except in the case of inmates). Together these surveys have reached many tens of thousands of people, and each has shown internally consistent results over time. We therefore believe that this article provides more definitive estimates about the prevalence of female sexual perpetration than has been provided in the literature to date. Taken as a whole, the reports we examine document surprisingly significant prevalence of female-perpetrated sexual victimization, mostly against men and occasionally against women. The findings are sufficiently robust so as to compel a rethinking of long-held stereotypes about sexual victimization and gender.

We also highlight other findings in the broader literature that illuminate this phenomenon. Some research has found that women themselves report committing abuse in surprisingly high proportions, and others have examined the behavior patterns of at-risk populations such as college students and adults and juveniles held in confinement. A look at these studies helps shed light on the female perpetration dynamics at play in different contexts.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.09.007
1359-1789/

**Table 1**
US Federal Agency Surveys of Sexual Victimization Using Probability Samples.

| Study | Year of study | Conducted by | Sample | No. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) | 2011 | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | Nationally representative telephone survey of 12 months and lifetime prevalence data on sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence | 12,727 |
| National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS); and 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation (NISVS-SO) | 2010 | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | Nationally representative telephone survey of 12 months and lifetime prevalence data on sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence | 16,507 |
| National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) | 2010–2013 | Bureau of Justice Statistics | Multistage stratified cluster survey with a rotating panel design. Interviews are conducted every six months and households are rotated into and out of the sample | 146,811 households 31,099 incidents |
| Sexual Victimization in Juvenile Facilities as Reported by Youth; National Survey of Youth in Custody (NSYC 2012) | 2012 | Bureau of Justice Statistics | Multistage stratified survey of facilities in each state of the United States and random sample of youths within selected facilities | 8707 |
| Sexual Victimization Reported by Former State Prisoners; National Former Prisoner Survey (NFPS) | 2008 | Bureau of Justice Statistics | Multistage stratified survey of parole offices in 40 states of the United States and random sample of former prisoners within selected offices. | 17,738 |

A focus on female perpetration might be skeptically viewed as an attempt to upend a women's rights agenda focused on male-perpetrated sexual victimization. But attention to female perpetration need not negate concern about other forms of abuse. Moreover, a close look a sexual victimization perpetrated by women is consistent with feminist imperatives to undertake intersectional analyses, to take into account power relations, and to question gender-based stereotypes, as we explain. For example, we know that juveniles in detention, where victimization flourishes, are disproportionately drawn from racial and ethnic minorities (Hartney & Vuong, 2009). We know that women who commit sexual victimization sometimes co-offend with coercive male partners (Faller, 1987; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; Matthews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; McCarty, 1986; Rosencrans, 1997; Syed & Williams, 1996) and that women perpetrators have often experienced severe childhood sexual abuse themselves (Christopher, Lutz-Zois, & Reinhardt, 2007; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; Sandler & Freeman, 2009). Lesbian and bisexual women abused by women report feeling that their victimization is delegitimized due to heterosexist assumptions (Girshick, 2002b). These complex realities call into question a simplistic male-on-female victimization paradigm and merit further inquiry.

We conclude by recommending that public health and policy responses embrace a new, gender inclusive response to sexual victimization. This ought to entail, among other things, the attention of healthcare and criminal justice professionals to the reality of female perpetration, the inclusion of inmates in our national conversation about sexual victimization, and an expanded research agenda to study sexual victimization more comprehensively.

## 2. Gender-based assumptions about sexual victimization

Contemporary understandings of sexual victimization have been informed by the reality that men's sexual violence toward women was ignored for centuries and remains dangerously well tolerated in many regions of the world. Feminist approaches have long challenged the assumption that male-on-female sexual abuse is an inevitable outgrowth of preordained differences between the sexes. Instead, feminist theory posits that sexual victimization is a result of socially constructed male power and privilege, employed as a tool to subordinate women (Brownmiller, 1975). This male-on-female construct remains the dominant paradigm through which sexual victimization is understood and addressed.

We and other scholars have pressed for an expanded understanding of sexual victimization (Smith, 2012; Turchik & Edwards, 2012; Stemple, 2009; Denov, 2003a, 2003b). New research findings that run counter to gender stereotypes fuel this imperative. While in no way seeking to minimize the very real phenomenon of male perpetration, we examine female perpetration so as to explore the gender dynamics at play and to understand sexual victimization more fully. In so doing, we argue that new attention to female sexual perpetration serves important feminist goals.

Stereotypes about women, which reflect gender and heterosexist biases, include the notion that women are nurturing, submissive helpmates to men. The idea that women can be sexually manipulative, dominant, and even violent runs counter to these stereotypes (Byers, 1996; Pflugradt & Allen, 2012). Yet studies have documented female-perpetrated acts that span a wide spectrum of sexual abuse, which include even severe harms such as nonconsensual oral sex, vaginal and anal penetration with a finger or object, and intercourse (Hetherton, 1999; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2011; Pflugradt & Allen, 2012).

Despite this reality, the minimizing of female perpetration persists (Struckman-Johnson & Anderson, 1998; Turchik & Edwards, 2012). Studies of "rape myths" among college students, for example, have found that little has changed over two decades (Turchik & Edwards, 2012). The majority of those surveyed do not believe that a "big, strong man can be raped by a woman," (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992) nor do they think that a man who was raped by a woman would be "very upset" (Chapleau, Oswald, & Russell, 2008; Turchik & Edwards, 2012). Male victims are viewed as more culpable for the abuse themselves if their abuser is female rather than male (Davies & Rogers, 2006).

