

# Female stalking: a systematic review

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**Abstract:** The aim of this review was to study “female stalking” and specific traits characterizing this phenomenon. The main medical databases were searched for studies conducted in clinical populations, case series, reports, reviews, retrospective studies, and original articles. We highlight a variety of different tactics adopted by female stalkers and the stalker propensity to progress to physical violence. Female stalkers are more frequently affected by erotomania, although this condition generally increases the risk of violence. In case of a previously intimate relationship between the stalker and her victim, this increases the risk of violence. In a significant proportion of female stalkers, the behavior is carried out in the occupational setting, especially in the field of psychotherapy, where the male-female ratio is reversed. No significant differences emerged between the motivations of heterosexual or homosexual stalkers. In the category of crimes of harassment committed by women, stalking seems to be among the most prominent.

**Keywords:** stalking, female stalking, same gender stalking, erotomaniac delusional disorder, aggression

## Introduction

The aim of this review was to study female stalking, a phenomenon that is less common among women than men,<sup>1-3</sup> and often considered less dangerous in the law courts. Particular attention is paid to the prevalence of this crime, gender differences in the manifestations and expression of violence, as well as correlations with mental disorders.

The main medical databases were searched (Medline, Social Science Research Network, APA Psyc Net) using the key word “stalking”, and 420 articles published between 1985 and July 2010 were identified. From these, a total of 54 articles, including studies conducted in clinical populations, case series, case reports, reviews, retrospective studies, and original articles, were judged relevant to the scope of the review. It should be noted that the quoted works were conducted in very different study samples (clinical populations, university students, various professional contexts) that are not always easily comparable.

## Female stalking: an overview

The first investigations of female stalking were made in the context of studies of erotomania.<sup>4-7</sup> Epidemiological studies show that most stalkers are male and their victims are female.<sup>8-12</sup> This is a constant in the scientific literature, even if stalking is not considered a gender-specific behavior.<sup>1</sup> The most common type of stalker is the ex-partner who refuses to accept that the relationship is at an end,<sup>13</sup> but the percentage

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of women harassers of their ex-partner seems to be markedly lower than that of their male counterparts. In a study based on the data of the “National Violence against Women Survey” of 1998, representing the adult US population, Slashinski et al<sup>14</sup> calculated that only 1.6% of males had suffered stalking by their female ex-partner.

It is difficult to trace reliable percentages of the female stalking phenomenon, because of great differences between the study samples. In Germany, investigations conducted using a questionnaire mailed to a representative sample of citizens<sup>15,16</sup> showed a lifetime prevalence of the stalking phenomenon of 12%, but only 14.5% of these offenses were committed by women.

However, higher percentages are found in studies conducted in the criminal court population or in legal ambits. In an investigation conducted at the New York County Criminal and Supreme Court over a period of 4 years (1994–1998), 33% of stalkers (16 of 48) were women.<sup>17</sup> In a retrospective study based on analysis of 74 files from a special antistalking unit of the Los Angeles Police Department,<sup>18</sup> it was found that, in 32% of cases, the stalker was a woman (24 of 74), and six of them were classified as affected by erotomantic delirium.

Percentages of female stalkers ranging from 17% to 22% emerged from research conducted in the forensic mental health field.<sup>1,19</sup> In particular, in a study by Purcell et al,<sup>1</sup> that lasted 8 years (1993–2000) and was conducted in a sample of 190 stalkers at a community forensic mental health clinic specializing in the assessment and treatment of stalkers and their victims, 21% of the stalkers were women.

A notable study of victimization was conducted by Sheridan and Davies<sup>20</sup> in 95 victims of stalking referred to the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, a center for social and health promotion in London. In this study, the stalker was female in 7% of cases.

