



Characteristics of Incarcerated Women in South Korea Who Killed Their Spouses: A Feminist and Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the roles of domestic abuse and prior criminal involvement in women's spousal homicide in South Korea utilizing Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of informal social control and relevant feminist literature on women who kill their spouses/partners. Using a sample of female prison inmates, this study found that certain factors differentiated between females who killed their partners and other female offenders: notably, they had been subjected to psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, and they were more likely to be married, but less likely to have been involved in prior delinquent activities.

Key Words: female prisoners, spousal homicide, VAW, South Korean prisons

INTRODUCTION

Correctional data from South Korea indicate that women represent only a small part of the prison population, as women constituted only 5.3 percent of the entire Korean prison population in 2006 (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2006). The 2,431 women incarcerated served their sentences in one prison for women, one institution for juveniles, 10 detention centre houses, 4 detention centre branches, and 1 correctional institution for vocational training.

Due to this relatively small number of female prison inmates, these incarcerated women have not been a matter of much popular or scholarly concern and interest in South Korea.

However, Kim, Park, and Lee (2004) investigated the status of female prisoners incarcerated in Cheong-Ju Women's Correctional Institution, South Korea's only prison for women among 44 prisons nationwide (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Their finding that of 531 women who were incarcerated in 2004, 133 women were incarcerated for spousal homicide drew the attention of both the public and policy makers, because this finding contradicted gender-role socialization in Korea of women as docile (Adinkrah, 1999). In part, this national attention was caused by the fact that the consequences of female-perpetrated homicide against husbands are much more devastating compared to other forms of homicide because children lose both parents at the same time (Peterson, 1999).

Scholars have argued on the need for cross-cultural research on violence (Cooney, 1997; Peterson, 1999). However, of the extant studies on spouse slayings committed by women published in English, very few studies focus on incidents that have occurred in non-western societies. Adinkrah (1999), in a study in Fiji, found that the patterns of spousal homicide by women and the characteristics of the women using lethal violence in intimate or marital relationships in non-western societies have many significant differences from those in Western societies. Previous studies in western societies (Browne, 1987; Chimbos, 1978; Leonard, 2002; Totman, 1978; Felson and Messner, 1998) have mainly focused on "abused" women who kill their intimate partners. By doing so, these studies exclude the possibility that for some or many of the women who used lethal violence against their male partners, abuse by the victims may not be the primary reason for their crime. The current study is unique in that it focuses on South Korean female offenders who killed their partners, regardless of their abuse experiences.

Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Eggleston, Laub, and Sampson, 2004) found that social bonds formed in adulthood in both delinquent and non-delinquent males deterred criminal behavior, although criminal propensity may vary over the life course. Moreover, non-delinquent males who have weak attachments to their wives show an onset of crime in adulthood. Spousal abuse was the key characteristic of this weak marital relationship. Although Sampson and Laub based their studies on male subjects, their findings may prove to be applicable to an all female group who killed their partners after the majority had abusive relationships but no prior criminal histories. The current study advances Sampson and Laub's (1993) perspective by adding the feminist notion that women commit partner homicide in order to protect themselves (Ogle, Maier-Katkin, & Bernard, 1995; O'Keefe, 1997; Walker, 1989). A comparison group of women incarcerated for other offenses is examined in order to explore the similarities and differences in the characteristics and abuse experiences of the two groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist Perspective: Violence against Women and Self-Defense

Globally, violence against women is a pervasive social problem of extraordinary proportion (Heise, 1994; United Nations, 1989; Leonard, 2002; Yoshihama, 2002). Numerous studies from a wide variety of countries demonstrate that violence against women is present in every country (UNICEF, 2000). For example, according to Heise (1994), 35 studies from 24 countries reveal that from one-fourth to more than one-half of women are abused either physically or psychologically.