Viewing women only as passive or harmless problematically constructs women as one-dimensional, thereby lacking in the negative traits that complex human beings embody. It can also deny women agency and the responsibility for their actions that empowered persons ought to have. As one scholar observed, to be fully recognized, women must be "heard in all possible forms, whether in compassion, in protest, or in violence" (Denov, 2003b). Moreover, the drive for power is now understood to inform sexual violence (MacKinnon, 1987; National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2014). To deny this drive negates any female impulse to dominate others, however misguided it may be (Hetherton, 1999).

Moreover, attention to female sexual perpetration is aligned with feminist concerns about female victimization because female perpetration is frequently intertwined with women's past experience of their own victimization (Vandiver & Teske, 2006). One study found that juvenile female sex offenders had a notably higher number of past sexual abusers (4.5) compared to juvenile male sex offenders (1.4) (Mathews, Hunter, & Vuz, 1997). Female perpetrators also reported earlier sexual abuse (64% were first victimized before age six, as opposed to 26% of male sexual offenders) (Mathews et al., 1997). Another study of adult and juvenile sex offenders found that females were more likely to be victims of incest (33%) than male offenders (13%); female

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perpetrators were also more likely to report having been raped (39%) as compared to males (4%) (Miccio-Fonseca, 2000) (although unduly limited definitions of "rape" sometimes undercount even severe sexual victimization of men and boys (Stemple & Meyer, 2014)).

Comparisons between female perpetrators of sexual *versus* nonsexual crimes have found that those who perpetrated sexual crimes had previously experienced greater childhood trauma than those convicted of nonsexual offenses, including more physical violence, emotional abuse, and neglect (Sandler & Freeman, 2009). Compared to other perpetrators, female sexual perpetrators are more likely to have experienced more frequent sexual victimization and of a longer duration (Christopher et al., 2007). The high incidence of past sexual victimization has been identified among both incarcerated female perpetrators as well as college-age perpetrators who are not in contact with the criminal justice system (Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006).

## 3. Female perpetration in new federal agency data

We turn now to the findings from large-scale federal agency surveys from 2008 to 2013. The prevalence of female sexual victimization has long been considered difficult to quantify (Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Estimates have ranged vastly (Mendel, 1995), depending on whether one looks at arrest and conviction records (Sandler & Freeman, 2009), surveys of respondents' own perpetration, or surveys of respondents' victimization. New federal data on respondent victimization, to which we now turn, indicate that females comprise a significant proportion of perpetrators of sexual victimization. Here, we examine four large-scale federal agency surveys, two conducted among the general population and two conducted among those currently or previously incarcerated (Table 1).

### 3.1. General population

#### 3.1.1. National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS)

The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), one of the most comprehensive general population surveys on this topic to date, was conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention beginning in 2010. Remarkably, the surveys have found that men and women had a similar 12-month prevalence of nonconsensual sex (*i.e.*, 1.6 million women and 1.7 million men were raped or made to penetrate in 2011 data) (Breiding et al., 2014). There was greater divergence by sex in lifetime reports. In 2011, for example, 19.3% of women reported having been raped in their lifetime. 1.7% of men reported being raped, under the CDC's narrow definition of rape, which is limited to penetration of the victim, and 6.7% of men reported being "made to penetrate" someone (also a form of nonconsensual sex) in their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2014).

The 2010 report (which had similar findings by victim sex as the 2011 report) is the only report to provide detail on the sex of perpetrators, the subject of our focus here. Unfortunately, the details are limited and only include lifetime prevalence; we calculated proportions from marginal and conditional distributions provided in the federal agency's reports to determine sex and sexual orientation prevalences.

The findings were noteworthy. Females reporting any form of sexual victimization were vastly more likely to have experienced abuse by male perpetrators, as were male victims who experienced the CDC's overly narrow definition of rape. But among men reporting other forms of sexual victimization, 68.6% reported female perpetrators (Fig. 1). Specifically, being "made to penetrate" – the form of nonconsensual sex that men are much more likely to experience in their lifetime – is frequently perpetrated by women: 79.2% of victimized men reported female perpetrators. Therefore when the CDC or others fixate on the directionality of penetration and define rape in a narrow way that excludes this form of nonconsensual sex, the rape figures misrepresent who perpetrates nonconsensual sex when men and boys are victims. (Elsewhere we have critiqued in greater detail the CDC's failure to use an inclusive definition of rape that treats nonconsensual sex as rape, regardless of the directionality of penetration (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). In contrast to the CDC, other contemporary researchers now use a gender-inclusive definition of rape (Turchik, 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2013; Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, & Mahendra, 2014).

The 2010 and 2011 reports also estimate that men who experienced sexual coercion and unwanted sexual contact were more likely to report female rather than male perpetrators. Despite this study's own findings, CDC authors emphasize the prevention of male perpetration (Breiding et al., 2014).