In more recent work Spitznagel<sup>21</sup> investigated clinical/forensic sample populations, analyzing studies of the general population and also of college students in about 30 US states. This author found a reported lifetime percentage of male victims of stalking ranging between 2% and 13%. Data from other investigations of the stalking phenomenon have yielded very variable conclusions, with percentages ranging from 17% in Fremouw et al,<sup>22</sup> 2% in Basile et al,<sup>23</sup> and 4%–7% in Dressing et al.<sup>24</sup>

## Demographic characteristics

A milestone work in this context is the study by Purcell et al,<sup>25</sup> who mailed 3700 questionnaires to men and women

selected from the electoral lists, representing the adult population in the state of Victoria, and obtained 1844 completed questionnaires. It was found that in 22% of cases, stalkers were unemployed, which is a much higher percentage than the national mean (9%); in 45% of cases, they were single and in 20% of cases were separated or divorced. The percentage of married or cohabiting stalkers was much lower than the national mean at 5% versus 34%.

Among the investigations aimed at drawing a profile of the female stalker, notable findings were obtained by Meloy and Boyd.<sup>2</sup> Their retrospective study of material collected by mental health professionals and the police force showed that female stalkers are mainly white (77%), with a mean age of 37 years, and high school (88%) or university education (38%). In 80% of cases they were heterosexual, with 8% being lesbian and 12% being bisexual. In 58% of cases they were single, 13% were married and 21% were divorced. They were more commonly childless (67% of cases). There was a high percentage of women with a criminal record (30%), even if this figure is far lower than in male stalkers (74%). The data in this study are consistent with those that emerged from the investigation of 190 stalkers (40 women and 150 men) conducted by Purcell et al.<sup>1</sup>

## Cultural and ethnic influence of stalking frequency and characteristics

### International survey study

Meloy and Boyd<sup>2</sup> collected data on 82 adult women who had engaged in stalking behavior via a survey sent to mental health and law enforcement professionals in the US, Canada, and Australia. Although this study has some limitations, including a dependence on the observations of a variety of clinicians who were not using a standardized instrument to evaluate the female subjects, it assesses one of the large groups of female stalkers found in the literature.

Typically, the perpetrators were Caucasian, and were single heterosexual women of mean age 35 (range 18–58) years. Often, these women did not have children. They appeared to be educated, with a large majority having graduated from high school and a solid minority having achieved a college or graduate degree. Their intelligence may have allowed them to be more successful in pursuing their victims.

Reports of substance abuse were not common, but about one-third of women used substances while stalking. Available data suggested the presence of Axis I and II disorders. Twenty percent of those with Axis I disorders were diagnosed with

delusional disorder. The most common Axis II diagnosis was borderline personality disorder (10 of 22). Antisocial personality disorder was not diagnosed in any of the women. Despite incomplete data, there appeared to be a high rate of sexual (18 of 40) and physical (12 of 40) abuse in the personal histories of the female stalkers, which may have predisposed these women to development of borderline personality characteristics or post-traumatic stress disorder.

A great majority of the victims of female stalkers were known to them, either as acquaintances, former lovers, or family members. However, one-fifth of the victims were completely unknown to their stalkers. Frequent reasons for stalking included anger, obsession, feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and dependency. Usual stalking behaviors included telephone calls and messages, giving letters and gifts, driving by the victim's location, trespassing, and following the victim. More than half of the women threatened their victims, and a quarter were physically violent, with three victims losing their lives to their stalkers. However, most episodes of violence did not involve use of a weapon and did not result in injuries. Violence was more likely if the stalker and the victim had been previously sexually intimate. In more than half of the cases, the behavior increased in frequency and intensity. The victims had a mean age of 41 (range 16–68) years, and were usually Caucasian heterosexual males. Female victims were targeted one third of the time. The perpetrators pursued their victims for an average of 22 months.

