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logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4665-2034>, D'Aguanno, Sofia and Jones, Sophie (2020) Women as Active Agents: Female Perpetrators of Sexual Harassment and Domestic Abuse. *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*, 14 (1). pp. 32-49.

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Women as Active Agents:  
Female Perpetrators of Sexual Harassment and Domestic Abuse

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## Abstract

Beginning with Darwin's theory of sexual selection, evolutionary psychology has been dominated by the view that women are the "choosy sex" and, through intrasexual competition, males the "aggressive sex". This view was supported by seminal works (e.g. Buss et al., 1990; Clark & Hatfield, 1989), which formed the basis of a considerable body of work. Moreover, they lent credence to the popular view that women are less interested in the sexual side of human relationships, instead being focused on protection and stability. Combined with the notion that males are the dominant/aggressive sex, the literature has therefore insufficiently examined female aggression. When female aggression does occur, it is often viewed as a retaliation against male aggression (i.e. self-defence), rather than as an active strategy used by a small, but not insignificant proportion of women. The focus on male aggression and female self-defence not only deprives women of agency, it also means that their victims are not taken as seriously, and rehabilitation programmes for female offenders are scarce. This paper will discuss evidence that women act aggressively, focusing on why and when women engage in sexual harassment and domestic abuse. It will seek to establish the underlying mechanisms for such strategies (e.g. the personality traits associated with increased aggression in women), which future research should explore. Moreover, because, historically, the evolutionary literature has taken a heteronormative approach, female aggression will be examined in the context of diverse human relationships.

*Keywords: Evolution, Women, Domestic Abuse, Sexual Harassment*

*Summary:* The evolutionary psychology literature often neglects to examine female aggression as it pertains to domestic abuse and sexual assault. This manuscript provides an overview of the theory and empirical evidence, thereby showing the importance of this largely overlooked research area.

The essence of Darwin's theory of sexual selection pits males and females in competition, with each other (intersexual competition) and with themselves (intrasexual competition), in a way that is believed to have far-reaching consequences in how each sex has evolved. In combination with lower obligate investment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), sexual activity has a direct fitness consequence for men in a way that it does not for women (Symons, 1979; Trivers, 1972). This means that men have evolved a stronger libido, a desire to engage in short-term mating, and a preference for a variety of sexual partners (e.g. Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001; Ellis & Symons, 1990; Jonason & Fisher, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2019). Research on sexual behaviour also indicates a propensity towards more sinister behaviour. For example, men show indications of a greater desire to exploit sexual partners, based on their attraction to cues of sexual exploitability (Goetz, Eason, Lewis, & Buss, 2012).

Although the concept of a “choosy” female lies at the heart of evolutionary theory, female choice proved to be an unpopular idea for over a century after Darwin first proposed his idea of sexual selection (Campbell, 2015). Despite researchers embracing female choice more recently, evolutionary research, particularly that examining human aggression, is still largely based on the popular cultural belief in the passive, harmless female; this idea has far-reaching sway, affecting laws, criminal justice response, and ultimately victims of aggression. This paper will discuss evidence that, contrary to popular opinion, women do engage in aggression, including intimate partner violence and sexual aggression.

### *Societal Attitudes*

An important component to our understanding of sexual behaviour is the sexual scripts that individuals hold. These scripts relate to how sexual encounters should progress, including who should initiate (e.g. Sakuluk, Todd, Milhausen, Lachowsky, & URGiS, 2014) and who should pay

for a date (e.g. Stirrat, Gumert, & Perrett, 2011). While recent research suggests that the current generation supports more egalitarian relationships (e.g. Lamont, 2014, 2015), these sexual scripts are still dominated by ideas of an active man, and a passive woman (Sakuluk et al., 2014).

To state that men are more likely to initiate sexual encounters does not, however, mean that women cannot seduce or even victimise men, or other women. To suggest such would be to engage in benevolent sexism because it would imply that women are less agent and competent than men. The idea of the benevolent, caring female has been referred to as the “women are wonderful” effect (Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991). This view persists even when the woman in question is causing physical or psychological harm (Denov, 2001). It is also inconsistent with research suggesting that women commit 15% of criminally violent crime (Campbell, Muncer, Bibel, 2001).