In 2013, the CDC released a report on its 2010 NISVS findings focused on lifetime prevalence by sexual orientation. Among men in the sample,

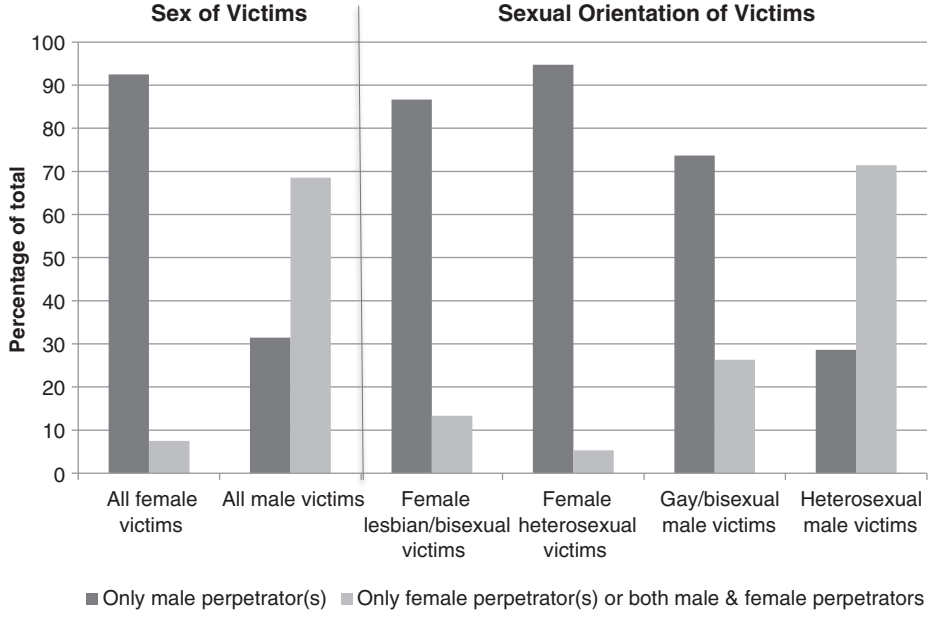


**Fig. 1.** Lifetime prevalence reports of "non-rape sexual victimization" from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) 2010 Summary Report and the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation. Note: "Non-rape sexual victimization," includes nonconsensual sex in the form of being "made to penetrate" someone else, "sexual coercion," "unwanted sexual contact," and "non-contact unwanted sexual experiences."

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2.0% self-identified as gay, and 1.2% identified as bisexual. Among women, 1.3% identified as lesbian and 2.2% as bisexual. Fig. 1 shows non-rape sexual victimization by sexual orientation of the victim. Disaggregating by sexual orientation helps illuminate the gender dynamics at play.

The data show that heterosexual male victims were much more likely to report abuse by a female perpetrator in their lifetime (71.4%) than were bisexual men (34.2%) or gay men (21.4%). Lesbian victims were more likely to report such abuse by a female perpetrator in their lifetime (14.8%) than were bisexual (12.5%) or heterosexual women victims (5.3%). Unfortunately, when reporting on sexual orientation, the CDC did not disaggregate the non-rape forms of sexual victimization and counted the severe (*i.e.*, nonconsensual sex in the form of being "made to penetrate" someone else) together with the less severe (*e.g.*, flashing).

#### 3.1.2. National Crime Victimization Survey

Each year the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducts the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), a household survey on violent crime incidents including rape and sexual assault. Unlike the CDC, BJS combines rape and sexual assault, avoiding some of the definitional problems with the term rape. Also in contrast to the CDC, this survey focuses on "violent crime" and therefore reports only a subset of sexual harms. This limits comparability across surveys and has been critiqued for excluding forms of abuse involving coercion rather than force (Weiss, 2010).

The results of this survey are widely covered by the media each year, but the sex of perpetrators is rarely discussed. For this article, we pooled the 2010–2013 NCVS data on rape and sexual assault and disaggregated the incidents by sex of victims and perpetrators. Our analysis is weighted and adjusted for the complex design of NCVS.

We found that female perpetrators (acting without male co-perpetrators) were reported in 28.0% of rape/sexual assault incidents involving male victims and 4.1% of incidents involving female victims. Incidents of rape/assault involving at least one female perpetrator were reported in 34.7% incidents involving male victims and 4.2% of incidents involving female victims (Fig. 2). Our analysis also found that, among those reporting rape/sexual assault by a female perpetrator, 57.6% of male victims and 41.4% of female victims reported that the incident involved an attack, meaning the offender hit, knocked down, or otherwise attacked the victim. Of those who were attacked, 95.7% of male victims of female offenders and 47.0% of female victims of female offenders also reported that they were injured in the incident.

### 3.2. Incarcerated populations

Because population-based victimization studies like NCVS use a sampling frame restricted to households, they do not include those who are incarcerated (or otherwise institutionalized in care facilities and the like) at the time of the survey. This includes nearly 2.2 million people detained in U.S. prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities at any given time (Walmsley, 2013), comprising a population drawn disproportionately from low-income, minority, and mentally ill persons. As we have estimated previously, BJS surveys detect nearly one million incidents of sexual victimization incidents behind bars annually (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). Therefore our national conversation about sexual victimization is incomplete without attention to those behind bars. To determine the sex of perpetrators victimizing incarcerated populations, we examine two BJS surveys designed to assess the prevalence of sexual victimization behind bars.

#### 3.2.1. Sexual Victimization Reported by Former State Prisoners & the National Survey of Youth in Custody

Data collected by BJS under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) includes information on hundreds of thousands of detained persons. These data demonstrate remarkable consistency across surveys. One of the most notable findings is the high prevalence of sexual victimization committed by female staff members and female inmates.

Despite the common assumption that, for women prisoners, male staff members pose the greatest sexual threat, BJS studies have consistently shown instead that women are much more likely to be abused by other women inmates than by male staff. For instance, in contrast to the 4.4% of former women prisoners who reported custodial sexual misconduct, 13.7% reported sexual victimization by inmates (Beck & Johnson, 2012). A large, statistically significant difference between the threat posed by female inmates *versus* male staff has been found across BJS surveys on this topic.

