

‘That might not be our reality, but it’s her’s’ - Exploring Non-offending Female Perceptions of Serious Female Perpetrated Crime

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Abstract

Research has identified punitive and dismissive perceptions towards serious female offenders, discarding their criminal ability. Yet there is a lack of qualitative research, understanding why these perceptions are held. The aim of this study was therefore to explore non-offending female perceptions towards serious female offending, understanding why these views are held and whether viewpoints shift following the provision of contextual information. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of non-offending women aged 20-62; shown real-life criminal case study examples to elicit conversation. These interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged; 1) varying crime characteristics; 2) sympathy towards women who kill; 3) crime inducing social factors. Results demonstrated widespread sympathy and leniency towards serious female offenders; namely women who kill abusive partners and children. However, across all interviews the importance of context and circumstance in shaping participant perceptions was clear.

Key Words: *Female offenders; women who kill; public perceptions; empathy; crime context*

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Introduction

In the UK, theoretical explanations and public perceptions of female offending have gradually altered over time. Historically, women were viewed as invisible (Flanagan & Valiulis, 2011) and thus so was female offending due to their assumed incapability (Tutella, 2023) of acting independently. However, female offending has become an increasingly focal topic in both academia and popular media, yet not necessarily due to the increasing prevalence rates but rather increasing visibility with female-perpetrated crime now being more readily viewed as a social issue (Smart, 2013). In 1903 Holloway Prison was established as a female-only prison (Davies, 2018), in what marked the beginning of the recognition of female offending as a unique social issue. In fact, seven further female prisons were established around the same time in UK (Prison Reform Trust, 2023), highlighting female-perpetrated crime not only as a distinct social issue but female offenders as a separate group requiring different treatment from male offenders. Women constituted 51% of those within the Criminal Justice System in 2021; with only 21% being convicted (Ministry of Justice, 2022). Despite low rates of conviction for female offenders overall, there has been a gradual increase in the female prison population in recent years. Today, over 3,500 women are imprisoned throughout the UK (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) predict that by November 2024 this number will rise even further (Ministry of Justice, 2023), demonstrating the increasing punitive treatment of female offenders in viewing them as excessively dangerous due to the unexpected nature of their actions. Notably, theft from shops was the most common offence committed by incarcerated women in 2022 (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). Opposing societal gender expectations, 55% of female arrests were for violence against the person (Ministry of Justice, 2022). Likewise, Australian official statistics show that 650,000 men experienced IPV from a female partner (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Additionally, there is continuous underreporting (Sowersby et al, 2022) of female-male intimate partner violence (IPV) in the UK, with a lack of research surrounding male-victimisation (Tilbrook et al, 2010). This highlights the public's underestimation of women's capabilities to act violently as forms of IPV are typically assumed to be male-perpetrated. With this assumption, women who exert violence against their partners are deemed to be exceeding gender boundaries. Despite this view causing different treatment towards these women, actions are often excessively harsh due to the perceived crossing of gendered boundaries. Further highlighting women's capability to commit serious crime, women constitute 54% of perpetrators of child maltreatment with mothers specifically making up 75% of biological parent perpetrators (Hurren et al, 2018). This demonstrates women's role within more violent crime even within instances of co-offending with a male, surprising to the lay population. Expansively, in cases of child homicide, quantifying

total child mortality is highly complex due to the definition of infanticide; the killing of a child under 12 months old by the biological mother who is deemed to be suffering from a mental disorder (Aho et al, 2017). Here the characteristics of a mother and the presence of a psychological disorder is required in law to define the killing of a child under one. Thus, statistics demonstrating infanticide rates are scarce. However, over 70% of mothers commit parental homicides (Stöckl et al, 2017) reiterating a woman's role within violent crimes, specifically crimes against children. This is something that inverts gendered expectations of women as nurturing creating punitive attitudes towards them.

However, despite these high rates of serious female-perpetrated crime, increasing numbers of women entering the Criminal Justice System (CJS) report elevated levels of complex issues regarding financial and housing concerns, self-reported poor mental health and drug and alcohol problems (Ministry of Justice, 2022). This created increasing interest surrounding the crime-inducing factors of female offending. Therefore, previous research focused upon this and female pathways to offending, finding that various environmental factors (Al Hassan, 2021; Barlow & Weare, 2019), a history of violence and trauma (Widom & Osborn, 2021) and anti-social relations (Cauffman et al, 2015; Shepherd et al, 2019) can increase the likelihood of female crime involvement. Admittedly, there is increasing interest and thus research concerning both lay and professional perceptions of serious female offenders. Yet, despite this foundational understanding, there is a lack of qualitative research in understanding why lay perceptions are this way, hindering the tackling of gender-related stigma previously highlighted as a barrier to seeking help (Milne, 2021; Rutter & Barr, 2021). Therefore, this research will explore non-offending female perceptions of serious female offenders in relation to various crimes yet with predominant focus upon child abuse and homicide of both partner and child (as separate offences). Research acknowledges studies demonstrating the link between female offenders and the attribution of harmful labels by both the media and the public (O'Donnell, 2016). With the research focus concerning the women, it felt appropriate to explore the topic via an all-female perspective as women may hold a better understanding of some of female offenders' emotions. Research also suggests that life experiences ultimately shape and influence human perception (Demski et al, 2017; Spence et al, 2011). Therefore, some women may have higher levels of emotion towards female offender's adverse experience subject to their own experiences and life events. This study captured the perceptions of women aged 20-62, allowing a diverse range of life events to be influential in shaping perceptions. This project concerns seeking non-offending female perceptions towards female offending and their rationale, seeking shifts in perceptions subsequent to the provision of contextual information.

Importance and Relevance

The seeming increase in serious female-perpetrated crime has been outlined, acknowledging social stigma's negative impact upon these women. Therefore, it is vital that the rationale is that public perceptions of serious female offenders are understood in dispersing the stigma surrounding women who commit crime. If the perpetuation of these perceptions persists so will the cycle of female offending. Therefore, if our understanding of female offenders and their reasons for offending increases, more targeted educational programmes can be developed to ensure that the public, policy makers and CJS stakeholders better understand the unique needs and realities of female offenders. Such knowledge and programs can then be cohesively used to disperse the stigma attached to female offenders. This can support these women to seek help as opposed to offending. Previous research demonstrates the harmful effects of negative stigmatisation towards female offenders in relation to their various crime types.

Research Objectives

Motivated by the lack of qualitative understanding, this research seeks to explore non-offending female perceptions towards serious female offending. This project will explore these perceptions through three research objectives (RO):

RO1: explore female perceptions towards serious female-perpetrated crime amongst a non-offending population to gain an understanding of the reasons that underpin these opinions; seeking any divergence within these subject to individual differences.

RO2: identify any changes in perception due to the provision of contextual information of specific female-perpetrated crime cases to fully understand lay female perceptions towards female offenders who commit various types of serious crime.

In achieving these objectives three sub-questions (SQ) will be answered to provide appropriate evidence. This dissertation will refer to them as SQ1, SQ2 and SQ3. The sub-questions include:

SQ1: How do these women perceive serious female offenders in relation to their various crime types? And why are these views held?

SQ2: How do these non-offending women understanding the crime inducing factors of female-perpetrated crime?

SQ3: How does the provision contextual information of female-perpetrated crime shape non-offending perceptions of female offenders?

Seeking answers to these sub-questions will allow research objectives to be answered, enabling a deeper understanding of non-offending individuals' perceptions to be gained. This will allow new educational programmes to be formed in spreading acceptance and support of female offenders' circumstances; with the hope that the social stigma surrounding serious female offenders will be reduced.

Literature Review

Female offending is becoming a central focus of governmental policy with the Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022-2025 (Ministry of Justice, 2023) aiming to reduce female imprisonment by tackling various precipitating factors and improve overall prison experiences. This chapter contextualizes the current study by primarily discussing theoretical and stereotypical views of female offending, followed by evidence-based explanations of female-perpetrated crime. Discussion will then turn to specific female-perpetrated crimes such as sexual offences (FSO), homicide, IPV, child abuse and infanticide. Both professional and public attitudes will also be discussed in relation to these various crime types. By the end of this chapter, existing evidence of the stereotypical depictions of female offenders and evidence-based crime-inducing factors will have been extensively reviewed. Alongside this, focus will have been given to each prominent female-perpetrated crime type in relation to the current knowledge gap surrounding public perceptions towards serious female offenders. This will contextualise the requirement of addressing the lack of qualitative understanding surrounding public perceptions of women who commit serious crime.