There is evidence that even the media provide more sympathetic accounts of female perpetrators (Quintero Johnson & Miller, 2016). The denial of female aggression is integral to professional response to sexual offences, which is often ambivalent (Denov, 2001; Finkelhor, Williams, Burns, & Kalinowski 1988; Hetherington & Beardsall, 1998). It explains, for example, why conviction rates for female perpetrators are significantly lower than for cases involving male perpetrators (Boyce, 2013; Holmes, 2010; Traylor & Richie, 2012). As researchers cannot fail to be influenced by their cultural context, they are liable to hold similar attitudes. When they fail to scrutinise these attitudes through examination of the evidence, there is a danger of the body of knowledge being contaminated by false narratives. While historically the research has been dominated by investigations of male aggression, evolutionary psychology can form a useful basis to examine aggression in women.

### *Evolutionary Perspective*

Humans are unusual among mammalian species in that they engage in biparental care

(Woodroff & Vincent, 1994). One proposed explanation for this anomaly is that human infants are much more altricial than other mammalian infants (Cartwright, 2016; Hrdy, 2011), many of whom can walk within minutes of birth. This means that long-term pair-bonding is adaptive in humans in a way that it is not for most mammalian species. This harmonious parental objective of successfully rearing offspring does not, however, equate to harmony within relationships. For example, it is still in both partners' best interests, individually, to attempt extramarital relationships, particularly with those of high mate quality (Buss, 2015). Given the amount of time and resources that are required to successfully raise a human offspring, the consequences of cuckoldry are extremely high for men. These consequences provided the basis of early evolutionary explanations of gender-based violence: there are evolutionary pressures for men to ensure fidelity, which leads to sexual jealousy, the need for power, and behaviour designed to control female partners (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982).

Despite the mixed evidence that patriarchal beliefs lead to violence (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward & Tritt, 2004), evolutionary accounts of domestic abuse are traditionally based on patriarchal explanations (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 1979). The most prevalent evolutionary explanation for domestic abuse is therefore that it acts as a mechanism to avoid paternity uncertainty (Daly et al., 1982; Wilson & Daly, 1996). Evolutionary explanations are therefore, by necessity, focused on male-on-female aggression and are therefore hetero-normative in nature, which is common in the wider domestic abuse literature (see e.g. Bates et al., 2017; Dixon, Archer, & Graham-Kevan, 2012). Given the extensive literature focusing on male aggression, it is not our intention to expand upon this further; instead, the focus will be on female aggression, which has received comparatively little attention.

Child-reading is an equally high-stakes pursuit for women. There is evidence that women are evolved to be strategic in providing care and the amount of care they provide. As outlined by

Cosmides and Tooby (1981), even in-utero, mother and foetus are in conflict. Two third of infanticides that take place prior to the child's fifth birthday, and 80% of those that occur in the first year of life, are committed by a woman (Fox & Fridel, 2017). A child is much more likely to be killed by its biological mother than its biological father (Daly & Wilson, 1988), with it being argued that this serves an adaptive function (Duntley & Buss, 2011). Across species, females engage in filicide when resources are scarce (e.g. milk supply) and when the current offspring are preventing future reproductive opportunities (Lukas & Huchard, 2018).

For females, competition for resources is not restricted to parent-child conflict. Like men, women have a sense of proprietary rights when it comes to sexual partners (Burbank, 1994; Marsh & Paton, 1986; Ness, 2004). Indeed, men and women do not differ in the frequency or extent to which they experience jealousy (Buss, 2015). As evolutionary theory would predict, competition is affected by resource scarcity; in this case, scarcity of male partners through an uneven sex ratio (Campbell, 2015; Campbell, Muncer, & Bibel, 1998). Women also report a greater likelihood of verbal and physical abuse in response to infidelity (De Weerth & Kalma, 1993). Indeed, controlling for differential homicide rates, a review of 20 countries found that women as likely to kill out of jealousy (Harris, 2003). Cross-cultural research estimates that one third of spousal homicides are committed by women (Daly & Wilson, 1988). These facts and figures support the argument that women face evolutionary pressures that result in conflict. The next section will discuss to what extent these pressures result in female aggression within intimate relationships.

### *Domestic Abuse*

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the majority of reported domestic abuse cases involve violence against women by a male partner (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; ONS, 2018; Smith & Farole, 2009; Walby & Towers, 2018). This is consistent with men being much

more likely to engage in other violent offences (Fox & Fridel, 2017; ONS, 2018). In the UK, official statistics show that between 7 and 24% of women and 4 and 14% of men report experiencing domestic abuse (Department of Health, 2017; Strickland & Allen, 2017). This is consistent with the Office for National Statistics' (2018) assertion that one in three victims are men.