Such abuse and violence against women might be much more serious in traditional societies where modernization is relatively slow compared to western societies, and the traditional patriarchal family structure strongly supports the authority of men over women (Choe et al., 2004; Tsuya & Bumpass, 2004; Tsuya & Choe, 1991). Feminists see patriarchy as the source of the structural social control of women by men and unequal gender power relations (Kurz, 1993; Leonard, 2002).

Leonard (2002) posits that a feminist framework can best explain women who are involved in partner homicide. Studies in the United States have been guided by a feminist epistemology that “supports the voices of women and seeks to give greater visibility to women’s experiences” (Leonard, 2002, p. 47). According to Bergen (1993, p. 200), “feminists explore how ‘personal’ problems are the result of structured gender inequality.” Feminist frameworks focusing on how battered women become involved in partner homicide largely rely on the immediate characteristics of abusive relationships to explain the killings. Feminists view the killing of an abusive partner as a woman’s last attempt to protect herself or her children from further physical and mental harm (Ogle, Mier-Katkin, & Bernard, 1995; O’Keefe, 1997; Walker, 1989).

Research indicates that women who kill their abusers frequently do so in self-defense following years of severe abuse (Browne, 1987; Ewing, 1987; O’Keefe, 1997; Walker, 1984). In Leonard’s study (2002), the results show that battered women killed their abusers because they found no legal way to stop life-threatening violence. The research finding that battered women less often have a history of criminal or violent behavior supports these assertions (Browne, 1987; O’Keefe, 1997). Compared to 40% of other female inmates, fewer than 20% of the battered women who killed their partners in Leonard’s study (2002) had a previous arrest history. Likewise, O’Keefe’s study (1997) reveals that of the battered women who killed their partners, 80% had no previous criminal record.

However, it should be noted that not all women who commit partner homicide are abused, although studies report that the vast majority have been battered (Chimbos, 1978; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Totman, 1978; Wolfgang, 1967). The majority of the studies that concluded that women who killed their spouses were socially different from other female offenders included only abused women. For example, Grant and Curry (1993) interviewed only those who were “abused” among women serving time for killing their husbands, instead of women in general. Likewise, Leonard (2002) compared battered women who killed male partners with the general population of female inmates. These studies exclude the possibility that not all women who killed their male partners had an experience of severe long-term domestic violence and thus, for some or many of them, abuse by the victims may not be the reason for their crime. For instance, Choi’s (1996) identified infatuation, jealousy, resentment, disagreement, and quarrel as motivations for women who killed intimates in South Korea.

Domestic violence is not an issue only for women who kill their husbands. Rather, this is the issue many women in general have been facing (U.S. Department of State, 2004). In spite of the prevalence of women’s experiences of abuse by their male partners, the majority of these women do not react with lethal violence (Adinkrah, 1999; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Shackelford, 2000, 2001; Wilson & Daly, 1996).

Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez (2006, p. 326) criticized the notion that “although victimization may be an important component of a woman’s pathway to crime, many feminists essentialize it and, in so doing, give primacy to this experience.” At the same time, victimization ex-

perience is rarely used to account for men's criminality. Daly (1998, pp. 149-50) explained that "a seamless web of victimization and criminalization tends to produce accounts which focus on victimization and leave little agency, responsibility or meaning to women's lawbreaking." To better understand women who kill their partners, information about the victim-offender relationship, including abuse, as well as the characteristics of female murderers themselves should be explored.

Life-course Perspective: Attachment to Spouse and Late Onset of Crime

Criminological theories have typically focused on either the person or the environment (Nagin & Paternoster, 1994). Theories focusing on the person emphasize continuity, that is, those enduring characteristic traits that lead one to engage in crime throughout life. For instance, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that individual differences in present-day orientation are established early in life and are stable over time. Therefore, the underlying propensity of individuals to be more or less crime-prone does not vary substantially over the life course (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995). In contrast, situational theories predict that an individual's environment and circumstances have an impact on criminal involvement throughout life (Nagin & Paternoster, 1994). In recent years, efforts to integrate the theories of enduring individual differences (continuity) and environments (change) have been proposed (Horney et al., 1995; Nagin & Paternoster, 1994; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Moffitt, 1993, 1997).