Historical Stereotypes Towards Women and Female Offending

Both theories of women and female offending will be discussed in relation to one another. Historical representations of women act as a foundation in which research concerning crime-inducing factors interrelates; providing context as to why female offenders are depicted in this way. Despite the ever-increasing focus upon female offending, women's association with crime has not always been so

prominent. Historically, women were viewed as passive (Eden, 2015) and unlike men did not possess the biological qualities to commit crime. It was assumed that women were submissive within their docility (Arrigo & Griffin, 2004; Bryson et al, 2014; Wesley, 2006), presenting women as incapable of offending. Additionally, due to women's situation within the private sphere, their public visibility was minimal and thus so was crime itself (Habermas, 1991). This denies women's agency, referring to "the recognition of the ability of the individual to make a semi-autonomous decision to act in a particular way." (Weare, 2013 p338). However, even in the acknowledgement of female criminality as a distinct social issue through the establishment of Holloway prison, female criminality was still perceived as insignificant (Smart, 2013). With this, women were viewed as inessential and again incapable offending. After World War I, female conviction rates for indictable offences increased (Heidensohn, 1968). With this came the emergence of the improper woman; those who failed to become a 'proper' woman (Lombroso & Ferrero, 1895), suggesting that female offenders were 'sick' as opposed to delinquent, as no 'true' feminine woman would act in this way (Heidensohn, 1985). In a turn of events, the Wolfenden Committee enacted legislation to diminish the visibility of more serious female offences like prostitution (Heidensohn, 1968), to prevent further atypical labels being attached to women. This ultimately caused a decline in prevalence rates of female offending and thus its social visibility. With female conviction rates continuing to increase after World War II, so did female crime visibility (Ferizović, 2020). This is widely considered to be a significant contributor to the emergence of gendered stereotyping in defining female offenders as mad, bad, and sad (Appignanesi, 2011); justifying their unfeminine actions.

Theories of Female Offenders

The mad, bad and sad typology (Appignanesi, 2011) describes away female-perpetrated crime due to its unfeminine nature, presenting violent women as non-human others (Rodgers, 2010). 'Mad' women are presented pathologically (Africa, 2010) suggesting suffering from a mental illness such as depression, personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and effects of childbirth. These conditions are depicted as affecting a woman's rational abilities (Appelbaum & Grisso, 1995), undermining a woman's sanity and thus reliability. Lin (2012) further suggests that illustrating women as blameless due to mental instability causes assumptions of irrationality towards female autonomy and ultimately its removal. More punitively, 'bad' women are presented as inherently evil (Berrington & Hokatukia, 2002) and deviant by nature (Africa, 2010); often being perceived as "cold, selfish and non-women" (Frigon, 1995 p34). Finally, 'sad' women are depicted to be suffering from depression due to experiences of domestic abuse or

unfaithful partners. Therefore, women are illustrated as victims of the social world, unable to cope with day-to-day pressures (Wilczynski, 1997; Morris, 1993). Such circumstances can induce irrational action due to increasing social pressure, aligning with the subservient depictions of the appropriate woman taking on amounting pressures that ultimately cause such outbursts. This enables wider explanations of female offending to be offered. Pollak's (1950) Chivalry Thesis refers to the protection of women by men in society due to their biological femininity, underpinned by men's masculine role to assert power over the inferior gender (Kane, 2021). Within the CJS, male social agents (police and judges) have been seen to practice this with more lenient treatment towards female offenders (MoJ, 2022; Pina Sanchez & Harris, 2020). However, selective treatment has been observed with chivalrous behaviour only been shown to women adhering to gender norms (Rodriguez, Curry & Lee, 2006) with those committing 'masculine' acts being treated more harshly (Cruz et al, 2023; Jones, 2009). Not only does this further affirm the rhetoric of agency denial in female offenders but it also contributes to the perpetuation of the stigma surrounding women who exceed gender boundaries, resulting in disproportionate treatment.

Historical Stereotypes and the Media

The narratives historical rooting has infiltrated into contemporary society and thus news media, perpetuating these stereotypes. Such assumptions are visible within media representations of female offenders (Easteal et al, 2015), where women are symbolically annihilated through the media's ignorance, trivialization and condemnation (Tuchman, 1978). Research found Appignanesi's depictions of women within media representations of cases, illustrating female offenders as victims of circumstance or domestic violence and abuse (DVA) (Barnett, 2005; Easteal et al, 2015; Farr, 2000, Jewkes, 2004; Morrissey, 2003). 'Bad' women are also depicted within the media, presenting women who abuse children as bad mothers, perpetuating women as doubly deviant (Barnett 2005; Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002; Huckerby, 2003) in being both bad women and mothers. The media is central within legal outcomes as it permeates individual thinking (Eisenwort, 2021; Roberts & Hough, 2005). However, studies show that contextual information explaining the female's actions is downplayed or discarded entirely (Easteal et al, 2021) by the media causing case misrepresentation. Such misrepresentations infiltrate lay perceptions, influencing the formation of opinion (Easteal et al, 2015). Public outrage to female offending is common due to its socially defined inexplicability, requiring officials to react accordingly to appease citizens (Bagozzi et al, 2023), often through punitive treatment. Relatively within previously discussed literature

these representations of women are used to neutralize (Pelvin, 2019) the blame of violent females as they do not “fit nicely” into expectations of women (McSweeney, 2021, p1).

Evidence-based explanations of female offending

Research surrounding female offending has predominantly concerned crime inducing factors with evidence highlighting the factors ‘complexities’ (Al Hassan, 2021). Yet within violent offences, a more multifaceted connection is found between situational and individual factors alongside social cognitive variables (Polaschek, 2018). Current research offers experiential, psychological and environmental explanations of female offending. Notably, both male and female offenders share similar crime-inducing experiences (Boduszek et al., 2022; Brennan et al, 2012) causing crossovers in explanations. Yet women are apparent in being more deeply affected and subjected to these experiences compared to males.

Experiential Factors

There are a multitude of widely interconnected factors explaining female offending. Yet experiential explanations are among the more prominent. Yet due to its intersectional nature (Anser et al, 2020) there are various inducing factors here. Therefore, the more central explanations of adverse experiences, support and crime-involved relations will be discussed here.

Adverse Experiences

There is widespread evidence for the role of adverse experiences in increasing the likelihood of offending (see Zelechowski, 2016) and specifically, a prominent risk in increasing female-perpetrated crime (Bowles, Dehart & Webb, 2012). Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) amongst women are evidenced to cause higher risks of violent offending in later life (Asscher et al, 2015; Hubbard & Pratt, 2002; Chapple et al, 2021) with Hubbard and Pratt (2002) demonstrating the strong relation between childhood physical abuse and female-perpetrated violence. Furthermore, over half of Belknap and Holsinger’s (2006) sample recognised the significant role of violent experiences in women’s offending behaviour. Agenda Alliance’s (2022) report further supports this, with victims of abuse explaining that maltreatment drove their motivation to offend. Research continues to support this relation as women exposed to child sexual abuse were evidenced to be at significant greater risk of sexually offending (Widom & Massey, 2015; Willmott, Boduszek & Robinson, 2018). This displays female-perpetrated violence as a coping mechanism to adverse experiences, diminishing levels of culpability. Reviewed literature largely suggests the presence of

Bandura and Walters (1997) social learning theory whereby an individual exerts certain behaviour due to individual experiences that frame such actions as acceptable. This again could be seen to remove women's autonomy in placing the blame upon adverse experiences. More specifically, Barton-Crosby and Hudson (2021) found that women committing IPV were 'victims' of ACE's, impacting upon individual ability to build healthy relationships and the development of accepting attitudes towards violence.