However, the idea that men are more likely to commit domestic abuse has become increasingly controversial and has resulted in problematic, highly political dialogues that do not appear to be in the best interests of understanding the factors that cause domestic abuse to occur. The controversy dates to the first study to attempt an evidence-based investigation of domestic abuse prevalence; that study found comparable rates for male and female-perpetration (Steinmetz, 1978). Since then, other self-report studies have corroborated Steinmetz's findings (e.g. Archer, 2000; Archer, 2004; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1993; Straus & Gelles, 1986, 1990; Straus & Ramirez, 2007) or have found higher prevalence for female-perpetrated abuse (e.g. Archer, 2002; Magdol et al., 1997; Stets & Straus, 1992a, 1992b; Thornton, Graham-Kevan, Archer, 2010). In addition, when members of the general population are asked about the behaviours they engage in with their intimate partners, women are more likely to endorse engaging in behaviours that meet the definition of domestic abuse (Bates, Graham-Kevan, & Archer, 2014; Cross, Tee, & Campbell, 2011; Straus & Rameriez, 2007). Certainly, studies do not universally find comparable rates of domestic abuse in men and women, with those that recruit participants from women's shelters and prisons suggesting that male victimisation is rare. However, the fact remains that findings from self-reported victimisation and perpetrator studies are often inconsistent with official crime figures (Hester, Jones, Williamson, Fahmy, & Federer, 2017). The next section will review the various arguments that have attempted to explain these inconsistent findings.

### *Self-Defence*



Findings that women are at least as aggressive as men in intimate relationships were initially countered with the argument that these women were acting in self-defence (Dobash et al., 1992). Many advocates and some feminist scholars contend that male dominance and degradation is the catalyst for female perpetrated domestic abuse – that it is their male partner who is the dominant aggressor (DeLeon-Granados, Wells, & Binsbacher, 2006; Hamel, 2011; Hamel & Russell, 2013). While self-defence and reactive aggression arguments continue to hold sway in rhetoric (see e.g. Bates, Graham-Kevan, Bolam, & Thornton, 2017), studies investigating the cause of female aggression find that self-defence is most frequently cited as “not the cause” of the abuse (Hettrich & O’Leary, 2007). This is corroborated by another study that found self-defence to be the least common reason for abuse (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001). Studies have also found no sex differences in reporting self-defence as the cause of domestic abuse (Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Seastian, 1991; Harned, 2001). Indeed, the same motives are listed by male and female perpetrators (Medeiros & Straus, 2006; Felson & Outlaw, 2007; Stets & Hammons, 2002). This suggests that females do not simply engage in reactive aggression, but use domestic abuse as a means of controlling their male partners, thereby ensuring the continuance of the relationship, with all of the advantages that ensue

### *Sex Differences in Patterns of Abuse*

A second argument (see e.g. Renzetti, 1999; Saunders, 2002) is that studies investigating domestic abuse are overly-simplistic in their designs, failing to differentiate between persistent, pervasive abuse and isolated incidents. However, studies that have attempted to investigate this systematically have found that female perpetrators show the same pattern of aggression, report the same provocations, and engage in behaviour of escalating seriousness (Entilli and Cipolletta, 2016). A meta-analysis also found no differences in the use of a weapon (Archer, 2002), with eight percent

of female-perpetrated domestic abuse involving the unprovoked use of a weapon (Saunders, 1986).

In light of recent legal recognition of coercive control in the Serious Crime Act (CPS, 2015), it is worth noting that rates of male and female perpetrated coercive have also been shown to be equivalent (e.g. Comecanha, Basto-Pereira, & Maia, 2017; Williams et al., 2018). It is difficult to determine to what extent these figures are consistent with those found in homosexual relationships because such prevalence has not been explored extensively, hampered by low rates of reporting (Turrell, 2000). However, studies exploring this issue have found rates consistent with other relationship types (Renzetti, 1992) and suggest that such abuse is often status-oriented (McClennen, Summers, & Vaughan, 2008).

The authors do not wish to minimise the seriousness of male-perpetrated aggression; they acknowledge that even where mutual levels of abuse occur, differences in upper body strength increases the likelihood and prevalence of serious outcomes for female victims, which includes the risk of death (Archer, 2000, 2009; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Whitaker, Haileqesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). However, the evidence suggests that women are capable of engaging in unprovoked, recurring abuse that results in substantial levels of physical and psychological harm (e.g. Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007; Hogan, Hegarty, Ward, & Dodd, 2012; Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Stets & Straus, 1992a, 1992b).