Prior to Sampson and Laub's (1991, 1993, 2003) pioneering work, criminologists paid little attention to adult crime and change in criminal offending (Horney et al., 1995; Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998). It is well known that "on average, rates of offending rise rather rapidly during early adolescence, reach a peak in the late teenage years, and then begin a gradual but steady decline thereafter" (Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995, p. 112). However, although this is the typical pattern, this trajectory cannot explain all kinds of crime. Moreover, some researchers (Caspi & Moffitt, 1992; Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001; Loeber, 1982; Moffitt, 1993, 1997; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Thornberry, 1997) assert that the continuity of antisocial behavior throughout life is characteristic of only a small group of serious chronic offenders.

Nagin and Land (1993) identified four distinctive offending trajectories in a sample of 403 British males: the never-convicted, the adolescence-limited, the low-level chronics, and the high-level chronics. Likewise, Moffitt (1993, 1997) differentiated between the adolescent-limited offenders who "age out" in their late teen years, and the life-course-persistent offenders who continue to engage in antisocial behavior throughout life (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001).

Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993) suggested that regardless of delinquent or antisocial behavior during childhood and adolescence, institutions of informal social control, such as family and work, influence criminal behavior in adulthood. That is, variations in adult crime cannot be explained by childhood behavior alone. Using Glueck and Glueck's (1950) comprehensive longitudinal data set, they concluded that "childhood pathways to crime and deviance can be significantly modified over the life course by adult bonds" (Sampson & Laub, 1990, p. 611).

Sampson and Laub (1990) found that job instability and weak attachments to one's spouse are directly related to adult crime and deviance, even after controlling for childhood delinquency and crime in young adulthood. Results showed that even individuals whose youth delin-

quency was severe desisted from criminal behavior as adults to the extent that they had stable jobs and strong spousal attachments. The data documented that marital bonding has a significant impact on one's decision to discontinue involvement in antisocial activities (Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001).

In addition, Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) asserted that "the factors that lead to the initiation of crime in adulthood among the nondelinquent group are of considerable interest to criminological theory, as are the factors associated with desistance among those in the delinquent group" (1993, p. 30). In their study, more than 100 of 500 individuals of the original non-delinquent group initiated criminal behavior as adults. This suggests that it is important to analyze the factors accounting for the late onset of crime and deviance. Within a sample of formerly non-delinquent youths, informal social controls exerted by job stability and marital attachment are significantly and substantially related to adult antisocial behavior. In particular, those in discordant marital relationships at ages 17-25 were three times more likely to later engage in criminal or deviant acts.

The current study is aimed at determining if Sampson and Laub's findings can be generalized to women offenders in South Korea. There are some obvious cultural, historical, and political differences between the U.S. and South Korea, most notably the relative heterogeneity of the former and homogeneity of the latter. At first glance, it would therefore appear that such an endeavor is doomed to failure. However, if we find any support in spite of these differences, we will be that much more confident that the findings are indeed substantively meaningful.

DATA AND METHODS

This study is based on information collected for a larger project focusing on the status of South Korean female prison inmates. Although researchers prefer a longitudinal data set for a life-course analysis of offending, such data are currently not available in South Korea. We use this cross-sectional data set, fully realizing that it is a weakness that needs to be addressed in future research projects.

After first obtaining approval from the institutional review board at the senior author's academic institution, participants were recruited from Cheng-Ju Women's Correctional Institution, the only women's prison in South Korea. Local researchers intended to distribute the questionnaires to all 133 women who served prison sentences in 2004 for killing their partners/spouses. An unspecified number of inmates were unavailable as they were either at work or in the hospital during the administration of the questionnaire. After respondents were assured that their participation was voluntary, 97 agreed to participate. Three questionnaires were eventually eliminated because they had problems with too much missing data. In addition, researchers were able to obtain the cooperation of 157 women convicted of other offenses. The selection process of members in the comparison group was similar to the women who had killed. Women who were at work or in the hospital were excluded by the prison administration, and the remaining women were given the opportunity to refuse to participate. Local researchers were able to compare demographic characteristics of respondents to non-respondents in both groups. They found no statistically significant differences between respondents and non-respondents.