Support (lack of)

For some, a lack of support increases the risk of offending with young female offenders expressing experiences of long waiting lists and feeling unimportant to support services (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2022). This demonstrates a state-controlled factor that holds the capability to induce female crime, suggesting the requirement to highlight women's needs in tackling female offending's root causes. Research also suggests that female offenders are overlooked and ignored by society (Fitzgibbon & Stengel, 2018) especially in policy and planning for support services (Foley, 2008; Genders & Player, 2020; Swavola et al, 2016). This evidences women's motivations to offend due to the social dismissal of their experiences (Willmott & Ioannou, 2017). Support workers expressed that female offenders frequently explained crime as needs-responsive due to lack of alternatives and insufficient societal support (Leese, 2018), demonstrating female criminality as an act of desperation (Greenwood et al, 2023). Furthermore, female offenders view prison as a 'safe haven' (Leese, 2018, p.n.k), accessing the support unavailable in society, highlighting the urgent need for sufficient support as it clear that women offend to access help. Reports also highlight that female offenders are reluctant to seek support in fear that it will be held against their case (Vince & Evison, 2021). Additionally, Milne (2021) discovered that the increasing societal pressure to meet the social expectations of 'being feminine' can frequently induce crime. More personally, Al Hassan (2021) observed that offenders discussed involvement with anti-social groups alongside serial offenders with studies evidencing the importance of positive social networks and peer relationships in preventing criminal involvement (Mahoney & Karatzias, 2012; Sherretts & Willmott, 2016; Wright et al, 2013). This is vital in reducing female recidivism (Rutter, 2019: Rutter & Barr, 2021) further evidencing its positive influence (Barnett et al., 2021; Willmott et al., 2016). Culturally, some women offend due to fear of bringing shame upon both their culture and families (Calabrese, 2020) often seen within infanticide and IPV.

Crime Involved Relations

Much of the research surrounding this factor demonstrates significant linkage to female gang crime. Several studies found that gang-involved women often have several family members, fully entrenched within gang life (De la Rue & Espelage, 2014; Merrin et al, 2015). Miller (2002) found 71% of gang-involved women have multiple family members active within gang crime, demonstrating the influential nature of socialization within crime-related groups upon female-offending. Interestingly, studies show that being associated with crime involved peers creates stigma, making it increasingly hard to obtain employment. Therefore, a criminal career appears like the only option (Saladino et al, 2021). Moreover, female offending is often collateral to co-offending due to a partner's criminal involvement, as most women have no previous criminal involvement, prior to their co-offences (Barlow and Weare ,2019). Furthermore, some women expressed experiences of coercive control here (Comartin et al, 2018; Hulley, 2021), creating pressure to co-operate in offending. Expansively, DeCou et al (2015) found that co-offending women often 'give-in' to their partner in wanting to please them, displaying the pressuring influence of the male within co-offending. Thus, male perpetrated IPV should be considered when exploring women's involvement in co-offending as some females engage to avoid further abuse, demonstrating the interrelatedness of women's crime-inducing factors (Chapman,2013). These factors are part of a relationship between the mental and the experiential as social occurrences can often contribute to psychological conditions (Alegría et al, 2018).

Psychological Factors

Various psychological conditions are known to contribute to both offending risk and trajectories. Here, such conditions are discussed as consequent to some of the previously discussed crime explanations, highlighting the factor's intersectionality. Depression is common amongst female offenders (de Vogel & Nicholls, 2016; Hidayati et al, 2023; Muller & Kempes, 2016) with studies showing its predictive relationship with offending women (Hornsveld et al, 2018). Amongst currently incarcerated women, depression was found to arise due to a lack of emotional support (Narayan et al, 2017) with over 30% experiencing depressive symptoms (Tyler et al, 2019). This relates with previous discussion concerning how a lack of support contributes to female offending with depression being a consequence of this. More specifically, depression and PTSD are commonly found within women who commit IPV (Carlson & Shafer, 2010; Scott et al, 2016; Trabold et al, 2015), due to their offence resulting from previous abuse. Yet such explanations perpetuate the 'sad' stereotype, explaining away their actions through adverse experiences.

Trauffer & Windom (2017) found that PTSD moderates the relationship between child maltreatment and violent offending, with women being found to be of increased risk of violent offending due to their ACE's (Pflugradt et al, 2018). Furthermore, Trägårdh and colleagues (2023) identified that ACE's can increase the development of mental disorders with violent female offenders demonstrating high rates of such experiences, further supporting the inter-relational impact ACE's and poor mental health have upon behaviour. Alternatively, Milne, in Wheelwright (2023) suggests that within infanticide cases such conditions can cause dissociation from action, until the episode has passed when the mother realizes what has occurred. However, some results are compounded by the wide use of quantitative methods but more specifically the use of self-report questionnaires. This limits the validity of assumptions that can be drawn from this data, providing no in-depth insight into the experiences that led to the condition's development. In using this research, it must be remembered that not all women with these conditions act violently (Murphy et al, 2023) nor does this exclude those without mental illness from becoming criminally involved.

Environmental Factors

Referring to the situational contexts capable of inducing crime-related responses, various environmental factors are also apparent in inducing female criminality. Relative to the current study the role of education, unemployment and living conditions will be discussed more briefly due to their lesser prevalence in participants responses. Research suggests that problematic educational experiences increase the likelihood of offending (Azad & Ginner Hau, 2020; Andrews & Bonta, 2010) with disrupted education being more common amongst repeat offenders compared to one-time offenders (Al Hassan, 2021). Specifically, school exclusion is evidenced to induce low social value, increasing the likelihood of future offending due to being 'othered' (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Furthermore, educational attainment inequalities also increase crime involvement (Chu et al, 2021) where those with higher levels of education are significantly less crime-involved than their peers with lower educational attainment. However, some of these studies based upon non-UK populations, limiting the direct applicability to the UK, causing a lack of generalizability. Furthermore, the relationship between unemployment and female offending is well evidenced (Ayang et al, 2022; Naffine & Gale, 1989; Flower, 2010), with 40% of female offenders being unemployed at the time of the offence (Radović-Stojanović et al, 2023); demonstrating the correlation between rising rates of unemployment and female-perpetrated crime (Sheely, 2020). Additionally, the ongoing cost-of-living crisis continues to disproportionately affect women, causing the requirement to source basic products in illegitimate ways (Agenda Alliance, 2022), highlighting unemployment as a driver of female offending.

Further demonstrating environmental factors crime-inducing ability, poverty and living in high crime areas also increase the likelihood of female criminality. Women's criminalisation is often linked to economic circumstance alongside other environmental factors (Malloch & McIvor, 2013) with Nnam and Arua (2021) highlighting poverty's centrality in women's criminality with female offenders themselves expressing its role within motivations to offend (Khalid & Khan, 2013). Subsequently, linking to previous discussion, lower educational achievement increases the risk of poverty due to reduced financial incomes (Shahid, 2023), demonstrating the complexity of female offenders' circumstances with crime being used as a last resort. The government themselves acknowledge the role of living in deprived areas upon female offending (Public Health England, 2018) with over 40% of crime occurring in underprivileged areas (Trust of London, 2023). Damm and Dustman (2014) build upon this highlighting that those brought up in more deprived areas are increasingly likely to commit crime, due to being socialised into antisocial behaviour. This research highlights the complex role of environmental factors upon female offending trajectories, contextualising the need to understand public perceptions towards these women in reducing the current stigma towards serious female offenders. Evidence-based explanations of female offending have been discussed, highlighting the in-depth research knowledge. The factors interrelatedness has also been illustrated, underpinning the complexity of female offending and therefore the need to understand non-offending perceptions towards female offenders to disperse stigma. This will allow sufficient community and state help to be provided to them, reducing the risk of crime.

Perceptions of Serious Female-Perpetrated Crime

Whilst violent offending amongst women remains low (18% compared to 82% among men) (MoJ, 2022), serious female-perpetrated crime still occurs. Research indicates that crimes including (female) sexual offences (FSO), homicide, IPV, child abuse and infanticide are covered disproportionately in the media when they occur. Therefore, it is important to review the research evidence that has previously examined public perceptions towards serious female offending to help better understand how public thinking is influenced. Understanding these perceptions can greatly aid the dispersal of the gender-related stigma currently attached to female offenders, creating a more supportive society, encouraging these women to seek help as opposed to coping through crime.