Staff perpetration remains a concern, however. For women prisoners and girls in detention, the staff perpetrators are overwhelmingly male, and for men and boys the staff perpetrators are overwhelmingly female. Because men and boys are vastly disproportionately incarcerated they are overrepresented among victims; women are therefore disproportionately represented among all staff abusers (Figs. 3 & 4). Among all adult prisoners reporting any type of staff sexual victimization, 80.0% reported only female perpetrators. An additional 5.1% reported both male and female perpetrators (Beck & Johnson, 2012). Among all juveniles reporting staff sexual victimization, 89.3% reported only female perpetrators. An additional 3.1% reported both male and female perpetrators

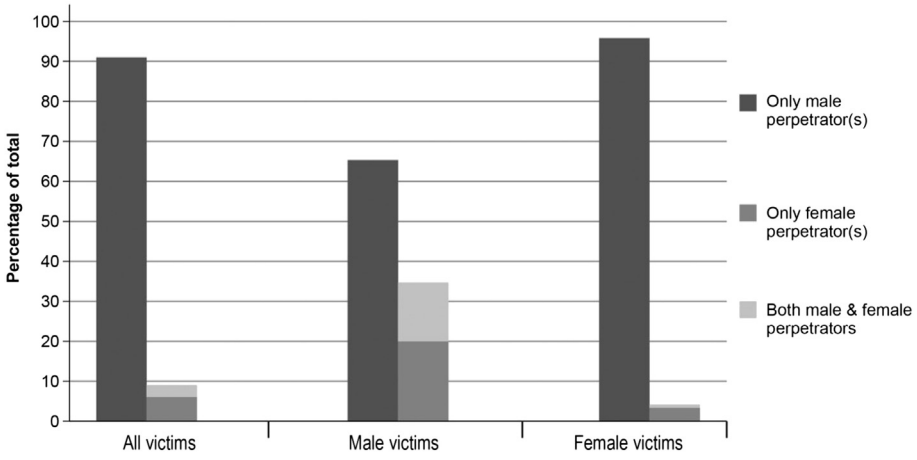


**Fig. 2.** Rape and Sexual Assault as reported in the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) 2010–2013. Note: The NCVS is a complex survey that is designed to allow for pooling across years. We pooled four years of data, incorporating the sampling design and probability weights into our analysis. The NCVS has a recoded variable for type of crime, and we combined their categorization of "rape" and "sexual assault." We estimate the conditional distribution of rape and sexual victimization by both sex of the victim and sex of the perpetrator.

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(Fig. 4) (Beck, Cantor, Hartge, & Smith, 2013). Gay and bisexual men and lesbian and bisexual women were 2–3 times more likely to report staff sexual victimization than their heterosexual counterparts (Beck & Johnson, 2012). The disproportionate abuse by female staff members does not occur because women are more often staffing facilities. Men outnumber women by a ratio of three to one in positions requiring direct contact with inmates (Stephan, 2008).

Moreover, while it is often assumed that inmate-on-inmate sexual assault comprises men victimizing men, the survey found that women state prisoners were more than three times as likely to experience sexual victimization perpetrated by women inmates (13.7%) than were men to be victimized by male inmates (4.2%) (Beck et al., 2013). This large and statistically significant difference between male and female rates of inmate-on-inmate sexual assault has been found across surveys. (Beck et al., 2013). Bisexual women were more likely to be abused by other inmates (18.1%) than heterosexual (13.1%) or lesbian inmates (12.8%) (Beck et al., 2013).

## 4. Contextualizing female perpetration

Given these findings, it is vital to understand female perpetration of sexual victimization beyond simply its prevalence. More research is certainly needed, but an examination of the broader literature to date sheds some light on the phenomenon. We turn first to studies of the narrow subset of female perpetrators who have come into contact with the criminal justice system. A 2009 analysis of three large-scale studies of female perpetrators found that the mean age of perpetration was late 20s to early 30s, the mean age of victims was approximately 12, and 75–80% of perpetrators were white (Sandler & Freeman, 2009). Researchers have found female perpetrators to have lower levels of education and income (Tardif, Auclair, Jacob, & Carpentier, 2005) and greater prevalence of mental illness (Lewis & Stanley, 2000; Allen, 1991).

But perpetrators are far from homogenous (Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006), particularly concerning their motivation for offending (Sandler & Freeman, 2009). For instance, scholars have looked at incidents in which women committed sexual abuse together with a male perpetrator, a pattern referred to as "co-offending" (and sometimes "male-coerced") (Matthews et al., 1989; McCarty, 1986; Syed & Williams, 1996; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; Faller, 1987; Rosencrans, 1997; Williams & Biere, 2014; Gillespie et al., 2015). One 2002 literature review found that, among females who sexually victimize children, the prevalence of a co-offending perpetrator ranged from 33% to 70%. The authors concluded that there was little data to indicate whether women had initiated the abuse or were pressured to participate (Vandiver & Walker, 2002). A 2006 literature review reported that 10 out of 13 studies found that the majority of female perpetrators were offending alone (Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006). Likewise, a study using the FBI's 1992–2011 National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data, which collects reports to police, found that, while female perpetrators of sexual assault were more likely to co-offend (they had accomplices in 38.1% of incidents) than men (11.8% of incidents involved an accomplice), female perpetrators were still more likely to abuse alone (61.9% of incidents) (Williams & Biere, 2014).