### Australian forensic clinic study

In 2001, Purcell et al<sup>1</sup> published a study that compared female stalkers ( $n = 40$ ) with their male counterparts ( $n = 150$ ). The data were collected based on referrals to a community forensic mental health clinic specializing in assessment of stalkers. One of the limitations of this study is that it involved a retrospective analysis of data collected from evaluations performed over a period of 8 years. Like men, the women were on average 35 years old, single, and employed. Women were less likely to have a history of criminal behavior. Almost half of the women (18 of 40) had an Axis I diagnosis, most commonly (10 of 18) delusional disorder. Half (20 of 40) were diagnosed with an Axis II disorder, including borderline, dependent, and narcissistic personality disorders. The diagnostic profiles of these women did not differ from their male counterparts, except that the women had lower rates of substance use.

With only two exceptions, the female stalkers knew their victims. Forty percent of the victims were professional

contacts, frequently mental health professionals. Men were comparatively more likely to pursue strangers. Same-gender stalking was more frequent among women than men. Based on Mullen's typology, women's primary motive for stalking behavior in almost half of the cases was a desire for intimacy. In the female group, there were no cases of sexually motivated predatory stalking, which differed from the male stalkers. Women and men appeared to stalk their victims for a similar duration of time. Women were more likely to harass their victims via telephone calls but less likely to physically pursue them when compared with men. Strikingly, women had the same propensity as male stalkers to make threats and become violent, including property damage and assault.

Another study was conducted in 143 female stalkers, who were part of a large US sample of stalkers ( $n = 1005$ )<sup>26</sup> gathered from law enforcement, prosecutorial, and corporate entertainment security files. There were 143 females in the total study sample of 1005 subjects (14.2%). The average age was  $35 \pm 12.6$  (range 17–76) years. Sixty percent of the women were Caucasian, 11% were African-American, and 6% were Hispanic (23% unknown). Eight percent did not complete high school, 15% graduated from high school, and 15% had earned associate or bachelor degrees (62% of unknown type). Forty-nine percent of the women were single, 16% separated or divorced, and 11% were married (24% unknown). Sixty-four percent were heterosexual, 9% were homosexual, and 3% were bisexual (24% unknown sexual orientation). Female stalkers were significantly less likely to be heterosexual than the male stalkers (64% versus 86%;  $F = 25.542$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 20.056$ ). Comparisons between homosexual and bisexual male and female stalkers did not yield any significant differences. The criminal histories of the female stalkers were serious, but significantly less so than those of the male stalkers ( $F = 15.573$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.055$ ). Among the females, 11% had violent, 8% had nonviolent, and 39% had no recorded criminal histories.

### Young stalkers

Various studies have investigated harassment by young people. The first of note is one by Fremouw et al,<sup>22</sup> conducted in 294 psychology students (165 girls and 29 boys, mean age 19.1 years) using a self-administered questionnaire. In this study, no girl reported having ever employed stalking tactics. In a later study by Le Blanc et al,<sup>28</sup> conducted in a university population of the Worcester Polytechnic using similar research methods, only 0.6% of women students (1/172) admitted stalking.

However, when the focus of the research is shifted from stalkers to victims, the results change markedly, demonstrating how differently the perception of stalking is between the stalker and the victim. For example, when Bjerregaard<sup>29</sup> administered a questionnaire to 761 US college students aged 18–25 years (65% women, 35% men), he found that 10.9% of the men (29/267) claimed to be victims of stalking, and that in two out of three of these cases, the stalker was a woman. Interviewing 1490 college students, Fox et al<sup>30</sup> discovered that 30% of the victims of stalkers were men. Previously, a slightly lower percentage (about 20%) had emerged from research by Bjerregaard.<sup>29</sup>

Morgan<sup>31</sup> recently investigated the stalking phenomenon among students and faculty members. Interviews in the faculty (52 members, 55.7% women and 44.3% men) identified 87 cases of students who had stalked a professor and, interestingly, nearly half (48.27%) were women (aged  $25.2 \pm 5.9$  years). In 42.5% of cases, a mental disturbance emerged (erotomantic delirium); 43.6% belonged to the category of “molestive/manipulative” stalkers attempting to obtain secondary advantages and, in 14% of cases (more than half of these were female), there was an inappropriate or confused interpersonal relationship, not necessarily sentimental or sexual, between the stalker and the victim.

