Chapter 10

The "Gentler Sex"
Patterns in Female Serial Murder

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Abstract

This chapter examines patterns of serial homicides committed by women from 1600 to 2004, which are estimated to comprise approximately 10% to 15% of all serial murder offenders. More specifically, this chapter seeks to lend understanding to those serial homicides committed specifically by women in dominant roles as murderer. Women who acted alone or in concert with another where the accomplice was in a subordinate role are also examined. Patterns suggest that women who commit serial murder and are dominant tend to have significantly different patterns of action when compared to those of men in the same role. Trends include, but are not limited to, the following: women are less likely to use physical violence, are more likely to use poison, are more likely to choose children and men as part of their victim pool, and have a higher estimated kill ratio than men. Implications of the lack of recognition of these killers’ actions for both research and detection are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that most serial murders are committed by men (1–3). In fact, it was not long ago that it was a phenomenon thought to be solely committed by men (4). Diverting the gaze from the acts of men, however, to

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the more rare acts of women might serve to highlight some of our sexual biases when we look at the criminal acts of women. The women outlined in this chapter have stepped out of the more traditional role and moved into another more dangerous social place: the offender class comprised of serial murderers. These women often cloaked themselves in their vulnerability, committing their atrocities in their own quiet way. What is ironic, as this chapter demonstrates, is that historically when a woman has made a habit of killing it does not attract attention. Her persona as the “gentler sex” comes in conflict with her actions, and other explanations are offered in an effort to rationalize the number of missing persons associated with a particular woman.

There has been considerable debate surrounding the definition of serial murder \(^{(5,6)}\). For the purposes of this study, the serial murderer is defined as a person who has attempted to kill or successfully killed three or more victims. To be included in this class, intent to kill and acts of killing or attempted killing must be present. These killings, or attempted killings, take place over a prolonged period of time with a cooling down period between homicides. This killer class is more often male than female. The motives to these crimes are often intensely personal, giving the outward appearance of randomness. Finally, as is demonstrated in the pages that follow, whereas men have had motives that are more often associated with sexual fantasy \(^{(2,7–10)}\) women often commit these crimes for more instrumental reasons, such as financial gain. Although these are predominant themes, it should be noted that the reasons for murdering, for both men and women of this class, are varied and sex does not ensure the motive type.

**Perspectives of Women and Crime**

Criminology has traditionally been a male-oriented social science. Until the very early 1990s, only three sources—Hickey \(^{(11)}\), Holmes et al. \(^{(12)}\), and Holmes and DeBerger \(^{(13)}\)—addressed the issue of female serial killing. Before Hickey published his analysis, academics implicitly assumed, as Egger did in 1984 \(^{(4)}\), that women did not commit serial murder. Holmes and DeBerger \(^{(13)}\) were the only researchers who acknowledged women as serial murderers, citing three case studies. Ronald Holmes, since writing this study, has acknowledged that there are others \(^{(14)}\).

To date, the largest comprehensive study on serial murder was conducted by Eric Hickey \(^{(2)}\). His extensive work has captured characteristics of 367 male and 64 female serial murderers operating in the United States since 1800. In his study, women represent 14.85% of his offender pool. His analyses, for the most part, focus on only 61 of these women. Just over one-fourth (26.6%) of these women worked in teams. Hickey noted that a few of these teams