### *Perceptions of Domestic Abusers*

A third explanation for the different prevalence rates centres around evolved differences between the sexes. Hamby and Jackson (2010) argue that because men tend to be stronger and bigger than women, individuals are more likely to fear them; this does not solely centre around gender stereotypes, but on real, physical differences between the sexes. Related to this, formidability has been shown to moderate the degree of moral outrage experienced by male, but not

female, third parties (Jensen & Petersen, 2011). This led Allen and Bradley (2017) to hypothesise that humans are evolved to punish and criminalise those who are deemed more of a threat. In their study, Allen and Bradley (2017) found that male violence is perceived to be more serious, more criminal, and more likely to require police intervention. While participants tended to think the male would inflict more harm, these differences in seriousness and criminality persisted after controlling for injury level. This is consistent with previous findings that, in comparison to female-perpetrated abuse, male-perpetrated domestic abuse is deemed to be more reprehensible by the public (e.g. Davidovic, Bell, Ferguson, Gorski, Campbell, 2011; Felson & Feld, 2009; Harris & Cook, 1994). Even where the abuse is female-on-female, people tend to blame the more “masculine” partner (Little & Terrance, 2010). This may explain why male perpetrators are more likely to be convicted (Felson, 2008) and incarcerated (Smith & Farale, 2009), whereas women disproportionately avoid arrest (Felson & Pare, 2007) and criminal charges (Brown, 2004).

While, from an evolutionary perspective, such perceptions may seem reasonable, they have negative consequences. Men report that the gendered view of abuse prevents them seeking help/reporting crime (Migliaccio, 2001). Indeed, researchers have argued that reported rates are likely to be skewed by police response (Barkhuizen, 2015; Dutton, 2012). It has been argued that men are re-victimised by a system set up to negate their victimhood (Hines et al., 2007). There is evidence that such bias also affects police response to such cases, with some researchers arguing that gender role stereotypes may explain the lack of police response to abuse that takes place within a homosexual, or non-heteronormative, relationship (Island & Letellier, 1991; Letellier, 1996; Renzetti, 1992).

The resistance found in the literature to the idea that domestic abuse may not be a gendered crime is even more extreme in the charities that have been set up to support victims and rehabilitate offenders. These organisations, consistent with the broader dialogue surrounding domestic abuse,

usually take a gendered approach; that is, it is assumed that domestic abuse crime is committed by men, against women, due to patriarchal ideals (see e.g. Bates et al., 2014; Bates et al., 2017; Bohall, Bautista, & Musson, 2016; Quintero Johnson et al., 2016). This suggests that the dialogue remains consistent with traditional dichotomies of men as “bad” and women as “good” categories (Mackinnon, 1989). Such arguments stem from a view of women as the weaker, more vulnerable sex, who need to be protected (Gerber, 1991). In the context of domestic abuse, this has also been referred to as the Norm of Chivalry (Felson, 2000).

It has been argued that the reason domestic abuse organisations take a gendered approach is partly due to the significant financial and political power in feminist argument (Mederios & Straus, 2006). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the majority of intervention programmes focus on gendered, patriarchal explanations. Sadly, they also tend to be ineffective (e.g. Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004; Bates et al., 2017; Daly & Pelowski, 2000; Davis, Taylor, & Maxwell, 2000; Feder & Wilson, 2005). This suggests that the gendered views held by victim services may be hampering efforts to prevent abuse, particularly when exacerbated by differential police response based on sex, as evidenced above.

The evidence from prevalence rates and the inefficacy of gendered interventions shows suggest that a gendered approach is problematic. In addition, it has been used to dilute calls for financial and practical support for the victims of female perpetrators, from the formation of intervention programmes (e.g. Pleck, Pleck, Grossman, & Bart, 1978). Support for victims should not be treated as a zero-sum logic problem. Perhaps ironically, such explanations also neglect the complex nature of domestic abuse, given evidence that it is, for example, generally bi-directional in nature (Própero & Kim, 2009; Stets & Straus, 1992a, 1992b). In addition, abusers tend to be violent in other (i.e. non-intimate) relationships (Felson & Lane, 2010; Ford, 2006; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001). This means that the current dialogue may not only be hampering prevention efforts but takes

an overly-simplistic view of domestic abuse.