A different type of population was the focus of research by Purcell et al,<sup>32</sup> who studied a sample of 259 adolescent stalkers tried in the Juvenile Court of Melbourne for stalking; among these, the percentage of female stalkers was high, reaching 36%.

## Stalkers in the occupational setting

Female stalkers frequently pursue people they have met in a professional context. According to Purcell et al,<sup>1</sup> in 95% of cases, a female stalker's victim is a person she knows, and in 40% of cases someone she met in their professional capacity. In contrast, in the later study conducted by Meloy and Boyd,<sup>2</sup> the percentage of female stalkers of a known victim was less than 50%. McIvor and Petch<sup>33</sup> also found that female stalkers more often choose a victim they met in an occupational setting.

High prevalence rates emerge in studies conducted in some professions, in particular among psychologists/psychotherapists or plastic surgeons. In a study conducted with the participation of 294 members of the American Psychological Association, Gentile et al<sup>34</sup> found that 10.2% of the specialists interviewed had been stalked by one of their clients, and in 68% of cases the stalker was a woman. The psychologists declared that they had felt fear (41% of cases) and anger (70%

of cases), while 50% had changed their professional habits as a consequence of the persecution they had suffered.

High percentages of stalking of professionals were also found in the study by Purcell et al,<sup>35</sup> conducted in a sample of psychologists randomly selected in the Australian state of Victoria. A total of 830 specialists (79% women and 21% men) participated in the investigation and 20% of those interviewed admitted that they had been a victim of stalking in the course of their profession. The percentage of female stalkers was 37% ( $n = 60/162$ ); resentment was the prime motive in 42% of cases, and a desire for a more intimate relationship in 19%.

Morgan and Porter<sup>36</sup> focused on a particular form of stalking, ie, sexual harassment, administering a questionnaire to a sample of 85 psychiatric trainees (37 men and 48 women). They were relatively young (mean age 32.6 years) and most (86% of the total sample, with no difference between males and females) reported that they had been a victim of stalking at least once by patients or other members of staff. Female stalkers were patients (28/29, 97%) but also colleagues (21/33, 91%). However, it must be stressed that the inclusion criteria for stalking in this study were very general (eg, “a patient followed me down the corridor and touched my behind”), which may have influenced the high percentages obtained.

The percentage of female stalkers emerging from the study conducted by Allnutt et al<sup>37</sup> in plastic surgeons is equally high. Of 103 plastic surgeons extracted from the list of members of the Australasian Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 57% had suffered harassment by a patient at least once in their career and 22.3% in the last year, and 43.5% of the stalkers were female.

A lower percentage was reported in the study by Romans et al<sup>38</sup> conducted at 41 university counseling centers in the US accredited by the International Association of Counseling Services. Of 178 consultants interviewed, 5.6% reported that they had been stalked by a patient, but female stalkers accounted for only five of a total of 35 (14.3%).

## Same-gender stalking

Tjaden and Thoennes<sup>10</sup> conducted a telephone study, speaking to 16,000 subjects (50% women and 50% men) in the adult US population. Only 2% of the men had been a victim of stalking during their lifetime, and in 60% of cases the stalker was a man. Among the women, 8% claimed that they had been stalked, but only in 6% of these cases by a woman.

