

Female Serial Killers: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Like male serial killers, female serial killers have meant the killings of thousands of people. The psychological features, phenotypical qualities, criminal behaviour, aggressiveness pattern, mental disorders, historical background, and other factors are all investigated in the cases and data of these female serial murderers. Researchers have already utilised many approaches of determination of serial killers such as manner of murdering, mental illness, marital status of offender, and kind of victim, educational and economic background of offender. This literature review's major contribution is a comparison of different aims and approaches used by researchers to determine the features of female serial killers. This research will aid in the evaluation of approaches, the identification of research gaps that have previously been identified, and the identification of future issues when dealing with such instances.

Keywords: *Criminal Behaviour, Female, Psychology, Serial Killer, Victim, Female Psychology, Disorder, Mental Illness, Trauma, Aggression*

In the world of serial killers, names like Jeffery Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, and Ted Bundy are well-known and well-known. Few people, on the other hand, have heard of Belle Gunness, Nannie Doss, Dorothea Puente, or other serial killers. Holmes, Hickey, and Holmes (Holmes, Hickey, and Holmes, 1991). Female serial killers have committed killings all around the world, which is not widely acknowledged in society. In 1861, for example, a band of female assassins working as prostitutes in Varanasi, India, poisoned their victims in order to take goods. In 1951, Lala Wanh, an Indian woman, married 17 times and murdered all of her husband's in a six-year period! Anjanabai Gavit, Renuka Shinde, and Seema Gavit kidnapped 13 children and held them captive in 2007.

Whereas criminal profiling of male serial killers is prevalent, serial homicides by women have been misunderstood, disregarded, and undervalued in the past. Serial murderer definitions were limited to criminal acts of a sexual nature, which is unusual for female serial killers. Although the number of female serial killers is limited, study is hampered by the fact that most conventions are based on evidence obtained by men (e.g., Elliott, 1992, on psychopathy; Fox and Levin, 2006, on sociopathy). Unlike male serial killers, female serial killers have been researched extensively by some experts. For example, serial killer expert

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Eric Hickey (2006) provides one of the most comprehensive studies of female serial killers; however, Hickey does not include complete data on offender convictions or sentences (e.g., executed or commuted sentences)

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESULTS

Our searches identified 12 relevant citations. Of those, some books, 6 scientific papers (one specifically focusing on single female serial killer case, three on determination of relevant characters of female serial killer) with original data, few monographs and dissertations and news articles also. Various techniques, methodologies, analysis methods, interpretations are compared in order study the actual psychological traits of female serial killers. Demographics, history, antecedents, familiarity, means, mobility classification of offenders, victims are some of the points which are compared in the study.

If we study the modus operandi of the female serial killers in chronological order from 1825-1997, study states (WAYNE WILSON AND TONYA HILTON, 1998) that there were 58 cases in America only and 47 cases in other 17 countries, in that duration. It was then compared and studied in this paper. In cases of USA, gradual increase in the cases of female killers can be seen in 1975-97, also in 1900-24 there is sudden increase in number of cases and offenders. Number of offenders is directly proportional to number of victims, also most common method killing is poisoning which is then followed by firearm. Target age of victim ranges between children and adult. Overall, USA witnessed 61 female killers with more than 398 victims till 1997.

In other 17 countries, difference that we have seen is there was no any case of use of firearm for killing the victim. Number of female serial killers and accordingly victims is constant and steady, not showing any sudden increase. Overall, these 17 countries witnessed 47 female serial killers with more than 1113 victims in between 1800-1997.

In the first paper which was examined, Marissa A. Harrison, Erin A. Murphy, Lavina Y. Ho, Thomas G. Bowers & Claire V. Flaherty (2015), there were some methods and key characters used for the understanding criminal behaviour of female serial killers. Overall sample size for the analysis was n=64 in USA.

Here are some characters:

Demographics:

Criteria	Sample size	Results
Birthplace	64	98.4% native
Ethnicity	62	88.7% white
Religion	18	100% Christian
Relationship status	59	54% married 15.3% divorced 12.5% widowed
Socio economic status	47	55.3% middleclass 40.4% lowerclass
Age	61	Mean 32
Academic achievement	26	34.6% college professional degree
Estimated intelligence	25	50% average
Occupation	51	39.2% health related positions
Appearance	25	10 normal, 7 attractive

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From above data, as we can clearly see most of the serial killers belong from same place, regional community, and married, normal and from middleclass and lower class background. Although we can't differentiate them clearly, demographics can give us tentative information about the suspect.

History:

Factor	Sample size	Results
Childhood issues	64	6 cases of severe illness in childhood
Parental and family issues	64	21 family issues
Physical and sexual abuse	64	20 physical abuses
Substance abuse	64	15 alcohol and drugs
Mental health history	64	25 cases of mental illness (anxiety 1, antisocial personality disorder 2, bipolar disorder 2, mental retardation 2, schizophrenia 2)

From the above data we can interpret that parental and family issues, physical abuse, and mental health history can be important factors while assessment of female serial killers. From this data, there is still no any strong clue which can be said as confirmatory for the study, but it can be used as corroborative factor. Antisocial personality disorder and mental retardation can be crucial for the study.