In addition to the "co-offender," typologies for female perpetrators have included categories such as "teacher/lover" (Matthews et al., 1989), same-sex offenders who abuse adult women (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004), and a distinct group of chronic offenders at high risk of re-arrest (Sandler & Freeman, 2009). Some have criticized the typologies as vague, open to subjective interpretation (Pflugradt & Allen, 2010), or reliant on overly simplistic themes or event details (Cortoni & Gannon, 2016). More recently, scholars have attempted to delineate pathways to offending, distinguishing, for instance, women who plan their abuse from those who offend impulsively (Gannon et al., 2013).

Like male-perpetrated sexual victimization, female perpetration of sexual abuse is under-reported to officials (Denov, 2003b; Mendel, 1995; Allen, 1990; Banning, 1989). One 2003 review of 15 studies and statistical reports compared official reports of female perpetrated sexual victimization to abuse reported by perpetrators and victims in confidential surveys. Unsurprisingly, confidential surveys detected greater prevalence of female sexual perpetration than official law enforcement reports indicate (Denov, 2003b).

Moreover, the high prevalence of female perpetration identified in the U.S. population-based surveys such as NISVS suggests that many female perpetrators do not encounter law enforcement. Those who do may be among the most pathological offenders (Pflugradt & Cortoni, 2015). Because the criminological literature focuses disproportionately on women who have been arrested, convicted, or clinically treated for sexual perpetration, it can overlook the large numbers of women in the general population whose abuse goes undetected (Williams & Biere, 2014). Therefore studies of those outside of criminal justice and mental health systems are key to a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Struckman-Johnson, 1988).

For instance, a 2003 study of coercive and forced opposite-sex sexual experiences among 268 male and 355 female college students solicited written descriptions of tactics from male and female victims and perpetrators (Struckman-Johnson, 1988). Female perpetrators reportedly bit, slapped, and hit male victims. In some cases female college students got on top of aroused men and forced the men to penetrate them. One male victim wrote, "Alcohol was involved. She undressed me, tried to arouse me by touching my genitals, oral sex, and trying to force me inside of her" (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). One female perpetrator described her actions as follows, "I locked the room door that we were in. I kissed and touched him. I removed his shirt and unzipped his pants. He asked me to stop. I didn't. Then, I sat on top of him" (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003).

Another recent study of college and high-school aged men and boys have also detected a high prevalence of female perpetration. The 2011 survey of 302 male college students found that 51.2% reported experiencing at least one sexual victimization experience since age 16. Of those victimized, 48.4% reported female perpetrators. Men who reported more severe victimization (*i.e.*, "rape," which is defined to include nonconsensual intercourse in either direction) later experienced more risky behaviors and sexual dysfunction than those who reported less severe forms of victimization (*e.g.*, sexual contact that did not include penetration (Turchik, 2012)).

A 2014 study of 284 men and boys in college and high school found that 43% reported being sexually coerced, with the majority of coercive incidents resulting in unwanted sexual intercourse. Of them, 95% reported only female perpetrators. The authors defined sexual coercion broadly, including verbal pressure such as nagging and begging, which, the authors acknowledge, increases prevalence dramatically (French, Tilghman, & Malebranche, 2014). But, the study also found that the resulting sexual activity was a more significant predictor of psychological distress and behavioral sequelae than the type of coercion tactic employed. Specifically, participants whose coercive experience resulted in intercourse showed greater subsequent sexual risk-taking and alcohol abuse, regardless of whether the incident involved force or only verbal coercion (French et al., 2014). Male respondents described incidents that included statutory rape (*e.g.*, "I was coerced into sleeping with an older [woman] because I was told it would make a big boy. I was only 12 at the time and the girl was 18 I believe" (French et al., 2014)) and substance-related incidents ("Well she told me she could drink a ton and was giving me double shots to 'see if I could keep up.' After a couple hours things got blurry and I woke up next to her" (French et al., 2014)).

Perpetrator self-reports are also revealing. A 2012 study using data from the U. S. Census Bureau's nationally representative National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC, 2001-02) found in a sample of 43,000 adults little difference in the sex of self-reported sexual perpetrators. Of those who affirmed that they had "ever force[d] someone to have sex … against their will," 43.6% were

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female and 56.4% were male (Hoertel, Le Strat, Schuster, & Limosin, 2012).[1]

One 2008 literature review looked at five studies of female-perpetrated sexual victimization within relationships. The review found that between 1.2% and 19.5% of adolescent girls and 2.1%–46.2% of college women self-reported that they perpetrated some form of sexual victimization (Williams et al., 2008).

A 2013 survey of 1058 male and female youth ages 14–21 found that 9% self-reported perpetrating sexual victimization in their lifetime; 4% of youth reported perpetrating attempted or completed rape, which, again is defined to include any unwanted intercourse regardless of directionality (*i.e.*, respondent reported that he/she "made someone have sex with me when I knew they did not want to"). While 98% of perpetrators who committed their first offence at age 15 or younger were male, by age 18–19 self-reports of perpetration differed little by sex: females comprised 48% of self-reported perpetrators of attempted or completed rape. Females were also more likely to perpetrate against victims older than themselves (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2013). Among respondents, victim-blaming was common; perpetrator accountability was not. About half of all perpetrators of rape or attempted rape said that the victim was completely responsible for the incident. Fewer than 1% of perpetrators reported contact with law enforcement subsequent to the abuse (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2013). A 2011 Dutch study also found no significant difference among male and female adolescent self-reports of sexual aggression (10% of males and 8% of females reported using sexual aggression) (Slotboom, Hendricks, & Verbruggen, 2011).