Different data emerged from the study by Pathè et al,<sup>39</sup> conducted in a forensic community treating subjects



denounced for stalking. They observed 29 same-gender stalkers (11 men and 18 women), and reported that the phenomenon was more common in the work context and rarely ensued after a close relationship. A higher percentage of female same-gender stalking emerged in the study by Purcell et al,<sup>1</sup> in which 48% of the female victims had been stalked by a female. In Germany, Dressing et al<sup>40</sup> mailed a questionnaire inquiring about stalking, to which 679 people answered (400 women and 279 men), but only 11% (68 women and 10 men) reported that they had been a victim of stalking. It is interesting to note that among the victims, both men and women, 91% reported that they had been harassed by a man. Thus, same-gender stalking seems to be essentially a male problem. In 2006, Baum et al<sup>41</sup> investigated a sample of 65,000 subjects in the US population and concluded that men have the same probability of being stalked by a man as by a woman, while two thirds of the women were stalked by a man. The same-gender stalker belongs to a category of resentful stalkers, according to the model proposed by Mullen et al.<sup>42</sup> Reviews did not reveal significant differences among the motivations of heterosexual or homosexual/lesbian stalkers.<sup>42</sup>

## Motives and types of stalker

In the research done by Purcell et al,<sup>1</sup> about half of the stalkers sought closer intimacy with their victim, and hoped to have an affair with their victim, who was a professional met in the work context in 78% of cases. In contrast, in the investigation by Meloy and Boyd,<sup>2</sup> the main motive (in two thirds of cases) of female stalkers was anger/hostility. They belonged to the category of “rejected” stalkers, according to the Mullen et al classification,<sup>42</sup> in other words, ex-partners who harass their victims when an intimate relationship comes to an end, fueled by a blend of feelings like, a wish for reconciliation, jealousy, anger, and a desire for revenge.

Most of the female stalkers in the investigation of college students conducted by Bjerregaard<sup>29</sup> also belonged to the category of rejected ex-partners. In fact, 40.7% of the male victims were stalked by an ex-partner, 18.5% by a friend, 7.4% by a personal acquaintance, and 3.7% by an acquaintance in a professional context.

In a study of 299 juvenile stalkers under restraining orders from the Juvenile Court of Melbourne, Purcell et al<sup>32</sup> found that female stalkers belonged largely to a category inspired by a desire for retaliation for a perceived harm or who stalked as an extension of bullying, typically aimed at a same-gender victim. There were no differences between males and females in terms of persistence of the harassment or intrusiveness of the behavior. Notably, these juveniles were more likely than

their adult counterparts to involve others in their persecutory actions against their victim. In this study, the authors identified six categories of stalking victimization:

- in 28% of cases, stalking was an extension of bullying; in this category, there was an equal number of male and female stalkers and victims, and the persecution was mainly of peers
- in 22%, the motive was retaliation for a perceived harm; again, there were no gender differences and the stalking victimization was largely of friends or acquaintances who had broken off the relationship
- in 22%, the stalking was a reaction to rejection: among these, women accounted for 14%
- in 20%, the stalker was affected by mental disease
- in 5%, the motive was sexual predation; these subjects were intent on imposing an unwanted sexual relationship on their victim (only one case of female stalking among these)
- in 2%, the motive for stalking was infatuation with their victim (only one of the six stalkers was a woman).

A peculiar aspect of stalking is the phenomenon that involves the British royal family, studied by James et al.<sup>43</sup> This investigation, based on 275 files randomly selected from 8001 collected over 15 years (1988–2003), led to a classification of eight categories of stalking according to the motivational type: royalty identification delirium (26.9%); seeking friendship (16.5%); seeking intimacy (12%); seeking help to face personal problems (8.8%); claiming to be victims of persecution by members of the royal family (3.2%); “counselors” who thought they could advise the royal family about how they should live their lives or manage political situations (11.2%); “querulants” seeking help from the royal family to pay off debts, and annoyed by the family’s indifference to their cause (6.4%); and nonclassifiables (14.4%). The research did not identify any significant gender differences in terms of the motivation or tactics of the stalker.