Professional and Public Perceptions

Research demonstrates that public perceptions of serious female offenders seek to explain away female-perpetrated violence due to the violation of socially defined gender norms (Hine et al, 2022). Recent research has centered around identifying both professional and public perceptions of serious female offenders from a largely quantitative perspective, collecting data from all genders. Yet, there remains a lack of sufficient research into lay perceptions of serious female offenders to fully understand public opinion. Public perceptions tend to demonstrate stereotypical views, regarding women as biologically incapable of violence without a valid explanation. Within FSO, IPV and intimate-partner homicide (IPH) lay individuals suggest that women must have been victimized (Buckley, 2020; McLaughlin, 2013; Walker et al, 2018) to act so violently. Mostly observed within IPV cases, the public believe that a female-perpetrated violence was pre-emptive in preventing further abuse (Bair-Merritt, 2010), justifying her actions. Yet research evidences the media's role in perpetuating stereotypes due to society's reliance upon this source to gain knowledge of social issues (Willis et al, 2010). As seen within the case of Sally Challen who was labelled by the media as "THE ABUSED" (Vonow & O'Shea, 2019), removing the belief of her rational ability and thus full responsibility. Unsurprisingly, female sex offenders' existence are publicly denied (Buckley, 2020), removing women's aggressive capabilities. However, professionals appear to be more open-minded, acknowledging women's ability to act aggressively, recognizing the crimes severity regardless of gender (Christensen, 2021). This demonstrates a less rose-tinted outlook towards serious female offenders, dismissing historical notions of women. These attitudes demonstrate the importance of understanding in shaping perceptions as professional's have access to patient information and frequently engage with them, ultimately impacting upon their perceptions. Comparatively, some lay individuals across various studies viewed teacher-child sexual abuse as an achievement by the student, with minimal harm being caused due to the perpetrator's gender (Bradbury & Martellozzo, 2021; Houghton et al, 2023; Zack et al, 2018), highlighting the biasing role of perpetrator-gender in public perceptions of crime severity. However, most studies here, utilized quantitative methods, causing a lack of in-depth understanding as to why perceptions are this way. Thus, a qualitative approach is adopted in the current study to gain a more insightful understanding into public perceptions. Similarly, women are also viewed as criminally incapable through mental illness. This is largely seen within infanticide, where perceptions frame these women as mentally unstable and deserving of leniency, displaying the public belief of a reduced capacity to make rational decisions (Udala, 2020), subscribing to the mad stereotype. However, punitive perceptions are also expressed, framing women as the main perpetrators of child

abuse and homicide, despite evidence of the crimes co-offensive nature (Sparks et al, 2023; Weisz & Wiersma, 2011). However, some findings are confounded by unrealistic and sensationalized interview materials causing a lack of validity due to the potential biases these resources may create. Therefore, the current study utilises real-life criminal case studies, removing any sensationalist language to avoid priming participant responses. Despite previous research, media narratives neglect information capable of evoking empathetic responses (Eisenwort et al, 2021), othering violent women (Barlow, 2015) and presenting them as evil (Niblock, 2018; Harris et al, 2022). This perpetuates the historical stereotypes of women with such assumptions affecting women's motivation to seek help due to fear of judgement (Grady et al, 2019; Levenson et al, 2017). Previous literature provides a direction of opinion towards female offenders, yet the underlying rationale remains unclear due to the research's quantitative nature. Furthermore, this area has not been researched from an all-female perspective. Such knowledge would be highly beneficial as women can be the best individuals to understand these women's experiences, providing insight into how these women come to offend and their treatment succeeding their offences. Gaining knowledge of these perceptions is vital as public responses to social issues like crime have a significant impact upon legislation (Jennings et al, 2020; Walgrave & Soontiens, 2023) and governmental interventions, that can aid female offenders' desistance. This emphasizes the need to understand public perceptions of female offending in ensuring these women are receiving sufficient support.

Methodology

Research Design

The inductive method of qualitative semi-structured interviews was selected to gather data. Semi-structured interviews were used as an advantageous tool for allowing participant elaboration on certain areas (Dörnyei, 2007, p136). Due to this research being concerned with investigating perceptions towards female offenders and how contextual information may cause shifts in attitudes, this tool proved most suitable. This method also ensures that interviews remain focused yet still allows the exploration of emerging leads (Adeoye-Olatunde & Omolola, 2021). The approach suggests that an objective reality is non-existent, and that reality can be seen as socially constructed (Maxwell, 2012). With the current study involving the investigation of public perceptions, seeking explanation by disentangling meaning from its social construction (Haq, 2015) and therefore gaining in-depth knowledge was vital in achieving a deeper understanding. Qualitative interviews are conversational in style, building up researcher-participant

rapport, central in subjective research (Zhang & Okazawa, 2022) with the natural flow gathering an in-depth understanding of the rationale beneath perceptions towards serious female offenders. This demonstrates the methods suitability as it provides individual rationale in the formation of perceptions, aligning with research interests and objectives. Despite its suitability, previous research is largely quantitative (see Buckley, 2020; Christiansen, 2021; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Zack & Dirks, 2018), causing a lack of validity and thus understanding as to why these opinions are present due to numeric data being collected. Therefore, this research, will aid the dispersal of gender-related stigma surrounding serious female-offenders. This is highly important as stereotyping and fear of judgment currently create barriers for offending women to seek support causing them turn to crime. A pilot study was conducted to refine the accuracy and efficiency of the research process (In, 2017) whilst maintaining effective methodology use. This enabled an approximate running time to be gaged (approximately 55 minutes) alongside any ineffective questions to be refined (Turner & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022). The problematic phrasing of some questions was highlighted, requiring minor alterations to allow a shared understanding of the question to be gained. This need was identified by the participant asking for question clarity or repetition in some instances. Yet the pilot study demonstrated the questions suitability in gathering sufficient data to analyse in answering the research question.

Sampling

Snowball sampling was employed, primarily utilizing the researcher's personal network to recruit females meeting the inclusion criteria. Succeeding this, these participant's networks were also utilized, in further recruiting participants via their connections. The selection criteria adopted were that participants must be aged 18 or above and identify as a female. With non-offending perceptions being sought, having a criminal record acted as an exclusion criterion. Yet with participants primarily being gathered from the researcher's own personal network it was already known that these individuals did not have a criminal record. However, it was outlined to these participants that any individuals sought from their network must not hold a criminal record. In total 10 female participants aged 20-62 were recruited, adopting cross-sectional approach, with the varied age-range captured. This is important as age is "central to human experience" (Eckert, 2017, p1) with life events largely influencing personal perception (Doshier & Lu, 2020). Thus, engagement with a wider age-range was necessary to seek any similarities or differences in opinion due to exposure to differing experiences. Participants were recruited via email, providing a brief background to the study and its eligibility requirements.

Research Materials

Pre-planned questions ensured that key areas were covered (Fylan 2005) and that interviews remained on-topic, whilst still enabling interesting leads to be investigated. The interview schedule (See Appendix 6) adopted a funneling technique (Rosala & Moran, 2022; Roller, 2020), beginning with questions relating to perceptions of women, leading onto questions surrounding female offenders and lower-level crimes. This gradually funnelled down into questions surrounding serious female offenders. Interview questions act as indicators of opinion, tackling the subject from more broad alternative perspectives which are then analyzed and used to create knowledge-based conclusions, beginning to fill the knowledge gap discussed earlier. The interview schedule was specifically created to avoid the inclusion of any leading questions that may prime participants to respond in a particular way (Patton, 2014) causing biases. Real-life criminal case studies were utilized within the interviews (see Appendix 6), triggering the stimulation of discussion, specifically beneficial surrounding sensitive topics (Murphy et al, 2023). This enabled the discussion of various types of female offences in less threatening ways (Schwappach et al, 2013). Several questions were asked in relation to these, observing any shifts in perception from previous instances subsequent to the provision of contextual information. The summaries contained only key case and background information, discarding any sensationalised words to avoid priming of participants (Carrasco, 2016). This approach was adopted as opposed to utilising vignettes, used in other research due to limitations within their ability to elicit valid data. Such a limitation is subsequent to fictional stories being utilised as only the scenario is real yet the individuals within the scenario are not. Participants are often aware of this, causing a risk of ingenuine responses as the participant recognizes that their opinion is not responding to a real-life case with real-life effects. Other areas discussed aside from more serious offences ease participants into (Knott et al, 2022) highly sensitive topics, whilst still gaining insight into perceptions, building upon understanding.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to study commencement an ethics application was developed. A series of documents detailed study procedures, key risk considerations and the subsequent steps to minimize these risks (See appendix 1-5, 8). Within this application various ethical considerations and risks were outlined and mitigated. For example, the participant information sheet was shown to each participant prior to interview commencement, providing information about the study's aim alongside the topics that would be discussed. Additionally, participants right to withdraw was outlined alongside relevant support services,