Although the samples are not random samples, we are confident that they are representative of the respective populations.

The comparison group consisted of women who were convicted of murder against people other than spouses/partners, robbery, theft, violence, fraud, and possession of drugs. Although it would be preferable to have a comparison group of only women convicted of violent offenses, the researchers had limited input in the selection of comparison group members.

As shown in Table 1, participants ranged in age from 20 to 74, with a mean of 44 years. Over half (57%) did not graduate from high school, 29.5% were high school graduates, and 13.5% reported at least some college. Regarding marital status prior to arrest, 69.4% were legally married or remarried, and 12.0%, respectively, were either divorced or had been living with their common law partners, while only 6.6% were single. Additionally, 68.5% were employed, and almost half (51.8%) reported their economic status as middle class, followed by upper class (26.7%), and 21.5% indicated a lower class status.

TABLE 1	
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE FEMALE INMATES (N = 251)	
Variable	%
Age (mean = 44 years)	
20-29	7.6
30-39	27.3
40-49	38.2
50-59	19.9
60-69	6.4
70-74	0.8
Education	
Some high school or less	57.0
High school graduate	29.5
Some college or more	13.5
Marital Status (prior to arrest)	
Married or remarried	69.4
Divorced	12.0
Common law	12.0
Single	6.6
Pre-arrest Employment	
Employed	68.5
Unemployed	31.5
Pre-arrest Economic Status	
Middle class	51.8
Upper class	26.7
Lower class	21.5
Conviction Offense	
Other	62.5
Partner Homicide	37.5

The present study, based on Sampson and Laub's model (1993), utilized nine variables. Job stability was measured by pre-conviction employment status. Similar to Sampson and Laub, economic status (measured by self-reported social class: lower, middle, and upper), age, and education were included due to their theoretical importance (Sampson and Laub, 1990; Wright et al., 2001).

Among the adult social bonds that Sampson and Laub measured, job stability, commitment, and attachment to spouse, this study focused in particular on attachment to spouse. In measuring attachment to spouse, Sampson and Laub (1993) used a composite measure derived from interview data describing the marital status, the general conjugal relationship between spouses, and the subjects' attitudes toward marital responsibility. Sampson and Laub's analysis of qualitative data revealed that key characteristics of weak marital attachment are domestic violence and disputes. The same measure, women's experience of abuse by their partners/spouses, was measured in this study to capture the quality or strength of women's relationships with their partners.

There are several forms of abuse women experience by their partners/spouses including sexual, verbal, psychological and physical. However, most studies on women who kill their partners/spouses focused only on physical abuse (Leonard, 2002; O'Keefe, 1997). Conversely, "a battered woman is a woman who is repeatedly subjected to any forceful physical or psychological behavior by a man in order to coerce her to do something he wants her to do without any concern for her rights" (Leonard, 2002, p. 6). That is, the abuse can be either psychological, physical, or both, and men may use both to control and dominate women.

We were unable to find a commonly accepted measure of domestic violence in South Korea. Thus, we asked two Korean psychologists with counseling experience with abused women to develop such a measure. Using their field experience, along with their knowledge of the relevant theoretical literature, they developed 16 items to measure specific forms of abuse women in Korea experience. These items were rated on a scale from 1 = "not at all" to 3 = "to a great extent." Cronbach's alpha for the sample was 0.95 indicating a very high reliability of the scale.