## Stalking and mental disorders

In the forensic field, the first investigations of the stalking phenomenon laid particular stress on the importance of erotomaniac delirium, considered to be particularly frequent in female stalkers.<sup>7,44–47</sup> In the case series reported by Zona et al,<sup>18</sup> six of seven stalkers with a diagnosis of erotomaniac delirium were women. In subsequent research,<sup>48</sup> this correlation was lower and the disturbance was identified in only 10% of cases of female stalking.

A review by Brüne<sup>49</sup> who analyzed 246 case reports of erotomania between 1900 and 2000, reported that female

stalkers were in most cases spinsters or women who were in “unstable” relationships, and that the object of their attentions was usually an older man of high socioeconomic status. In contrast, in cases of male stalkers with erotomanic delirium, the victim was generally a young woman.

Either way, the literature seems to show a high preponderance of mental disturbances among female stalkers. A pathological view of female stalking emerges in the study by Purcell et al,<sup>1</sup> for example, conducted in a sample of 190 stalkers (40 women and 150 men); among the women 45% had an Axis I disorder<sup>50</sup> and especially an erotomanic delirium disorder (30%). Other prominent diagnoses in this study were schizophrenia (5%), bipolar disorder (5%), and depression (5%). There was also a high prevalence of personality disorders, including borderline (15%), dependent (15%), and narcissistic (7.5%). In 7.5% of these cases, substance abuse was also a factor, but to a lesser extent than in the sample of male stalkers (28%).

These findings are supported by the research of Meloy and Boyd<sup>2</sup> who reported that, at the time of the persecution, 49% of 82 female stalkers were affected by psychosis. Of these, one third had a positive history of previous contact with psychiatric services, and in one quarter of cases, there was also an association with alcohol or substance abuse, in particular cannabis. Again, there was a high prevalence of personality disorders, including borderline (12%), narcissistic (4%), dependent (4%), unspecified (2%), and obsessive-compulsive (1%).

Illuminating data emerged from the study conducted by Gentile et al<sup>34</sup> who interviewed 294 members of the American Psychological Association and found that 10.2% reported that they had suffered stalking by one of their clients, and that it was a woman in 68% of cases. The most frequent diagnoses were a mood disorder (62% of cases) and a personality disorder (75% of cases).

## Stalking and risk of violent behavior

Purcell et al<sup>1</sup> claim that female stalkers have the same propensity as male stalkers to resort to threatening or violent behavior. Further, according to Morgan,<sup>31</sup> the duration of harassment does not differ according to the gender of the victim (in 54.5% of cases, the stalking persisted for one month or less, and in 22% of the cases from one to 6 months).

Instead, the stalking tactics seem to be gender-specific,<sup>25</sup> with female stalkers adopting a greater variety of types of persecution than males; in particular, they send more written messages (48% versus 16%) and make more phone calls (71% versus 54%). Meloy and Boyd<sup>2</sup> concur that the tactics

adopted by female stalkers consist largely of threats (65%) and less frequently culminate in violence (25%), although the percentage of violent actions increases by up to 50% in cases of a previous love affair with the victim. Even if the rate of threats does not seem to differ according to gender, female stalkers are still less likely to pass on from threats to physical violence (30% vs 49% in males).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the female gender shows a lesser propensity to progress from explicit threats of physical violence to actually acting them out. Meloy and Boyd (2003) explain that usual stalking behaviors included telephone calls and messages, giving letters and gifts, driving by the victim's location, trespassing, and following the victim. More than half of the women threatened their victims, and a quarter were physically violent, with three victims losing their lives to their stalkers. Most episodes of violence, however, did not involve the use of a weapon and did not result in injuries. Violence was more likely if the stalker and the victim had been previously sexually intimate. In more than half of the cases, the behavior increased in frequency and intensity. The victims were usually Caucasian, heterosexual males with a mean age of 41 (ranging from 16–68 years). Female victims were targeted one third of the time. The perpetrators pursued their victim for an average of 22 months.

