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# Domestic Violence in the Korean Immigrant Family

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This study examines the prevalence of wife abuse among Korean immigrant families in the United States and factors contributing to domestic violence in this population. One of the most serious problems facing the Korean community is spouse abuse. Immigrant Korean families are reported to experience the highest rate of domestic violence among diverse Asian American groups in Los Angeles. Research findings indicate that wife abuse is much more prevalent among the immigrant Korean population in comparison to other ethnic groups. Correlates and factors contributing to the high occurrence of domestic violence include: (1) a cultural variable of higher than usual levels of male domination in Korean immigrant families; (2) environmental factors such as immigration stress and frustrations stemming from adjustment difficulties for Korean men; and (3) heavy drinking among Korean men and permissive attitudes toward male drinking in Korean culture.

Violence against women in the family has been a long-standing problem affecting all segments of the population throughout history. Although aggressive acts between intimates are relatively universal and exist across all income levels and classes of the society, the extent and frequency of violence within the family and coping strategies and attitudes toward violence may vary from one culture to another (Gelles & Cornell, 1983; Pagelow, 1984; Song, 1992; Yim, 1978).

One of the most serious and urgent problems facing the Asian communities in the United States is spouse abuse. Among diverse Asian immigrant groups, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, and Asian Indian communities are reported to experience a serious problem of spouse battering (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992; Chin, 1994; Ho, 1990; Agtuca, 1994). However, in terms of prevalence, immigrant Korean families are recognized as having the highest rate of domestic violence among various Asian immigrant groups in Los Angeles County. According to the records of the Los Angeles County Attorneys' Office which handles domestic violence cases prosecuted in Los Angeles County each year, Korean immigrant males comprised the highest percentage of all Asian defendants accused of spouse abuse (Chun, 1990). The author's informal contact with several prosecutors of the Los Angeles City District Attorneys' Office reveals that the most severe cases in terms of physical or emotional injuries are found among Korean victims. The statistical report presented by the Korean American Family Service Center (1995) also indicates that violence against women accounts for the highest percentage (30.3%) of all cases served by the Center. Currently, Koreans represent the majority of the wife abuse victims in the Asian American Battered Women's Shelter in Los Angeles.

During the last twenty years, the problem of spouse abuse has attracted great interest in the study of sociocultural and psychological factors leading to domestic violence. The amount of family violence research and written materials has increased remarkably in the United States. However, despite the urgency and seriousness of the problem in the Korean community, there are very few studies specifically focused on this population. The overall purpose of this paper is (1) to examine the extent and severity of the problem of spouse abuse among Korean immigrant families; (2) to identify critical variables and factors contributing to wife abuse and domestic violence; and (3) to present implications for future research and social work practice.

### Background

The majority of Koreans in America are foreign-born first-generation immigrants who have arrived since the 1970s. For the

past two decades, the Korean community in the United States has experienced an incredible growth in population size, mainly through the influx of the largest wave of immigrants from Korea. According to the 1990 Census data and a recent study of the post-census emigration, there are approximately one million Koreans in the United States (Bureau of the Census, 1993; Yu, 1993).

The new immigrants have settled in Metropolitan urban areas in which they develop a cohesive Korean community with a variety of business sectors and ethnic organizations including Korean grocery markets, restaurants, churches, temples, and other interest groups. Large ethnic enclaves are found in Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, Honolulu, Seattle, and Washington, DC. The 1994–95 Korean Business Directory for the Los Angeles area lists more than 420 ethnic churches conducting services in the native language, 300 Korean restaurants, 200 ethnic schools, and 315 special interest groups (Korea Times, 1994). The formal structure of the Korean community as well as the informal network among Korean immigrants provide a familiar social setting in which they meet fellow Koreans, communicate in their own language, and participate in ethnic social activities.

Koreans come to America in search of better occupational opportunities for themselves and better education for their children. Over 40 percent of Korean immigrants had received some college education before coming here as opposed to only 20 percent of all other Los Angeles County residents, and more than 70 percent of Korean immigrant males held white-collar occupations in Korea (Bureau of the Census, 1993; Yu, 1987; Hurh & Kim, 1984). Despite their high educational attainment, most of them feel that their English skills are very inadequate for their survival needs. As Finnan (1981) pointed out, foreigners from similar linguistic circles generally learn English faster than those from different linguistic backgrounds. Basically, most of the first-generation Korean immigrants are monolingual Korean speaking.

Due to language difficulties and lack of adequate job opportunities, many Korean immigrant males are confronted with a grim situation of downward occupational mobility in the labor market. It is difficult for the majority of the Korean immigrants to find jobs commensurate with their education. Only a small portion of Koreans secure the kind of employment for which they were

trained (Kim & Hurh, 1987). It is common throughout the nation that well-educated Korean immigrants work as unskilled laborers in liquor stores, grocery markets, dry cleaning businesses, and gas stations.