Antecedents:

Factor	Sample size	Results
Environmental stressors	64	7 environmental stressor allegedly contributing to criminal activities
Recent crises	64	15 cases of recent crises

Again, there is no any confirmatory clue for the assessment of female serial killers, but it is possible that offender had gone through recent crises or offender may be part of illegal criminal activities.

Victims:

Criteria	Sample size	Results
Number	331 (total)	3-31 victims each
Age	267	155 males, 112 females
Sex	64	45% adults, 23% children
Victim vulnerability	64	54.7% killed children
familiarity	62	92.2 knew all of victims

The key factor we can interpret from the above data is almost all victims were familiar to the offenders and most of the serial killers targeted the children, which is, obviously easier to target. Sample size should be more for the more accurate results and interpretation.

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Means:

Method	No. of cases	%	Tools
Poisoning	32	50	Arsenic, bleach
Asphyxiating	17	26.6	Blanket, towel, pillow
Shooting	7	10.9	.22mm pistol
Stabbing	3	4.7	Knife
drowning	2	3.1	Basin of water

This can be very crucial information that almost half of the cases of female serial killers include the poisoning by arsenic or bleach, as they are easy to available, cheap, easy to use, with high mortality rate followed by asphyxiating, shooting, stabbing, drowning. Still thorough analysis and sampling should be done for the cases to avoid the margin of errors in this. Although they used different methodology for the experiment, results of the study can be exactly matched and very similar with the Hickey's (2010) prominent study of serial killers.

Another paper we have cited is Elizabeth A. Gurian(2009), methodologies, criteria, and factors used in this paper were similar to above paper. For this study, they have gone through 65 sample cases with the help of survey.

Distribution by location:

While going through country wise distribution it was found that, USA shows the most number of female serial killers and cases followed by UK, France, Australia.

Country	No. of cases (female serial)	No of offenders(female serial)
USA	29 from 65	29
UK	1 from 65	1
France	2 from 65	2
Australia	1 from 65	1

Mobility classification of offenders:

This was the new criteria we have seen was used for the understanding the characters of the serial killer, it can be said that most of the female serial killers are space specific or local, there was no any travelling offender found while performing this study. From n=35 offenders, 19 were place specific and 16 were local.

Percentage of offenders killing specific victims according to age, gender, relationship status:

	Female serial causes of offenders/35
Sex: female only	0
Male only	4
Both	31
Age: adult only	16
Teen only	0
Children	12
Relationship:	
Family	10
At least one family member	8
Acquaintance only	14
Stranger only	3

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It can be demonstrated that familiarity of the offender and victim is the most repeating and common factor which can be used as a crucial factor for understanding.

METHODS

Method	No of cases from n=25
Stabbing	2
Firearm	2
Suffocation	6
Poison	14
drowning	1

As discussed earlier, method of killing can be very important aspect in the female serial killer cases. Due to availability and directions of use, poisoning is the most common method which is used by the serial killers.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

A review suggests that, unlike male serial killers, female serial killers are well known and familiar with the victims which they are going to target. They use various types of methods like choking, drowning, firearm but most of time it is been observed that method used for targeting the victim is poisoning. Especially use for arsenic and bleach is most common. As it can be used very easily and less fatal period and dose, they are been preferred by female serial killers. Another aspect found was the victim is generally weaker than the offender, it can be stated that the victim can be child or adult but the age of victim or physical condition of the victim was found always weaker than the offender. Another factor was mental health history and childhood issues of the offender. If we study the history of the offender, it is possible to found that she might be suffering from mental disabilities like antisocial personality disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, mental retardation, anxiety, psychosis, and comorbidity, postpartum, depression, mixed personality disorder in past or present. Also, mental traumatic incidents, physical abuse, economical background, childhood illness can be the factors affecting.

If we compare the above papers, it can be demonstrated that number of female serial killers and cases were increased after 1900 in chronological order. About 92.6% of offenders were familiar with the victims. About 50% of offenders used poisoning as a method of killing. Birthplace, religion, ethnicity were the almost same of that native place. About 94% of the offenders were from middle class or lower-class background. 50% of the offenders were average in estimated intelligence, 40% of the offenders were suffering from mental disabilities, 54.7% of offenders killed children, 74% of the victims were weaker than the offender. This data is similar to Hickey's (2010) prominent study of serial killers. This data can be used in the criminal profiling for the assessment and determination of the female serial killers. This data can be also used as reference studies for future work.

Although it's possible to profile female serial killer from this data, there is no any confirmative factor with which can be sure on our opinion. To reduce the margin of error, the sample size should be more, e.g., for these papers researchers have carried out survey by takin samples of 60-65 samples, if sample size is increased it will automatically reduce the margin of error. Also, some factors not play so much relevant role in the studies, these factors are only corroborative in nature, such factors can be replaced by more relevant factors. Neurological analysis and various brain mapping tests can be performed in order to

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aim for more accuracy. More studies should be done on the Kelleher and Kelleher (1998). Raine (2013) study was based on the underdevelopment in the brains of serial killers. Alley and colleagues (2014) concluded that more than 10% of serial killers have autism spectrum disorder; these studies should be reconstructed thoroughly. Establishment of neurodevelopment biomarkers can be the option for more accurate profiling.

The brutality of crime and impact on society is always same, whether it is committed by male or female serial killers. Due to evolution in the genetic code and various gene mutations, more significant theories and studies should be performed. Research should be carried out to identify genetic changes and for the greater understanding of risk factors.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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