Rosenfeld<sup>52</sup> reported an interesting study of the risk of recidivism of stalking, reporting that there was no correlation with gender, but the best predictive factor was again the degree of intimacy with the victim. According to Glass et al,<sup>53</sup> if the couple are lesbian, predictive factors for recidivism are fierce jealousy and possessiveness, as well as abuse of alcohol, illicit drugs, or pharmaceuticals.

In a review by McEwan et al<sup>54</sup> of risk factors associated with physical violence and rape, it was found that gender was unrelated to either the prevalence of threats or of assault. Thomas et al,<sup>55</sup> who investigated the frequency of aggression in a sample of 1844 victims of stalking, did not find gender differences either, but only a significant correlation with a previous love affair. In this study, of 75 stalkers responsible for violence, only nine were women. Even if the rate of threats does not seem to differ according to gender, female stalkers are still less likely to pass on from threats to physical violence (30% versus 49% in males).<sup>1</sup> Thus, female gender shows a lesser propensity to progress from explicit threats of physical violence to carrying them out.

## Conclusion

Although female stalking exhibits some specificities, these seem to be less marked than is generally believed. Whatever the investigative context, women commit fewer

stalking offenses than men, and this is in agreement with the generically lower figures for women in criminal statistics in general. Having said this, it should be noted that in some settings the percentages of female stalkers emerging from a review of the literature are certainly not negligible, and much higher than those for other violent crimes. We have only to think of the percentage of woman murderers in Italy, based on the available Italian National Institute for Statistics survey figures for the last 10 years, which is slightly less than 3% and that of bodily harm is 11.73%, and to find higher percentages of female crimes, we need to shift our attention to insults, slander, and libel (32.9%). In any case, it can be estimated from the data presented in this review that, among crimes against the individual, stalking is in the forefront of crimes most frequently associated with the female gender.

Although this statement must obviously be treated with some caution owing to the obvious difficulty in extracting meaningful data from such widely different research contexts, methodologies, and sample populations, it is certainly of considerable interest. Moreover, a strong suspicion arises that the phenomenon may be underestimated, for various reasons. For a start, it is possible that men do not regard intrusive attention from a woman as stalking, at least for a while. Moreover, Purcell et al<sup>1</sup> have already pointed out that men sometimes complain that reports of female stalking are not taken seriously because they are presumed to be harmless, despite the fact that there is no empirical evidence available that this behavior is less invasive or persistent than that perpetrated by their male counterpart.

Female gender and stalking is not a mild inconsistent association. No particular differences emerge as regards the likelihood of female stalkers resorting to threats or duration of harassment. Instead, there are evident differences as regards the tactics adopted, given that women employ a greater variety of different persecution tactics than men, write more messages and make more calls, but they are less likely to pass on from threats of physical violence to their actual execution.

The risk of violence increases in cases of a terminated love affair. As in males, not only is the ex-partner category statistically relevant, but it is also more correlated with physical violence.<sup>56</sup> In particular, the experiences described by stalkers to justify their offence are the same in men and women. Only in juvenile populations do there seem to be motivational differences, correlated with, eg, unrequited love or the desire to have a closer relationship with the victim.

A specific risk factor for female stalking is erotomanic delirium, estimated in various investigations to be more

frequent in the female gender. There is also a significant incidence of female stalking in specific professional settings, in particular psychotherapy, where the gender difference completely disappears and indeed may be reversed, providing the other most significant example of female stalking motivation. The treatment relationship can easily be invested with an affective component that then takes on erotic overtones.<sup>57,58</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that a form of stalking can occur in this context due to the close relationship that develops between patient and psychotherapist. The profile of the female stalker that emerges from the present research, namely young adult, highly educated, single, and childless, does not conflict with this finding, but on the contrary reinforces it. Finally, it is noteworthy that the same-gender stalking phenomenon is shown to be more frequent in the occupational field, and primarily involves men.

## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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