should participants need them. Next participants completed a consent form where it was explained to them that this document was to formalise their agreement of voluntary participation within the study. Prior to starting the interview, participants were reminded of their rights whereby they could pause or stop the interview entirely at any point or refrain from answering a question without having to provide reason. Concluding the interview, participants were provided with a debrief sheet outlining their right to withdraw up to four weeks from the date of interview and that succeeding this point, withdrawal would not be possible due to the likelihood that their data had been analyzed. This document also notified participants that their data would be destroyed after study completion and grading. Ethical documents reassured participants of the secure storage of their data, maintaining their anonymity throughout. Anonymization of participant identities was maintained by using pseudonyms and keeping personal data in a separate recording from the main interview. Participants were reminded throughout the process that the interest was in their perceptions and not any personal experiences to avoid psychological harm.

Research Procedures

After ethical clearance had been granted, with informed consent gained, participants were contacted via email to arrange an interview time. The location had to be convenient for both parties needs ensuring the interviewee felt comfortable (Herzog, 2012) discussing perceptions of sensitive topics (Dempsey et al, 2016). Interview settings ranged from participants' homes to online Microsoft Teams meetings suiting each party's needs. Despite online interviews minimizing travel expenses and disruptions, there is a lack of control over potential distractions. This was experienced within some interviews but caused no detriment to data quality. Throughout the interview process, pre-determined questions were asked to reduce bias. In reducing short responses, follow-up questions were utilised, asking the participant to expand on their answer, diminishing the risk of insufficient data and thus evidence to support arguments. Prior to beginning data collection, the pilot interview alleviated any issues surrounding participant-researcher understanding regarding what a question was asking due to phrasing. Subsequently, complex question wording and lengthy questions were eradicated, increasing data collection efficiency and accuracy. This interview indicated a running time of approximately 55 minutes, yet this is subjective to people's reading efficiency and length of opinion. Pilot interview data was excluded from analysis due its purpose being to inform more practical elements of the study only. The utilisation of both probes and prompts enabled clarification and expansion (Robinson, 2023) of participant rationales. This allowed more in-depth information to be elicited, that may not have emerged otherwise alongside reducing instances

of misinterpretation. Leading probes were eradicated to prevent priming participant responses. Examples were also used as prompts, for instance in the question 'what did you think of their sentencing' the prompts of 'too lenient, too harsh, just right' were given, where participants seemed unsure of what to respond. This provided participants with various starting points in which to elaborate (DeJonckheere & Vaghn, 2019) with no 'prevailing' attitudes being promoted due to multiple examples being given. Thus, increasing the likelihood of full openness, displaying their true perceptions. With the method's flexible nature allowing the use of follow-up questions interviews ranged from 50 – 80 minutes. A sufficient qualitative sample size of the target population group was interviewed, enabling increasing credibility of the data. All interviews were consensually audio recorded, ensuring participant awareness of its transcriptive purposes. Participants were given a debrief sheet to conclude the interview, outlining their rights (see Appendix 8).

Analytical Procedure

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher before importing transcripts into Nvivo, a data analysis tool that aids the organisation and analysis (Dhakal, 2022) of complex qualitative data. Adopting an interpretivist approach, Braun and Clarke's process of thematic analysis (TA) was used. This 6-step process involves familiarisation, coding, developing and revising themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019), gaining an in-depth understanding of the data and deriving meaning (Ozuem et al, 2022). Data was familiarised to the researcher through transcribing and reading the interview transcripts. Inductively, with the use of Nvivo participant perceptions were categorised, allowing the generation of codes through repeated revisitation. More refined codes were then aggregated into themes (Appendix 9) due to the code's recursive nature and were utilised for research discussion. Here, TA proves to be the most appropriate tool of analysis regarding the research focus of understanding human perceptions and TA's purpose of gaining deeper understandings into participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Aside from ensuring the study's high validity, gaining a full understanding of the data was vital due to sensitive topics being discussed and thus a heightened need to ensure participants views were accurately understood and presented. With over 10 hours of interviews to analyse, Nvivo facilitated the generation of themes, allowing for similarities to be drawn across the large data sets. This was highly valuable in keeping to time-constraints whilst enabling thorough data analysis. The themes devised were 1) varying crime characteristics; 2) sympathy towards women who kill; and 3) crime-inducing social factors. Due to the subjective nature of human perceptions and various crimes being discussed, themes were divided into subthemes, ensuring the complexities and

nuance (Stänicke et al, 2023) within these categories were recognised. Subthemes included mental health of women who kill; complexity of infanticidal mothers' lives; levels of intention and premeditation; mental strain and entrapment within abuse; desperation and helplessness; lack of support; and adverse experiences.

Findings

This chapter will present the key findings of the interviews within the current study. Codes and subsequent themes were generated through thematic analysis, which will guide the upcoming discussion in addressing the research objectives:

RO1. explore female perceptions towards serious female-perpetrated crime amongst a non-offending population to gain an understanding of the reasons that underpin these opinions, seeking any divergence within these subject to individual differences.

RO2. identify any changes in perception due to the provision of contextual information of specific female-perpetrated crime cases to fully understand lay female perceptions towards female offenders who commit serious crime.

The themes to be discussed are 1) varying crime characteristics; 2) sympathy towards women who kill; and 3) crime-inducing social factors.

Theme 1: Varying crime characteristics

All participants showed acknowledgment of the importance of context in forming perceptions as Participant B expressed that *“it’s all about the circumstances and the story behind it...you can’t compare.”* The theme itself relates to the importance of context in forming perceptions and how differing contexts can cause perceptive shifts. This was an overarching theme across all interviews, interlinking with later themes.

Mental Health and Women Who Kill

A significant number of participants expressed that the psychological states of women who kill played a role within their perceptions. During the interview participants were presented with case studies of women who kill with no clear motive but have diagnosed psychological conditions. With this, perceptions

appeared considerate of these circumstances as participant A suggested that you *“can’t deny...whether you agree with it or not it does completely change the reasoning... behind it.”* This demonstrates participant acknowledgement of the psychological conditions role in influencing female-offenders decision-making, ultimately impacting upon women’s perceptions towards female offenders. Furthermore, another participant expressed that *“to a certain extent you are less culpable for your actions”* recognizing the impairing nature of psychological conditions, inhibiting female-offenders’ full rationality. However, some responded more punitively with Participant F explaining *“I’ve worked with loads of people with different mental health disorders, and I don’t know many of them who killed three people.”* Contrary to previous responses this demonstrates a less understanding perception of the crime-inducing factors of female-perpetrated homicide suggesting that psychological disorders are perceived as not an excuse for female-perpetrated violence. Similarly, in female-perpetrated child homicide cases where the condition of Munchausen by proxy was present, some demonstrated the same punitiveness. *“So you function in society, but then all of a sudden you go into this other person? Nah, not having that”* (Participant G), suggesting the belief that psychological conditions are perceived as not a tool for leniency, that the act of taking someone’s life remains the same regardless of mental condition. However, within cases of infanticide, numerous participants recognised the impact of post-natal depression upon mother’s rational thinking, *“your hormones are bonkers...so who knows...what that could do”* (Participant F). Participant H supports this further, expressing that *“there’s so many complexities around women giving birth”* suggesting a shift from previous punitive perceptions towards a more understanding stance towards mother’s psychological conditions and its role within child maltreatment. Overall, the role of psychological disorders within serious female-perpetrated crime in the formulation of non-offending perceptions appeared pivotal. While some participants demonstrated more punitive attitudes, the majority expressed sympathy as to how these conditions could affect women’s rational judgement. This demonstrates the role of psychological conditions and crime type (context) in shaping non-offending perceptions of female offenders, underpinning context’s importance in the formulation of opinion.

