

**When sexual offending disrupts the gender order. Socio-legal constructions of female juvenile sexual offending in Italian juvenile social work practice**

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This paper examines the Juvenile Sex Offender (JSO) not as a self-evident label attached to a young person who has committed a sexual offence, but as a socio-legally produced subject position (Berger, Luckmann, 1997). Within an interpretivist epistemological framework, we explore how femininities and gendered expectations shape the ways in which sexual offending in adolescence is identified, coded, and made actionable by the institutional actors responsible for its management. Drawing on social constructionist approaches to deviance, we argue that the transition from sexually abusive conduct to the status of “JSO” is not determined solely by the offence itself. Rather, it emerges through the activation of legal mechanisms, organizational routines, and discursive repertoires that progressively turn sexual offending into an ordering principle of the subject’s identity. In this process, the gender order functions as an implicit normative standard (Connell, 1996; Gavey, 2005) that orients institutional attention and classification, rendering some case configurations legible and expected while marking others as anomalous and disruptive – thereby contributing to the social production of deviance as intelligible and open to intervention.

Empirically, the study is based on research conducted between November 2023 and June 2025 at the Palermo Office of Social Services for Minors (Ufficio di Servizio Sociale per i Minorenni, USSM), specifically within the EOS group (Équipe Oltre il Silenzio), a specialized unit responsible for working with minors who have committed sexual offences (Di Vita, Salierno, 2013). The dataset includes 23 judicial case files – focusing on 99 social work reports – and 11 semi-structured interviews with team members. The analysis shows that gender becomes particularly salient in cases that disrupt the heterosexual script and normative gender expectations, most notably when the offender is female.

Findings indicate that female sexual offending is frequently represented as “unexpectedly” violent because it clashes with widely shared (including institutional) assumptions that link femininity to empathy, modesty, and care. In practitioners’ accounts, such cases are often read less as one possible manifestation of juvenile deviance and more as a symbolic breach of the gender order. The offence thus violates not only legal norms but also the interpretive categories through which practitioners make sense of “female” behaviour. As a consequence, explanatory accounts tend to recode the violence through symbolic repertoires of deviant and masculinized femininity, drawing on broader cultural associations between masculinity and violence to render female-perpetrated sexual violence comprehensible. Overall, the paper analyses how the USSM operates as an interpretive arena that socio-legally genders sexual offending when the offender is female, making violent conduct knowable, explainable, and actionable.