Sexual victimization of women by other women has been studied even less than opposite-sex female perpetration. In the 1980s, surveys began to detect this form of abuse (Loulan, 1988; Waterman, Dawson, & Bologna, 1989), but research remained scant. Two studies in the 1990s found that more than half of lesbian respondents reported sexual victimization by a female partner (Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes, 1991; Waldner-Haugrud & Gratch, 1997). NIBRS police report data from 1992 to 2011 showed that in sexual assault incidents involving female perpetrators acting alone, 45% of the victims were also female (Williams & Biere, 2014). This study supports other findings that women are more likely to commit same-sex victimization than are male perpetrators (Gannon et al., 2013; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2009). NISVS found that among lesbian and bisexual women reporting non-rape sexual victimization, 12% reported a female perpetrator (Fig. 1).

A multi-year study published in 2002 of lesbian and bisexual victims of female-perpetrated sexual victimization found that many of the dismissive gender stereotyping explored elsewhere in this paper informed these women's experiences. For instance, one victim stated "[W]hen I said to her, 'You raped me,' she just laughed at me. She said, 'That's impossible" (Girshick, 2002a). Survivors also reported their own gender bias: "The fact that it was from another woman also made me realize how much more I was willing to accept from her in the form of abuse and how that serves neither she nor I" (Girshick, 2002b).

### 4.1. Female perpetration behind bars

Here we contextualize abuse happening within incarcerated settings themselves. While it has long been understood that sexual victimization happens frequently in prisons, the BJS findings that females are committing a significant portion of that victimization is "met with discomfort bordering on disbelief" (Smith, 2012). A key fact for skeptics of this phenomenon is that the surveys' definition of sexual victimization includes sex between staff and inmates that inmates describe as "willing."

However, even "willing" sex between staff members and detainees is a criminal offence, replete with potential for the abuse of power. Staff members have near total control over inmates' lives: family visitation, cell assignments, educational opportunities, work assignments, and numerous privileges are controlled at the whim of staff, whose decisions are effectively non-reviewable by courts. An inmate's probation determination may also be affected by whether staff have issued disciplinary sanctions against inmates. Inmates may fear an assignment to highly punitive administrative segregation (solitary confinement) for real or concocted rule infractions by a staff member who views the inmate unfavorably (Buchanan, 2012).

Former inmates reported institutional responses consistent with these fears. Among inmates who made a report of staff sexual victimization, 46% said they were written up for a disciplinary infraction and 41% were placed in solitary confinement (Beck & Johnson, 2012). Moreover, 62% of inmates who reported "willing" sexual activity with staff reported some type of coercion or offer of privileges or protection by staff. Notably (and setting aside debates about "willing" encounters), even the majority of "unwilling" victims of staff sexual victimization reported a female perpetrator (Fig. 3).

Sexual victimization by female staff does not occur in a vacuum, but instead takes place in hierarchal prison systems in which power has traditionally been held by men. In order to succeed in this environment, female staff must command authority, demonstrating the control they have over inmates (Smith, 2012).

Because prison communities are single sexed, the presence of women as they move about men's facilities can be highly charged (Smith, 2012). Privacy norms are upended, and staff members wield sexualized power by the very nature of the duties required: conducting strip and pat searches, monitoring during showers and states of undress, and by way of the sexual feedback they receive from male inmates and staff (Smith, 2012).

Feminist theory's attention to the role that power can play in the subordination of the less powerful sheds light in this context, particularly if one acknowledges that power differentials come in many forms – gender being only one. Attention to the way in which intersecting forces of gender, race, sexuality and incarcerated status shape the daily lives of inmates and staff is necessary to meaningfully address female perpetration in the prison context (Smith, 2012).

Among the least powerful are youth in juvenile detention. Of those reporting staff sexual victimization, one in five reports 11 or more incidents of abuse (Beck et al., 2013). Despite such findings, victimized boys are described as "only too ready" (Smith, 2015) for sex with staff, or worse: they are framed as predators who manipulate unsophisticated female staff members (Smith, 2015).

## 5. Female perpetration & underreporting

There are numerous disclosure obstacles for victims of female perpetrators that ought to be kept in mind, particularly as reported in crime and other official reports (Denov, 2003b). Moreover, these disclosure obstacles, described below, can operate to obstruct the ability of victims to access healthcare, recovery support, and legal redress (Davies & Rogers, 2006).

First, the widespread perception of women as nonthreatening complicates the way abuse is confronted by victims who experienced harm (Sandler & Freeman, 2009). Tellingly, researchers have found that victims who experience childhood sexual abuse at the hands of both women and men are more reluctant to disclose the victimization perpetrated by women (Sgroi & Sargent, 1993). Indeed the discomfort of reporting child sexual victimization by a female perpetrator can be so acute that a victim may instead inaccurately report that his or her abuser was male (Longdon, 1993).

Male victims may experience pressure to interpret sexual victimization by women in a way more consistent with masculinity ideals, such as the idea that men should relish any available opportunity for sex (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Or, sexual victimization might be reframed by observers as a form of sexual initiation or a rite of passage, to make it seem benign. In some cases, male victims are portrayed as responsible

[1] The lifetime prevalence of perpetrating forced sex was only 0.15%. 2.7% of respondents did not answer the question; men were overrepresented among those who did not answer.