Complexity of infanticidal mothers’ lives

This was a prominent consideration across eight interviews, with participants recognizing that infanticidal mothers often had various issues around the time of the infanticide. Interlinking with the previously discussed concept of post-natal depression, Participant H suggested that *“it’s hard to get inside the mind of somebody who really does believe that that’s the only way out”*. This suggests participants’ awareness

to infanticidal mothers' feelings of helplessness, contributing to the taking of her child's life. Furthermore, Participant I also recognised these issues, *"a lot of the time...women get left with the baby... which... isn't their fault."*, depicting infanticidal mothers as single parents with a lack of support, leading to feelings of isolation, contributing to infanticide. Culturally, some mothers have familial and religious expectations surrounding childbearing and thus when these expectations are not met this can cause significant pressure upon them. This was widely understood by participants, *"she probably end up dead if it was honour killings or she'd end up in a worse situation."* (Participant C), further contributing to previous expressions that some mothers see infanticide as the only way out. Yet this provides additional complexity to the mother's life due to the detrimental effects of having a child out of wedlock that can result in the mother's honour killings in preventing familial shame. However, in participant recognition that complex experiences are not universal across all infanticidal mothers the importance of context remains with Participant A expressing *"it's really hard to... sit there and say...you have one set opinion on something as complex as infanticide because you just can't"*. This underpins the importance of context within multifaceted cases like infanticide as experiences are highly individualised.

Context's importance is further demonstrated by negative comments towards female-perpetrated child homicide (non-relative), as seen by participant perceptions towards Lucy Letby. Several participants expressed like-minded expressions of these women, describing them as *"very disturbed"* and *"sick in the head"* (Participant E, F). This depicts child homicide as highly inexcusable, underpinning the centrality of context in shaping perceptions due to the contrast in opinion with previous awareness of the multitude of factors contributing to infanticide in comparison to the lack of mitigating factors explaining why a women took the life of a child (non-related). Here, perceptions can be seen to be more understanding as opposed to more closed to leniency seen in the case of Lucy Letby. However, it is vital to note in line with participant responses, each case is different and so even in the aggregation of perceptions the individuality of women's experiences must be remembered. Overall, it is clear here that within the complex underlying factors within infanticidal mothers' lives participants demonstrate understanding of such influences in the committal of infanticide, denoting more consideration of women's circumstances. This underpins the role of context in shaping perceptions as within the circumstances of female-perpetrated child homicide, participants demonstrated more punitive, lower levels of understanding.

Level of intention and premeditation

A large proportion of participants expressed that the level of intention and premeditation had a larger impact upon their perception as opposed to the weapon used in the crime. *“Is it preconceived? What the circumstances was? Was the weapon something to hand...Or was it...I’m gonna buy this gun and go shoot somebody.”* (Participant C). This connotes the subjective relationship between non-offending female perceptions and criminal context as the varying levels of intent and premeditation largely affected individuals’ perceptions of the female perpetrator. This demonstrates the highly contextual nature of crime and its role within the formation of non-offending females’ perceptions. Surprisingly a significant number of participants expressed seeing no gender difference in their perception of the seriousness of violent crime. Participant C voiced that murder is *“point blank, you’ve taken someone’s life that is as severe as it gets.”* suggesting that murder is one of the most severe crimes regardless of perpetrator gender. Additionally, Participant E expressed that *“if its premeditated, calculated...then that’s slightly different”* yet the level of intention and premeditation was *“irrespective of gender.”* This strongly connotes the centrality of the level of intent and premeditation within non-offending females’ perceptions of crime severity, exposing that gender is not definitive in shaping perceptions of serious crime. Overall, such responses highlight that it is not gender here that dictates the perceived severity of the crime but its circumstantial context. It is clear that levels of intent and premeditation are significant within participant’s formulation of opinion towards violent crime regardless of perpetrator gender.

Theme 2: Sympathy towards women who kill

This theme addresses two specified groups of female offenders’ women who kill due to experiences of DVA and infanticidal mothers. More specifically sympathy towards DVA women who kill was a prominent perception observed within all interviews. The same was observed in relation to infanticidal mothers. Yet some participants questioned the mitigating factors related to these circumstances, in murder being the sole option, with more punitive perceptions being captured.

Mental Strain and Entrapment Within Abuse

All participants demonstrated high level of sympathy towards women who take the lives of their (abusive) partners with linkage to belief in reduced sentences. It was clear throughout interview analysis that non-offending women hold supportive attitudes towards domestically abused women and their experiences,

in inducing IPH. Most poignantly participant A voiced that *“you can completely understand how much that man...made her feel as if she was dead herself....the only way she could be free was if he was not here anymore”*. This presents a high level of understanding and want to provide consolation to these women as the participant suggests the sense of helplessness felt by domestically abused women and that an act of brutality was the only way of escaping. Other participants furthered the notion of these women as vulnerable and unable to withstand the continuous abuse. Participant I suggested that *“to have the...mental strain of somebody else controlling your whole life... I think that's a lot to deal with.”* denoting IPV as an explanation for female-perpetrated violence due to the oppression these women have endured. This is relative to participant G's sympathy, describing these women's lives as *“a prison, but it's your life”* further demonstrating sense of entrapment within the cycles of IPV due to its situation within a private relationship, underpinning the desperate turn to IPH.

Participant's also expressed leniency in the sentencing of female-perpetrated IPH. Participant E suggested that women who have experienced IPV have had *“a pretty tough sentence anyway”* suggesting the lack of need for punishment due to their experiences of abuse prior to taking their partners life. Similarly, many participants suggested that support was a more suitable response in these circumstances as opposed to a custodial sentence. Participant B acknowledges that *“that's got to have affected her so...she needs a lot of support”* suggesting that rehabilitative support would be most beneficial. However, some participants were less lenient recognizing that despite adverse experiences a murder was still committed, *“at the end of the day your still taking a person's life...but...it should be more lenient.”*, suggesting the requirement of some sort of custodial time yet acknowledging the severity of the experiences the woman has endured. Overall, despite minor punitive expressions, all participants were undoubtedly understanding and sympathetic towards the circumstances these women have endured in relation to their actions to take their partner's life This is further observed through a significant agreement amongst the sample that women who commit IPH because of domestic abuse should receive more lenient sentences, recognizing these women's actions as out-of-character.

Desperation and Helplessness

Within this context, all participants demonstrated sympathy and acknowledgement of various underlying factors in the mother's actions. Participant H suggested that *“it must be horrendous to feel that you've got no choice, no option...there's nothing else you can do”* connoting an understanding that some mothers feel

so overwhelmed that infanticide appears as the only option. This represents high levels of sympathy towards infanticidal mothers demonstrating the belief that infanticide is committed out of feelings of desperation and loneliness. Relatively, participant C suggests the removal of blame from the mother, *“she thought she was dealing with this situation the best way... she's just tried to survive”*, again conveying the assumption of desperation. Specifically, *“survive”* evokes the sense that mothers within these trauma-infused circumstances are in a highly distressed state, blind to any other means of coping. In a partially alternative context, some participants associated infanticidal mothers with experiencing psychological issues as participant I says, *“they've just given birth and postnatal depression is very common”*, supported by participant H explaining that there is a *“state of mind... the places that people go to when they think there's no other option... that is the only option.”* This suggests that infanticidal mothers are not within total rational capability after childbirth, impacting upon their self-awareness and thus responsibility. Despite these considerate views, some took a more disciplinary stance alongside this. Considering participant I's previously understanding tone, they also express that there were *“many other decisions that could be made”*, supporting the idea that child homicide is never excusable despite the challenging circumstances' some face. Participant D also reflects this saying *“I understand why she ended up there but... there were other options”* suggesting an understanding but maintaining that there are alternatives to infanticide. Overall, participants express understanding perceptions towards infanticidal mothers. This observation was aided by the stark contrast between participant responses to these women in comparison to women who kill with no clear motive but suffer from a psychological condition. Within this instance participant E expresses that these women are *“depraved..and...enjoyed killing people”* suggesting a closed perception of women with psychological conditions who kill non-relatives, carrying no mitigation for violence. With this, participants express high levels of sympathy towards both groups due to their belief of the complexity of their adverse experiences, explaining their actions. Some expressed the crime's inexcusable nature, yet their overall perception demonstrated understanding and sympathy.