TABLE 2
FACTOR LOADINGS IN ABUSE ITEMS

MY PARTNER	Factor I Psychological Abuse	Factor II Physical & Sexual Abuse
Demeaned me	.856	
Treated me like an imbecile	.847	
Offended or humiliated me in public	.810	
Offended or humiliated me in the presence of our child	.772	
Ignored my feelings	.710	
Was bad-tempered and rude toward me	.655	
Got extremely angry when I disagreed with his opinion	.630	
Ordered me around	.621	
Screamed and yelled at me	.618	
Ordered unquestioning obedience to his sudden caprices	.590	
Beat me black and blue all over my body		.791
Yelled and beat me when he was drunk		.786
Broke things and threw them at me when we disagreed with each other		.781
Left the house after fighting with me		.616
Acted like he would like to kill me if I suggested him to stop drinking when he was intoxicated		.595
Commanded me to have sex when I did not want		.499
NOTE: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax Rotation.		

One of the important goals of the current study was to investigate the relative impacts of various types of abuse women who kill their partners experience. In order to assist in clarifying the number of underlying dimensions in the items, an exploratory principle factor analysis was conducted (Sawyer et al., 2006). A principal components analysis of the items yielded a two-factor solution according to the scree plot, an eigenvalue greater than 1.0, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) of .95, together accounting for a substantial 67.0 % of the total variance among the variables (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Sawyer et al., 2006). Item loadings for the varimax-rotated factors are presented in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, Factor I measured psychological abuse (e.g., “my partner demeaned me;” “my partner treated me like an imbecile”) and Factor II measured physical and sexual abuse (e.g., “my partner beat me black and blue all over my body;” “my partner yelled and beat me when he was drunk”). For each subject, a score for each factor was computed, and all subsequent analyses were conducted using these factor scores.

Subjects reported involvement in a variety of status, property, and violent offenses before age 18. Prior delinquency was measured using the Delinquency Inventory for Girls by the Korean Women’s Development Institute (1999), which contains 24 items addressing behaviors

such as drinking, lying about age, wandering about in the red-light district late at night, sleeping somewhere other than home without permission from parents, and gang fighting. Responses to each of the 24 items were coded 0 = No and 1 = Yes and assigned a seriousness score derived from the National Survey of Crime Severity (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992, 2001; Wolfgang, Figlio, Tracy, & Singer, 1985), ranging from 0.25 for lying about age to 11.74 for gang fighting. The delinquency score equals the mean sum of each item's "yes" or "no" response and its seriousness weight.

Finally, a section of the questionnaire was designed to assess socio-demographic and background variables. Variables examined include age, education, employment status, marital status, economic status, number of children, and prior arrest history.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

T-tests and chi-square statistics were used to examine socio-demographic differences between women who killed their partners and those incarcerated for other offenses. Although no between-group differences were found for age, employment, economic status, and education, significant differences were found for other variables. As shown in Table 3, in comparison to women convicted of other offenses, more women who killed their partners had been in a marital relationship, had children, and were much less likely to have been arrested previously.

These findings differ on some key demographic variables from Leonard's study (2002) in which women convicted of using lethal violence against their abusive partners were compared to the broader population of California women prisoners. In her study, battered women prisoners were more educated and older than other female inmates in California. In both the current study and Leonard's study, women who caused the death of their partners were much more likely to have been married. Although this fact may sound tautological, it is not, because some of the women who killed their partners were not legally married. This issue becomes even more important in the subsequent analysis. Another similarity between Leonard and this study is that nearly equal proportions of both groups reported being employed prior to their arrest. However, in the current study, only 6.4% of women who killed their partners had a history of arrest compared to 42% of women in the comparison group.

TABLE 3
GROUP COMPARISON OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND BACKGROUND VARIABLES

Variables	Partner Homicide (n = 94)	Other Offenses (n = 157)	t-test or x ²	p
Age	45.13	43.23	t = -1.585	P = .114
Economic Status	2.82	2.92	t = .891	P = .374
Education	5.41	5.22	t = -.654	P = .514
Employment				
Yes	70	102	x ² = 2.460	P = .125
No	24	55		
Marital Status				
Married	86	118	x ² = 10.303	P = .001
Non-married	8	39		
Have Children				
Yes	91	138	x ² = 5.838	P = .019
No	3	19		
Prior Arrest				
Yes	6	66	x ² = 36.539	P = .000
No	88	91		

A forward stepwise logistic regression was then performed to more thoroughly investigate the significant predictors distinguishing women who kill their intimate partners/spouses (= 1) from those convicted of other offenses (= 0). A stepwise procedure was chosen for identifying the order of entry for the predictors (Minor, Wells, Soderstrom, Bingham, & Williamson, 1999). All variables in Table 3 and two types of abuse were submitted to the stepwise logistic regression analysis as potential predictors (Minor et al., 1999).