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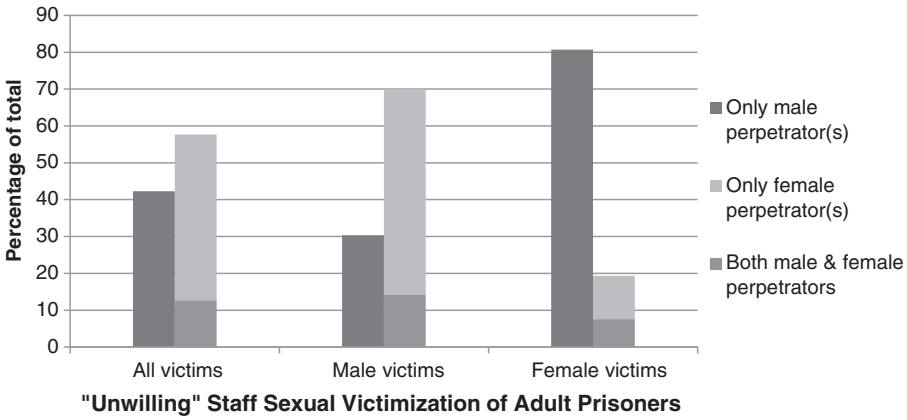


**Fig. 3.** "Unwilling" sexual misconduct by staff as reported by former state prisoners from the National Former Prisoner Survey (NFPS) 2008. Note: The exclusion from this figure of staff sexual misconduct described by inmates as "willing" is not meant to imply that such behavior is acceptable. Even if inmates describe the act as "willing," it may be exploitative due to the extreme power imbalance between staff and inmates; it is criminalized in all 50 states.

for the abuse. Particularly as male victims move from childhood to adolescence, they are ascribed more blame for encounters with adult women (Rogers & Davies, 2007).

Lesbian and bisexual women victimized by women frequently hesitate to report due to fear of heterosexist social attitudes. When same-sex sexual activity is stigmatized, it can inhibit the reporting of even nonconsensual sex (Girshick, 2002a).

Gender stereotypes about sexual behavior are compounded by the belief that, because of the female body's form, women are less physically able to commit acts that are harmful (Struckman-Johnson, 1988). In other words, "no penis, no problem" (Levin, 2005; Kirsta, 1994).

Some scholars have speculated that a reluctance to accept female perpetration may stem from the fact that this would destabilize understandings of safety. Because women have already accepted the idea that men pose a sexual threat, the notion that females may also be threatening is particularly unsettling. For lesbian women, the acknowledgement of sexual victimization within relationships "cracks apart the belief in a lesbian utopia" (Girshick, 2002a).

Victimization by women in contexts of incarceration is also underreported. Even when abuse by female staff is reported through the proper channels, women accused of sexual victimization are more frequently allowed to resign than they are prosecuted for a crime, which parallels the more lenient treatment that female perpetrators in the broader community receive (Smith, 2012). The abuse of women inmates by other women is also often dismissed, described as merely a "cat fight," or explained away as an attempt by women to replicate outside family dynamics inside of prison (Stannow & Kaiser, 2013).

## 6. Professionals & a culture of denial

Perhaps even more troubling than misperceptions concerning female perpetration among the general population are misperceptions held by professionals responsible for addressing the problem. Female perpetration is downplayed by those in fields such as mental health, social work, public health, and law, as a range of scholars have demonstrated (Denov, 2001; Saradjian, 1996; Mendel, 1995). Stereotypical understandings of women as sexually harmless can allow professionals to create a "culture of denial" that fails to recognize the seriousness of the abuse (Hetherton, 1999).

In terms of child sexual abuse perceptions, ideas about women's role as caretakers who naturally have intimate contact with children lead to less concern about victimization than when the same harmful acts are committed by male perpetrators (Denov, 2003a; Hetherton, 1999; Sandler & Freeman, 2009; Stannow & Kaiser, 2013). In some cases, female perpetration has been reframed as a "misguided extension of love" (Hetherton, 1999). One study documented the unsubstantiated belief that male victims of childhood sex abuse by female perpetrators experience less harm than female victims of childhood sex abuse by male perpetrators (Broussard, Wagner, & Kazelskis, 1991). In the context of prisons, scholars have noted that very little in the literature offers instruction on appropriate professional responses to female-perpetrated sexual victimization (Smith, 2012).

Heterosexism can render lesbian and bisexual victims of female-perpetrated sexual victimization invisible to professionals (Girshick, 2002b). While a few rape crisis centers have created small lesbian-

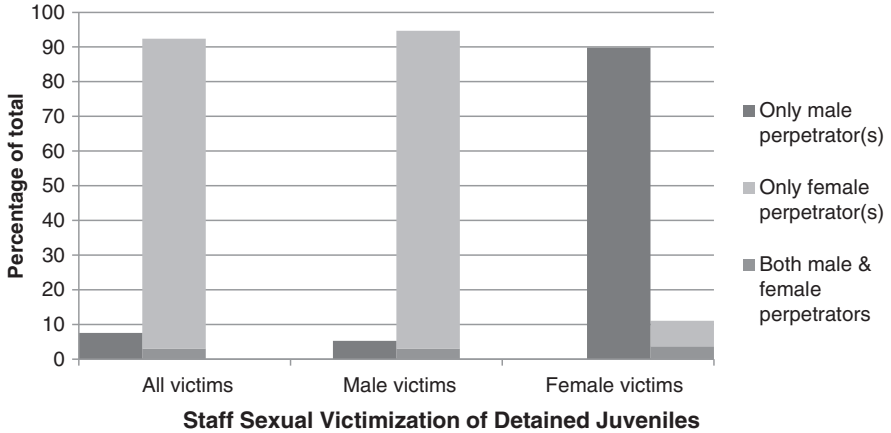


**Fig. 4.** Sexual Victimization in Juvenile Facilities Reported by Youth from the National Survey of Youth in Custody (NSYC) 2012.