Theme 3: Crime inducing social factors

This theme discusses participant perceptions suggesting that certain social factors have contributed to female-perpetrated crime. Lack of support largely surrounds the idea of minimal support from relatives and social institutions failure to intervene. Adverse experiences refer to both previous and ongoing occurrences contributing to female offending.

Lack of Support

Specifically, participants expressed that *"it's a real shame that she had to go through what she did to get the support... she needed and...then that might not have happened"*, understanding that mothers in these situations may feel embarrassed in admitting that they need help, creating a fear of reaching out for help. Expanding upon this, Participant A recognized how the pressure felt by these mothers *"due to the lack of support...can cause you to do things that you would not have done if people had just given you the very basic level of support"*. This conveys the criminogenic nature of this factor as it increases self-pressure and thus the likelihood of offending. Within society, participants suggested the Governments role in inducing female criminality. Participant C expressed that society is *"putting a mother into those situations, which are all dictated by societal decisions...they're all decided by government...which... affects the individual...it is societal."* This suggests that the society itself lacks openness in helping those in need, especially struggling mothers. This may be due to societal expectations of women as the child's primary caregiver; an idea that was also observed within interviews. Even within instances where women kill non-relatives, participants recognized that a lack of support can contribute to deviant actions. Participant B voices that *"she probably didn't have a lot of support around her...and then everything...went wrong"* acknowledging social factor's role within female-perpetrated crime despite previous punitive attitudes. Overall, it is apparent that social factors are believed to be a major influence in females' motivation to offend with lack of support from relatives, society's negativity, and insufficient help, pushing women to offend. This continues participants sympathetic perceptions towards certain groups of female offenders, namely infanticidal mothers.

Adverse Experiences

This subtheme discusses personal exposure to certain experiences that may have an inducing effect upon females' motivations to offend. Participant I display's an understanding of the effect of DVA upon women's motivations to offend saying that such experiences *"explain why someone would feel driven to commit that sort of crime [IPV]."* This suggests that non-offending groups perceive female crime to be borne out of negative experiences and that women would not act so violently without a legitimate reason. Yet as discussed previously women who have psychological disorders are still perceived in a punitive manner. Furthermore, participant B expresses that *"it's all about what you've been exposed to..., when you were a child, how you're growing up, how you've dealt with things, what's support you've had"*

suggesting the belief of the centrality of early socialization in shaping offending motivations. This further implies that female offenders' lives are highly complex and must be understood to form a fair opinion. Overall, it is undisputed here that adverse experiences are believed to be highly influential in women's crime involvement with all participants being in consensus of these experiences' crime inducing effects.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to understand public perceptions towards serious female offenders, from an all-female perspective. Exploring non-offending women's perceptions gave a unique insight into how and why women offend due potential empathy for their circumstances. Gaining such understanding will aim to reduce stigma towards female offenders and for educational programs to be established in raising awareness of the complex circumstances female offenders' experiences that induce criminality. This section will discuss the study's findings in relation to current research. Findings show that non-offending women rely heavily upon the crimes context in shaping their perceptions with high levels of sympathy being shown towards cases of infanticidal mothers and women who kill abusive partners. Within the importance of context, psychological disorders were prominent in shaping perceptions of female offenders. Yet significant differences were found between women with psychological disorders who kill non-relatives and infanticidal mothers. Across both contexts participants recognised the conditions' ability to impair rational thinking. This contrasts Motz's (2020) opinion suggesting the public view these women negatively, labelling them as psychotic; a stark contrast to the current sample's compassion. The current study's finding also relate to 'mad' women (Appignanesi, 2011) in removing their full autonomy, demonstrating that gendered stereotypes are still present in society. However, a minority of participants expressed more punitive perceptions, explaining that many women suffer mental health issues and never exhibit violence, suggesting that for these participants psychological disorders are an insufficient explanation of female brutality. Female-perpetrated child homicide was viewed in the same way as supported by Sparks et al (2023) finding that within parental-perpetrated child homicide, women were heavily associated with suffering psychologically and perceived as the main perpetrator as opposed to the father due to socially expected gender roles. Contrastingly, infanticidal mothers were viewed with significant consideration as participants with previously more punitive views acknowledged the complexities of childbirth recognising the commonality of post-natal depression. Despite a lack of qualitative research surrounding non-offending perceptions, Udala's (2020) participants also associated

infanticidal mothers with mental illness, viewing women as irrational, perpetuating gendered stereotypes. Furthermore, participants acknowledged the potential isolation new mothers may feel contributing to offending motivations, reflecting Milne's (2021) recognition of infanticide as an act of "desperation and hardship" (p3). This contradicts news media portrayals (see Harris, 2022) highlighting the sources sensationalist nature. Such recognition is something which Montgomery (2023) suggests is socially needed, encouraging struggling women to seek help as opposed to committing crime. Finally in the importance of context in shaping perceptions, the level of intention in relation to the crime's seriousness was discussed. Surprisingly, participants suggested seeing no gender differences in the crime's severity. This finding may be subsequent to using an all-female sample who may have experienced similar feelings causing empathy, reinforcing the role of personal experiences in shaping perceptions. Yet Zack and Lang's (2018) study of child abuse support this with participants suggesting the crime was equally severe regardless of perpetrator-gender, displaying more progressive views towards the gender-crime relation as more dated research suggests women are judged more harshly due to breaching traditional gender norms (Jewkes, 2011).

Sympathy towards women who kill was also expressed, specifically those who kill abusive partners. Yet underpinning participants expression of context's importance, harsher perceptions were displayed towards women who killed non-relatives. Participants explained female-perpetrated IPH through women's experiences of DVA; highly emotive responses were captured, acknowledging women's entrapment within abuse, understanding that IPH appeared as the only option. This builds upon research (Bair-Merritt et al, 2010) where participants believed female violence was used pre-emptively, in preventing further abuse with public beliefs further suggesting that such violence is motivated by vulnerability, not aggression (McLaughlin, 2013; Walker et al, 2018). This illustrates Appignanesi's (2011) sad women who kill succeeding partner-victimisation, suggesting women are highly emotive (Weare, 2017). However, Hine and colleagues (2022) suggest this is a way of explaining away female violence that society doesn't want to believe. Participants also agreed that reduced sentences should be given here with their experiences of abuse being sufficient punishment. This demonstrates a more progressive application of the chivalry thesis (see section 2.1.1) whereby, leniency is given due to complex circumstances as opposed to perpetrator gender; illustrating a more contemporary understanding of serious offenders. Furthermore, participants highlighted female offenders need for support as opposed to prison sentences, something which is also recognised by professionals (Christensen, 2021) demonstrating the impact of understanding upon shaping perceptions. Yet a minority of participants

suggested the requirement of some custodial punishment due to someone's life being taken, contradicting the fact that such crimes are unlikely to reoccur, ignoring main purpose of deterrence in sentencing to custody. Moreover, participants demonstrated compassion towards infanticidal mothers, specifically the overwhelming nature of motherhood. Alongside this, other complexities discussed earlier were also mentioned, explaining how mothers were driven to infanticide. This contradicts research suggesting that female violence against children is non-existent (Buckley, 2020). Such recognition highlights the current samples understanding as a potential result of relative empathy towards these women's circumstances, largely influencing perceptions (Demski et al, 2017; Spence et al, 2011). Furthermore, women were depicted as almost blameless by participants describing infanticide as an act of survival. This suggests participants view infanticidal mothers as distressed with minimal rationality. However, this removes women's autonomy, explaining away female violence (Denov, 2001; Hislop, 2001). Again, some participants were conflicted explaining that there are always alternatives to taking your child's life, suggesting infanticides inexplicability. Such views may stem from social expectations of women as caregivers, perceptions that were expressed in some interviews here. Similarly, in Zagrodney & Cumming's (2016) study of parental-child abuse, despite the male partner being the main perpetrator, the mother was judged more harshly, due to the assumed role as the caregiver.