As Table 4 shows, “psychological abuse” generated the highest score and the highest partial correlation indicating that this variable had the greatest discriminating power between the two groups. The variables “physical and sexual abuse,” “marital status,” and “delinquency,” were selected for entry at steps 2, 3, and 4, respectively. The remaining variables—education, economic status, employment, age, and having children—were not significant and excluded from the final model.

The overall measure of how well the model fits is given by -2 times the log of the likelihood value (-2LL). A well-fitting model has a small value for -2LL (Hair et al., 1998). A chi-square test for the change in the -2LL value from the base model is comparable to the overall F test in multiple regression. In the four-variable model in the present study, this reduction in -2LL is statistically significant at the .000 level (Model x² = 6.640). The Hosmer and Lemeshow measure of overall fit in the final four-variable model also indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the observed and predicted classifications. These two measures, in combination, provide support for acceptance of the four-variable model as a significant logistic regression model. The overall hit ratios were 72.9%, indicating that this model correctly classified 72.9% of the subjects.

Using the Wald statistic, the estimated coefficients for the four independent variables and the constant were also evaluated for statistical significance. The coefficients of the four variables in the final model were statistically significant at the .001, .01, and .05 levels, respectively. Thus, the four-variable model including “psychological abuse,” “physical and sexual abuse,” “marital status” and “delinquency,” demonstrates a good model fit and statistical significance.

Table 4 shows that “psychological abuse,” “physical and sexual abuse,” and “marital status” were positively correlated, and “delinquency” was negatively correlated with the dependent variable. These correlations imply that women who killed their partners/spouses experienced more “psychological” and “physical and sexual” abuse, and were more likely to have been married, but participated in less delinquency during adolescence than women incarcerated for other offenses.

Marital status as an independent variable merits some discussion here. Although it is true that it appears that women who were convicted of killing their partners/spouses would by definition be married, the reality is that some were not (although they were in “marriage-like” relationships). Conversely, the vast majority of offenders convicted of other offenses were also married. Being married was therefore neither a required status for being included in the partner homicide group, nor did it obviously exclude women from being in the other group. The fact that being married increased the chances of women offenders to end up in the homicide partner group approximately four-fold (odds-ratio: 3.748) is therefore at least somewhat meaningful.

TABLE 4. STEPWISE LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODEL COMPARING CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTNER HOMICIDE GROUP AND OTHER OFFENSE GROUP					
Predictors (in order of entry)	B	Wald	Sig.	Odds Ratio	95% C. I.
Psychological Abuse	.777	20.781	.000	2.174	1.557~3.036
Physical & Sexual Abuse	.577	14.325	.000	1.781	1.321~2.402
Marital Status	1.321	8.927	.003	3.748	1.575~8.919
Delinquency	-.078	4.754	.029	.925	0.863~0.992
Model $\chi^2 = 6.640$ ($p < .01$), Nagelkerke $R^2 = .283$, Hosmer and Lemeshow $\chi^2 = 11.317$					
NOTE: Variables not in the final equation are education, economic status, employment status, age, and having children. (N = 251)					