As has been seen, much of the dialogue centres around the idea of the benevolent female. The idea of the passive female is particularly noticeable when it comes to victim scripts, which is not consistent with the idea that men can be victims (Allen & Bradley, 2017; Eckstein, 2016). Despite the majority of violent crimes involving male victims (ONS, 2018), even when domestic abuse takes place within male-male relationships, society struggles to see men as victims (Brown, 2008). This idea is consistent with participants deeming female-perpetrated abuse as more acceptable than male-perpetrated abuse (Hamel, Desmarais, & Nicholls, 2007; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2003; Simon et al., 2001). The result is that men have trouble identifying as victims, fear being ridiculed for their abuse and, therefore, fail to disclose (Carmo, Grams, & Magalhães, 2011; Houston & McKirnan, 2007; Migiliaccio, 2001; Möller-Leimkuhler, 2002; Morgan, Williamson, Hester, Jones and Feder, 2014), or minimise their victimisation (Arnocky & Vaillencourt, 2014; Keeling & Mason, 2008). While disclosure rates seem to be increasing, as evidenced by recent historical abuse scandals, there is evidence that men are still at least three times less likely to report abuse (Bacchus, Buller, Ferrari, Brzank & Feder, 2018; Osbourne, Lau, Britton, & Smith, 2012; Pennington, 2014). This may help to explain why male, self-reported victimisation in anonymous questionnaires is much higher than the rate found in official records (Hester et al., 2017). Irrespective of the reasons why the discrepancy in rates occurs, there is a history of research focusing on the severity of outcomes, rather than prevalence of acts. This has meant that research often ignores female acts because the outcomes are not deemed to be as serious, which has hampered efforts to understand domestic abuse (Campbell, 2015).

### Why do Women Offend?

The evidence presented above suggests that the true prevalence of female-perpetrated domestic

abuse is closer to the self-reported rates than to the official statistics. Considering there is clear evidence that testosterone is linked to aggression (e.g. Björkqvist, 2018), and evolution should favour higher rates of dominance and aggression in men, near-equal rates of domestic abuse in men and women is surprising. However, the issue is not what the real rate is, the issue is that no matter which statistics one attends to, women do offend. The debate over to what extent they do so is hampering efforts to explain why, and what can be done to prevent abuse going forward.

Consistent with the aforementioned statistics, women appear to be more aggressive in intimate relationships, compared to other relationships (e.g. Cross et al., 2011; Bell & Naugle, 2007). By comparison, men seem to be less aggressive within such relationships, compared to their behaviour outwith said relationships (Cross et al., 2011). The reason why women may be more aggressive in intimate relationships may be that women normally engage in inhibitory control due to the risk of retaliation, perhaps because of fear of injury (Davidovic et al., 2011; Taylor & Epstein, 1967). However, in intimate relationships they may feel safe from retaliation (Fiebert & Gonzalaz, 1997). Therefore, when faced with the threat of losing their mate, through female-female competition, mate-poaching, infidelity, etc., females may resort to coercive, controlling, or directly aggressive strategies, knowing that their partner is unlikely to retaliate. Importantly, the women in this scenario may also feel that such behaviour will be condoned, or at least not punished, at a societal level (Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997).

This abuse most likely takes place in a cycle of mutually escalating conflict, rather than as an active strategy to establish dominance and gain control, which is often presumed of male perpetrators (Dalton, Drozd, & Wong, 2006; Dragiewicz, 2008; Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1997; Kimmel, 2002; Swan, Gambone, Caldwell, Sullivan, & Snow, 2008). Jealousy and sexual possessiveness have long been held as the dominant predictive factors of men's violence against women (Wilson & Daly, 1992; 1996). Yet examinations of men's and women's motivations for

domestic abuse perpetration have found that women are more likely than men to perpetrate domestic abuse because of anger or jealousy towards their partner (Harned, 2001). This finding simultaneously conflicts with the claim that women use aggression towards their partners in a reactive way, and that men are the more jealous and aggressive sex (Kimmel, 2002; O’Leary, 2000; Studd & Gattiker, 1991; Wilson & Daly, 1992). However, it is consistent with an evolutionary explanation of domestic abuse as a strategy to avoid extra-marital relations and to ensure resource-acquisition is directed to the pair’s mutual offspring, rather than offspring of extra-marital relationships.