Crime inducing social factors of a lack of social support and adverse experiences were also discussed. Within infanticide, participants recognised the impact of a lack of familial support upon new mothers, expressing that such help may have prevented the crime. Infanticidal mothers themselves expressed feeling a severe lack of support (Bourget et al, 2007; Eriksson et al, 2016; Milia & Noonan, 2022), reflecting participants acknowledgement of the need for better support for these women given the factors centrality within infanticide. This again reflects the application the chivalry thesis discussed earlier. Linking to previous discussion, all participants demonstrated sympathy, expressing sadness towards the lengths these women had to go to in receiving support. Participants further explained that a disservice was being done to female offenders due to governmental failures causing women to be cemented into these situations due to political agenda and lack of funding. Milne (2021) supports participant views, expressing the need for a focus upon society's role in creating feelings of helplessness, steering away from mother-blaming as she herself is a victim. This suggests the need for more awareness in the services available to women with poor support systems alongside the more positive representations of lay perceptions in reducing stigma; a current barrier to seeking help (Louden et al, 2016). Finally, the role of adverse experiences was discussed by participants, specifically the impact of DVA upon women's motivations for

IPH. Participants suggested that without these experiences females would never act so violently. These victimised representations, Pelvin (2019) suggests act to neutralise female culpability as such actions breach traditional gender norms (McSweeney, 2021). Participants almost justify the taking of the abuser's life, considering the harm cause to the female. Yet critics suggest the 'abuse excuse' (Dershowitz, 1994), the belief that abuse does not mitigate responsibility for violence, minimising abuse as a mitigating circumstance. Overall, participants held significant levels of understanding towards serious female offenders, predominantly in cases of DVA and infanticide, aiding a reduction in stigma towards these women. Notably, women who kill non-relatives were viewed more punitively in comparison to other female offenders. It is also vital to acknowledge the importance of context to participants perceptions, recognising crimes individual and incomparable nature. Thus, it is important to account for these views prior to defining female offenders as universally dangerous in both trial by jury (Lilley, Willmott & Mojtahedi, 2023; Willmott, 2018) and society where attitudes towards gendered crimes are deeply engrained (Conroy et al., 2023; Debowska et al., 2019).

Limitations

There are several limitations within the present study worth acknowledging. Firstly, some participants demonstrated awareness of the media popular case of Lucy Letby. This strongly indicates participant engagement with related news media, potentially increasing the risk of media influence upon participants opinions (Hatter, 2020; Scarduzio et al, 2017; Willis et al, 2010) due to their sensationalist writing. However, to reduce such bias, the case study summaries created specifically for this research used non-sensationalist language, giving only key case information. Alongside this, participants were asked not to read the summaries until directed to do so to prevent wider research prior to the interview. Secondly, many interviews were conducted online, with some instances of connectivity issues. This is common with online interviews (Irani, 2019), yet this was the only viable way to conduct these interviews due to participants commitments. This caused some participants to repeat some answers, risking some elements of their original response to be left out or reduced in level of expansion. However, a lack of detail was negated using follow-up questions if the researcher felt more expansion of a perception was needed (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021; Seidman, 2019). It was increasingly important in covering sensitive topics, to ensure participant views were accurately represented and understood. Finally, within the large sample for qualitative research, younger female participants were currently at university whilst some older women had experiences of working within the NHS or law sector. Despite these demographics not being

a requirement for taking part, being in higher education and these occupations may influence participant views in being more considerate of women's circumstances. Gakhal and Brown's (2011) study with professional's noted that experience influenced their opinion, demonstrating the influential role of prior experience and knowledge of the subject upon perceptions.

Study Implications

Considering these findings, there are several implications that address the relation between non-offending perceptions and women's motivations to seek help. There is an abundance of quantitative research surrounding public and professional perceptions of serious female offenders, specifically female sex offenders (see Buckley, 2020; Christiansen, 2021; Denov, 2001). In response to this, an in-depth understanding of non-offending female perceptions was sought in relation to some of the most qualitatively unresearched areas, women who kill non-relatives, abusive partners, and children. With this, new interventions and support programs could be informed for women in need due to the gained understanding of how important context is within forming perceptions. Furthermore, this could inform the creation of educational programs for all. Yet the most important implication, made possible by the latter point is the reduction of stigma surrounding serious female offenders. Such a reduction will be facilitated by the prominent expression of compassion demonstrated towards these women and their circumstances. The promotion of these views and female offender's experiences by governmental and probationary institutions will facilitate the spreading of awareness of these women's realities. The hope here is for a reduction in women's fear of stereotyping and disapproval (Grady et al, 2019) by non-offending groups, as this currently hinders women to reach for help. This therefore will allow them seek support as opposed to turning to crime, improving women's lives and female offence rates.

Future Research Recommendations

The overarching aim of this research was to explore non-offending perceptions of serious female offenders, gaining an understanding of the rationale of these views. Despite this research demonstrating positive perceptions towards serious female offenders against the media's sensationalized accounts, it must be considered that no male views were explored. Therefore, research from a male perspective may appear highly valuable, aiding an understanding of the wider picture of non-offending perceptions towards serious female offenders. Due to the limitations of the sample, it may be highly informative to

research this topic with more focus on the relationship between occupation type and perception as research demonstrates that having more communication with female offenders increases the likelihood of more lenient perceptions (Clements et al, 2014; Mellor & Deering, 2010). Finally, for this research to inform more specified support interventions, an understanding of female offender's perceptions of required support is focal. In knowing this, more targeted and individualized support can be devised. Undoubtably, financial restraints are a barrier to support systems being effectively implemented. Yet this was identified by participants as a required alternative to custody for these women with expressions of the lack of beneficial outcomes in the use of custodial sentences.

Conclusion

Given the rising interest of serious female-perpetrated crime in both the public and legal sphere, seen within the recognition of female offender's complex needs in custody (Ministry of Justice 2022), the current study adopted a qualitative approach exploring non-offending female perceptions towards serious female offenders. Using semi-structured interviews and criminal case studies, female-perpetrated theft, domestic abuse, homicide, child abuse and infanticide were discussed to identify and understand the direction and firmness of non-offending perceptions. Perceptions revealed the importance of context in forming opinions with high levels of sympathy being afforded to women who kill; specifically, infanticidal mothers and those subjected to DVA with participants expressing women's vulnerability. This suggests that the social stigma is not as heightened as initially perceived by female offenders. To understand these perceptions an adapted view of Pollak's Chivalry Thesis was drawn upon. Here, participants demonstrated leniency due to the recognition of the complexity of women's crime-inducing circumstances, not due to the perpetrator's gender as Pollak suggests. This highlights a more progressive outlook upon serious female offenders, as participants acknowledge women's capability to commit crime but recognize the complex precipitating factors. Participants discussed the cruciality of contextual knowledge in forming their perceptions, expressing that most of the crimes discussed are incomparable due to their subjective nature. With this, understanding towards those with psychological disorders who kill and the complexity of infanticidal mothers' lives was displayed. A surprising finding was participants' perceptions of crime severity were not shaped by gender but by level of intention. Yet some discussed their punitive views towards female offenders alongside the latter view, demonstrating the presence of gendered expectations. The impact of social factors upon female offending was also discussed with clear empathy from participants. With such knowledge and the aid of further governmental research discussed

above, new intervention and educational programs can be informed, specifically addressing women's needs and spreading public awareness of these women's complex lives. Furthermore, with this newfound knowledge it is suggested that governmental institutions such as His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) should circulate these perceptions alongside anonymized accounts of the complexity of female offenders' lives with the hope of the dispersal of stigma; encouraging these women to seek support as opposed to crime. Overall, this study has qualitatively explored non-offending female perceptions of serious female offenders and their firmness in relation to contextual information with participants largely expressing sympathy towards these women. To build upon these findings, future research should involve both males and those from alternative occupations to the ones here in furthering understanding of the perceptions of non-offending populations. Furthermore, relating to the above recommendations, research concerning female offenders support needs should be conducted by HMPPS alongside other governmental bodies to create more suitable aid programs for female offenders, reducing their felt need to offend.

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