The results provide tentative support for both feminists who emphasize the exclusive impact of abusive relationships on women’s propensity to commit partner homicide and Sampson and Laub’s theory focusing on stability and change of antisocial behavior over the life course. Consistent with research implying a continuity of antisocial behavior over the life course, adolescent delinquency is related to women’s involvement in other offenses (Caspi & Moffit, 1992; Cernkovich & Giordano, 2001; Loeber, 1982; Moffitt, 1993, 1997; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Simons, Johnson, Conger, & Elder, 1998), whereas abuse is characteristic of women who had little or no delinquent behavior history yet engaged in partner homicide. In this study, psychological abuse was a more powerful predictor of homicide against partners/spouses than physical and sexual abuse. Thus, it implies that psychological abuse is more damaging to women than physical abuse, while physical trauma also directly

relates to women's involvement in spouse/partner homicide (Foster, Veale, & Fogel, 1989; Leonard, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the feminist literature of women who kill their partners and Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control, the present study examined the relationship between partner homicides committed by women in South Korea and the abuse they may have endured. In order to increase the understanding of factors associated with partner homicide by women and to provide a comprehensive examination of their characteristics, women incarcerated in South Korea for other offenses were used as a comparison group. The results revealed that Korean women who commit partner homicide were less likely to have been involved in adolescent delinquency than their counterparts convicted of other offenses. This conclusion supports the feminist view and corroborates findings by Sampson and Laub (1993). That is, the use of lethal force among women who kill their spouses/partners is in response to the severe marital/partner abuse, and the "ontogenic" model's emphasis on stability of antisocial behavior appears insufficient to explain partner homicide by women in the adult life course (O'Keefe, 1997; Sampson & Laub, 1990).

Unlike in the United States, where attorneys sometimes use the "battered women's syndrome" in criminal trials (Gagne, 1998; Leonard, 2002; Walker, 1992), the idea of this form of self-protection is not allowed as a defense in Korea. In spite of the common etiology of domestic violence and spousal homicide, the personal character of a female defendant accused of partner homicide is stressed during her trial.

Because "psychological abuse" and "physical and sexual abuse" were analyzed separately, it is possible to conclude that psychological abuse is more significantly and substantially related to partner homicide than physical and sexual abuse. As the majority of studies on partner homicide have focused on physically abused women, the relationship between physical abuse and homicide has thus been exclusively emphasized. In contrast, psychological abuse has been deemphasized in criminology. At the same time, although increased public awareness of the prevalence and nature of domestic violence has resulted in some criminal justice interventions, there appears to be no legal way to stop the invisible psychological abuse that occurs in South Korea. The results of this study suggest that the Korean criminal justice system should become aware of psychological as well as physical abuse and prepare resources, especially for psychologically abused women, in order to protect and prevent them from committing partner homicide.

Future studies should examine a community sample of abused women in order to increase the understanding of factors associated with greater risk of homicide in abusive relationships (O'Keefe, 1997). In addition, the perception of gender among those women who committed partner homicide should be included in a future study. Adler (2002) suggested that between 1875 and 1920, the increase in the number of women who killed their abusive husbands was related to the gender role changes in turn-of-the-century Chicago. Also, according to Adler, the increase in women who worked outside the home was directly related to less restrictive gender roles and an increase in husband homicide by wives. Interestingly, however, Dugan et al. (1999) argued that in situations in which numerous American women enter the labor force and their economic dependence on husbands is reduced, a growing number choose divorce as

a nonviolent mechanism for leaving an abusive relationship. In other words, an increase in the female labor force resulted in the decline of husband homicides in America from 1976 to 1992, rather than in an increase in the rate as Adler (2002) suggested.

In the present study, 74.5% of the South Korean women who killed their spouses/partners were employed prior to arrest compared to 65% of female inmates in the comparison group; the corresponding figure for women in the South Korean general population was 50.1% in 2005 (Korea National Statistical Office, 2006). Although women in South Korea have experienced a discernable improvement in their status and job opportunities, strong patriarchal attitudes and gender inequalities still continue (Lawson, 2002). Thus, an investigation into the perception of gender roles and patriarchal attitudes of women who kill their spouses/partners would add to the literature on the relationship between the incidence of partner homicide by women, and the social change of gender roles in contemporary society.

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