Future research is needed to unpack the motives behind domestic abuse, however, and to explore the extent to which such abuse is selected for evolutionarily. Such endeavours may also benefit from investigating proximate factors, including attachment style (see Buunk, 1997; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990), the link between jealousy and surveillance behaviour (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005; Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1998), the link between anger and female-perpetrated abuse (e.g. Caldwell, Swan, Allan, Sullivan, & Snow, 2009; Fiske, 2004; Kimmel, 2002; Stuart, Moore, Hellmuth, Ramsey, & Kahler, 2006), the role of personality factors (e.g. Thornton et al., 2010, Fowler, 2002), and the predictors of psychological aggression (e.g. Gormley & Lopez, 2010).

### *Sexual Assault*

In this final section, the topic of sexual assault will be explored. As is the case with domestic abuse, ascertaining the prevalence of sexual assault is difficult, particularly when the abuse is female-perpetrated. Irrespective of perpetrator or victim sex, it is known that only a minority of cases are reported, with many factors combining to explain non-disclosure, including societal attitudes towards victims (see e.g. Khan, Hirsch, Wamboldt, & Mellins, 2018). While discussions

generally focus on female victims, there is also substantial disparity between the prevalence rate for male victims in official case statistics (1.2-8%; e.g. Faller, 1989), victim studies (4%-24.4% e.g. Heil, Simmons, Burton, 2010; Williams & Bierie, 2015), offender self-report studies (Denov, 2003), and self-report child abuse cases (58%; Faller, 1989). It has been suggested that, just as with domestic abuse, arrest rates grossly underestimate female-perpetrated abuse (Saradjian, 2010). While self-report studies remain controversial (Ballinger, 1996), a broad range of samples, including child report and victim data suggest that approximately one third of cases involve at least one female perpetrator (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2009; Cortoni, Babahishin, & Rat, 2017; Denov, 2003; NSPCC, 2007).

As with domestic abuse, researchers have argued that our understanding of sexual abuse has been hampered by the idea of the nurturing non-sexual female (Denov, 2004). While the majority of adult victims are female (Snyder, 2000), the traditional societal view of women leads to the assumption that *only* women can be victims (Byers & O'Sullivan, 1998; Elshtain, 1993; Mendel, 1995; Denov, 2003). Therefore, when women engage in sexual abuse, it is often claimed that they are engaging in misguided attempts at intimacy (Denov, 2003; Hetherton, 1999), or are disturbed, abnormal (Blancette & Brown, 2006; DeKeseredy, 2009). Such a dialogue interprets the offender as a victim (Ford, 2006). This is particularly likely if the woman has co-offenders, despite women in such cases generally having previous, solo offences (Heil et al., 2010), and such cases (i.e. multi-perpetrator cases) being in the minority (Williams & Bierie, 2015).

As was noted when discussing domestic abuse, the dialogue of the benevolent female negatively impacts their victims. It is acknowledged that under-reporting by male sexual abuse victims is a significant problem (Johnson & Shrier, 1987; Mitchell & Morse, 1998), especially if the perpetrator was the victim's mother (Rosencrans, 1997). This is exacerbated by the fact that a significant portion of boys are abused by women (Faller, 1989). While there is growing awareness



of this neglect, particularly with regards to child sexual exploitation, these data stand in sharp contrast to the stereotypical view that female perpetrators do not exist (Freund, Heasman, Racansky, & Glancy 1984), or are so rare as to be insignificant (Mathis, 1972).

According to Anderson and Struckman-Johnson (1998), traditional arguments are problematic in that they suggest that women are not sexually aggressive (Anderson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998). This is based on research that, for example, university students perceive male-perpetrated abuse as being fundamentally different from female-perpetrated sexual aggression, with the latter not deemed as being harmful to the victim (Broussard, Wagner, & Kazelskis, 1991). Indeed, even the law takes a gendered approach, being bound in gender-specific terminology (Keenan & Maitland, 1999). For example, the legal definition of rape in the UK means that women cannot be perpetrators (Sexual Offences Act, 2003).

Despite this, sexual abuse leads to a wide range of physical and psychological issues, including: depression, anxiety, aggression, low self-esteem, sexual difficulties, PTSD, substance abuse, Borderline personality disorder, self-harm (e.g. Berliner & Elliott, 2002; Briere & Runtz, 1993; Denov, 2004; Sgrio & Sargent, 1993). There are no known sex differences in the negative outcomes experienced by the victim, no interaction between the victim and perpetrator sex in determining outcomes, and no differences in outcomes based on perpetrator sex (Briere & Elliott, 2003). However, there is evidence that male victims are more likely to be disbelieved (Hetherington, 1999), particularly when abused by their mother (Denov, 2004; Eliot, 1993).