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oriented programs, lesbian and bisexual women report that, in general, hotlines, support groups, and legal aid organizations that address sexual violence seem designed for those victimized by men (Girshick, 2002b).

For adult men victimized by women, professionals often fail to recognize that this abuse can be damaging (Hetherton, 1999), perhaps informed by the stereotype that men have an insatiable desire for sex (Brownmiller, 1975). Sensitivity to male victims' concerns about masculinity, sexuality, and self-blame (particularly for men who became physically aroused during abuse) are needed.

Not only is female-perpetrated sexual abuse less likely to be reported to police than male-perpetrated sexual abuse (Allen, 1991), when it is reported, law enforcement officers believe intervention to be less warranted than if the perpetrator is male (Hetherton & Beardsall, 1998). Even when a report is successfully rendered to police, female perpetrators are less likely to be charged and prosecuted and more likely to be diverted to social services (Girshick, 2002a; Allen, 1991; Starr, 2012).

Among those prosecuted, even fewer are convicted. One five-state study of sex offender registries found that between 0.8% and 3% of those on registries are female (Tewksbury, 2004); others have found fewer than 2% on registries are female (Sandler & Freeman, 2009; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Several scholars have argued that gender stereotyping during the criminal justice process leads female perpetrators of sexual victimization to receive lighter sanctions than their male counterparts (Finkelhor, Williams, & Burns, 1988; Smith, 2012). Others posit that sentence leniency might be attributed to findings of lower rates of sexual recidivism among female perpetrators in contrast to males (Pflugradt & Cortoni, 2015; Sandler & Freeman, 2009). One study found that female juveniles in state care who had perpetrated sexually aggressive acts were significantly more likely to be treated as victims themselves, as compared to boys, even though they exhibited serious and repeated misconduct (Ray & English, 1995).

Even those researching female-perpetrated sexual victimization occasionally fall back on unsupported assumptions. For instance, a 2006 study of registered juvenile sex offenders found only one female who victimized someone older than 17; the authors curiously describe this as "expected" because it would be difficult for females to assault males who are "older and presumably physically larger" (Vandiver & Teske, 2006), overlooking the well-established (and feminist-initiated) understanding that physical overpowering need not, and often does not, accompany sexual victimization.

Some feminist organizations have asserted that attention to female perpetration risks derailing the hard-fought battle to assert that sexual victimization is about the exercise of male power (Hetherton, 1999). Others favorably note that professional responses, in particular law enforcement sanctions that "go easy" on female perpetrators appropriately advantage troubled women. In contrast, some argue that this advantage comes at a price (Denov, 2003b), and it's a price that all women and men pay, in the form of reinforcing regressive stereotypes about sex and gender.

Widespread professional minimization of the seriousness of female sexual perpetration can also exacerbate its harmful effects (Hetherton, 1999; Denov, 2003b). Research has found the effects of the abuse itself to include depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse (Burroughs, 2004; Denov, 2004). When professionals fail to treat sexual victimization by women as a serious harm, victims' suffering can be compounded by the disparagement of the abuse (Hetherton, 1999).

## 7. Conclusions & recommendations

In light of this new federal agency data demonstrating that female sexual perpetration is more widespread than previously known, we have sought to enumerate the gender stereotypes fueling its neglect. We call for feminist approaches – expansively interpreted – to challenge these stereotypes, making room to consider women who are abusive, power seeking, and sexually aggressive, while taking into account the troubled background many such women possess.

Unless we uproot the simplistic stereotypes that limit understandings about sexual victimization, we will not address it accurately, nor will we respond to victims empathically. Those victimized by women are doubly harmed when we fail to treat their abuse as worthy of concern.

Further, we recommend that law enforcement officials, care professionals interacting with perpetrators and victims, and policymakers apply a new awareness of the frequency and impact of female perpetration in practice, so as to address sexual victimization comprehensively. This includes taking account of issues specific to lesbian and bisexual women, youth, people of color, and incarcerated persons.

Those charged with preventing and responding to sexual victimization ought to be both gender inclusive (address all victims and perpetrators, regardless of sex) and gender sensitive (understand how gender norms influence women and men in disproportionate or different ways). Professionals must begin to understand this abuse "not as an exception or an add-on, but as fully as we understand male violence" (Girshick, 2002a).

To achieve this understanding, research that uses inclusive definitions, provides a deeper understanding about what facilitates this form of victimization, attends to women's past victimization issues, and seeks to overcome reporting and disclosure issues is urgently needed. Finally, the national conversation about sexual victimization – which has been especially robust in recent years, particularly concerning college students and, to a lesser extent, incarcerated persons – must broaden significantly, so as to include abuse that runs counter to our preconceived ideas about sexual victimization and gender.

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Please cite this article as: Stemple, L., et al., Sexual victimization perpetrated by women: Federal data reveal surprising prevalence, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.09.007

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Please cite this article as: Stemple, L., et al., Sexual victimization perpetrated by women: Federal data reveal surprising prevalence, *Aggression and Violent Behavior* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.09.007