The academic literature has debated whether such women are predisposed to offending, or whether childhood experiences predict future behaviours and actions. The prevailing opinion is that sexual offending is a consequence of adverse childhood experiences and trauma manifesting in actions and behaviours (Willis & Levenson, 2016). However, a counter-argument is that sexual offending and sexual harassment is gendered, predominantly caused by a desire to maintain sex-

based status when threatened (Berdahl, 2007).

### Why Do Women Offend?

Apart from murder, sexual crimes are seen as the most heinous acts a human can commit, particularly if the victim is a child. Despite this, evolutionary psychologists have not shied away from explanations of why sexual assault, including rape, occurs. Two of the most prominent are that either rape is reproductively advantageous to the perpetrator (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000), or that it is a by-product of other adaptations, such as a desire for sex without investing in the copulatory partner (Symons, 1979). In support of the former, rapists tend to target women during their peak reproductive years (Felson & Cundiff, 2012). Moreover, there is evidence that pregnancy is more likely to occur in cases of rape than when sex is consensual (Gottschall & Gottschall, 2003). When the sexual assault relates to an intimate partner, evolutionary psychologists have posited similar arguments to those that posed to explain domestic abuse; namely, that rape acts as a means of sperm competition (Goetz & Shackelford, 2009). However, these arguments are gendered in their nature, and so cannot be easily applied to instance of female-perpetrated abuse.

The most profound typology to explain female sex offending was developed by Matthews, Matthews, and Speltz (1991). They distinguish between two types of offending (solo & co-offending), which include variants in behaviour from victim characteristics, offending characteristics, and predispositions originating from childhood trauma (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Morag, & Campbell, 2016). It is proposed that within each of these two types of offending behaviour there are two sub-types. For solo offenders, behaviour occurs independently, and the perpetrator does not consider her actions to be criminal – the relationship is seen as legitimate and consensual. The victim characteristic typically involves younger males; arguably due to the inability to form healthy adult relationships (Weinsheimer, Woiwod, Coburn, Chong, & Connolly, 2017). This aetiology of

this offending behaviour is caused by a history of physical and/or sexual abuse, and consequently women exert this behaviour (i.e. sexual assault) towards her own children or child acquaintances (Wijkman, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2010). Researchers have proposed that this may operate through a biological mechanism, as a result of overproduction of hormones (Anda, Butchart, Felitti, & Brown, 2010). There is some empirical support for this type of offender existing (Willis & Leveson, 2016).

The second sub-type of female sexual offending behaviour is co-offending (Matthews et al., 1991); though, as discussed earlier, the majority are solo offenders. As with the solo offenders, there are two sub-sets: coerced and accompanied. Coerced offending behaviour is typically initiated by a romantically involved male; either a husband or boyfriend. Females who often engage in this behaviour demonstrate high levels of emotional dependency and desire approval and intimacy with their co-offender. It can be argued that the aetiology of this offending behaviour mirrors that of “Intergenerationally Predisposed”; where the offender struggles with social interactions and is inept in social situations, thereby engaging in sexual offending to gain approval and intimacy from their male partner (Matthews et al., 1991). This theoretical framework is problematic because it ignores the fact that the majority of such offenders will have previous, solo offences.

Due to the nature of the relationship between the female offender and their co-offender, victim characteristics of this behaviour differs from that of solo offending. Within co-offending victims are typically of a close familial relation, often being children of the women due to exposure of manipulation from their mother, and the typical sexual urge from the male co-offender. It is believed that familial relations are at the highest victim risk due to the manipulation by the primary care giver, and sexual behaviour manifests from typical care giver duties like bathing, changing diapers, and dressing their child (Weinsheimer et al., 2017). In terms of an accompanied offender,

behaviour is not sexually coerced by the co-offender, rather the female may even initiate the offending themselves. Victim characteristics mirror that of coerced offenders, similarly due to manipulation of a primary care giver role.

To support the assumptions between the differences in characteristics between solo and co-offending, Miller and Marshall (2018) compared solo and co-offending variables of psychopathology, victim and offender characteristics, and victimisation history. In terms of psychopathology, results indicated that solo offenders demonstrated higher scores of antisocial personality symptoms than co-offending females; who, on the contrary, demonstrated higher levels of depressive symptoms (Miller & Marshall, 2018). For victim characteristics, solo offenders were more likely to have non-related victims, whereas co-offenders were more likely to have female victims of a familial relationship (Miller & Marshall, 2018). Furthermore, co-offending females were more likely to be victims of physical and/or sexual abuse throughout their life compared to solo offenders (Miller & Marshall, 2018). However, by not comparing female and male offenders, and by basing the typology on what may be a superficial detail (number of offenders) the research in this area does not allow comparisons based on the sex of the offender, nor does it provide the richness of detail around cause and rehabilitation as male typologies.

Other typologies exist, though with substantial overlap in concepts. Vandiver and Kercher (2004) included variants of behaviour but added “homosexual criminal” and the “aggressive homosexual offender” types. The homosexual criminal is argued to be an older woman who manipulates young children and adolescent women into engaging in sexual acts, typically for economic gain (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). The aggressive homosexual offender mirrors behaviour of the homosexual criminal, but victims are mainly adult women. While such women may be heterosexual in orientation, this does not reflect their victim pattern, and most victims appear to be younger female children and, especially, their daughters (Atkinson, 1996).

Finally, focusing on sexual harassment, Berdahl (2007) has argued the behaviour is derived from an urgency to protect or enhance one's social status against threat. This concept adopts explanations for sexual harassment with an array of arguments for hereto and non-heteronormative relationships alike. To elaborate, although the discrepancies between men and women mean that women will less likely to threaten men due to their power imbalance, this does not mean harassment by women towards men does not happen. Women may feel the need to protect their sex-based status and in order to do so will target men and derogate him in order to threaten him based on his masculine abilities.

In terms of female-male sex-based harassment, women will protect their sex-based status by derogating a man's capacity associated with women skills, typically in the context of child care duties, and even in the context of masculine trait and skills. Furthermore, they may threaten men by negatively comparing them to other men, thereby suggesting incompetence, weakness, or insufficient masculinity (Waldo, Berdahl, & Fitzgerald, 1998). This behaviour from women is an attempt to overpower and dominant men in a way to demote his own status as a man. Although these actions are made to cause distress, it has been shown that these forms of harassment are often met with a neutral response (Waldo et al., 1998).

In comparison, female-female sex-based harassment involves the undermining of women in sex-specific ways. For example, a woman who feels that her sex-based status is in competition or at threat with another woman will attempt to outperform another woman in typical feminine roles. These include ideals such as beauty, warmth, and mothering. In attempt to demote a woman's sex-based status, women will resort to judging sex specific roles and behaviour and demoralise her using insults such as slut, ugly, and a bad mother. These insults further imply to the victim that they have failed at being a woman, and have no sense of feminine ideals which, therefore, carries the threat of social rejection.

While the theories and empirical results that have been discussed are informative in attempting to understand female aggression, they do not directly explain why such strategies may be adaptive. Evolutionary psychology has only recently begun to explore the potential advantages of short-term mating for women, but it has largely neglected why more exploitative tactics occur. Therefore, considerable research focus is needed in this area, if a full overview of the evolutionary underpinnings of sexual assault, including forced penetration, are to be understood.

### *Conclusion*

This review of the literature shows that, contrary to previously held beliefs, women are active agents who proactively utilise aggression and abuse. Women who engage in abusive behaviour are not well-understood, with considerably more research needed. Women who perpetrate domestic abuse appear to be a heterogeneous group, who share multiple characteristics with males who perpetrate abuse. Research is needed that investigates this group and should focus on alternate explanations of aggression, such as the biological approach (Ali & Naylor, 2013), the neuroendocrinal approach, (Campbell, 2008), the non-gendered approach (George & Stith, 2014), or looking at domestic abuse in the context of violence in other interactions (Dutton, 2012). In terms of sexual assault/harassment, very little is known about the motives for female-perpetrated abuse and evolutionary theories of why such abuse occurs are sadly lacking. We believe that this review shows the problems inherent in the dialogue around the “benevolent female”. While most women are loving, caring, productive members of society, they can also strategize, manipulate, and abuse - just as men can and do. Women need to be treated as active, competent agents and, where they engage in such reprehensible behaviour, be called to account for their actions. We are not passively awaiting the actions of men. We are more than receptacles vetting male genes.

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