Many Korean immigrants start family-owned small businesses after several years of hard work. Survey studies conducted in Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago show that one out of three Korean households run their own businesses such as small groceries and liquor stores mostly in high-risk inner city neighborhoods (Hurh & Kim, 1984; Yu, 1993). Hours of work are particularly long for those in small business. Usually, husbands and wives are working together more than 12 hours a day, 7 days a week sacrificing their vacations for years for an expeditious settlement in the new environment. Extended work hours, menial employment capabilities, poor English skills, and the consequent erosion of self-esteem are closely related to a high degree of emotional difficulties and stress for many Korean couples (Nah, 1993).

### Immigrant Korean Families

Traditionally, the Korean family system provided a well-defined set of marital roles in which the husband earns a living and commands his wife, while the wife is confined to a domestic role in her husband's family serving her husband, children and in-laws (Choi, 1977). Korea has maintained a patrilineal and patriarchal family system for many centuries. In contrast to women who are expected to accept the submissive role as housewives, husbands have the ultimate authority and control over all matters inside the family. The traditional family structure has been significantly weakened for the past few decades along with the rapid industrialization and the improvement of women's status in Korea. However, the basic family structure is still characterized by a tradition of male-dominance in contemporary Korea.

Upon coming to the United States, Korean immigrant families are experiencing a rapid change in their role structures. An unusually high proportion of Korean wives who carried the traditional role of homemakers in Korea have entered the labor market. Insufficient income earned by husbands makes it necessary for many women to seek employment immediately after their arrival. The

1995 Korea Central Daily poll found that more than 70 percent of the Korean married women in Los Angeles were employed, with most of them being full-time workers (Jung-Ang Il-Bo: April 27, 1995). Several researchers compared the rate of Korean working mothers with the American average, and found that the Korean wives are working at much higher rate than the national figure (Kim & Hurh, 1987; Hong 1982).

When compared with the pre-immigration period, Korean wives are becoming more influential and independent economically by participating in income generating activities with their husbands. Changes in role performance from traditional patterns to those needed for the adjustment to the new environment require an accommodation by the entire members of the family including the husband. However, there is no indication that Korean husbands have changed their traditional beliefs of rigid marital roles. They tend to adhere to a traditional definition of the female as subservient to her husband, while American society values more equality between men and women. In comparison to other ethnic communities, women experience higher than usual levels of male domination in Korean immigrant families (Bonacich et al., 1987).

Korean immigrant wives generally carry a double burden of performing overall household tasks and working outside the home. Kim and Hurh (1987) interviewed 615 Koreans (281 males and 334 females) to examine the division of household tasks among Korean immigrant families. According to their findings, the involvement of husbands in household chores was very limited regardless of the employment of wives or the presence of children. Women often work longer hours than men and, sometimes, in more adverse conditions because of their limited job skills or training opportunities. Many Korean working wives feel overburdened with the hardships of their lives and their multiple roles as wife, mother, worker and daughter-in-law. An interview with a 41-year-old Korean working wife demonstrates high levels of life stress among Korean immigrant families:

My husband is working at a liquor store, and I am running a beauty salon in Koreatown. I go to work at 8 o'clock in the morning and come home at 8:30 in the evening, Monday through Saturday. I am

on my feet all day to do my customers' hair. Sometimes, I don't even find time for a lunch break. When I come home, I usually feel exhausted and want to rest a little. But I have to go straight into the kitchen to cook because my husband complains about being hungry and there is no one else in the family to do this kind of housework. While I prepare the dinner, my husband either watches TV or reads newspaper in the living room. I have to do the dishes after dinner and spend some time to take care of my children's home work. The earliest I can get to bed is usually around 12:30 in the morning.

### Domestic Violence in Korean Immigrant Families

Song (1992) conducted a community sample study with 150 Korean women who were 18 years or older and had lived in the United States less than 10 years. According to her findings, the prevalence of wife abuse among Korean immigrant families is exceptionally high. Of those interviewed, 60 percent ( $n=90$ ) reported being battered during the entire marriage period. This figure is twice as high as those obtained from national studies (Straus et al., 1980). With regard to the frequency and intensity of violent acts, 37 percent of the battered women reported wife abuse at least once a month, and additional 24 percent reported at least once a week. Among those who were physically abused by their husbands, 70 percent suffered from bruises; 17 percent had concussions; 10 percent had damaged teeth; 9 percent experienced miscarriages, and 7 percent were hospitalized as a result of domestic violence.

According to the national study conducted by Straus and his colleagues (1980), approximately 12 percent of American wives experienced domestic violence during the previous year of the research. Recently, Shin (1995) surveyed the problem of wife abuse with a special focus on Korean immigrant males. She interviewed 99 Korean men in the Los Angeles area and found that 35 percent of the respondents in the sample admitted at least one incidence of wife abuse during the previous year. 67 percent reported to have at least one incidence of verbal aggression toward their wives during the year preceding the study. These findings indicate that wife abuse is much more prevalent in the immigrant Korean population.

The author's recent study of marital dissolution among Korean immigrants also suggests that domestic violence is more

serious in the Korean community than in other ethnic groups (Rhee, 1995). As implied in the concept of model minority, there is a general notion that Asian American families are relatively stable and immune from problems. However, surprisingly, the divorce rate for Korean immigrants is one of the highest among various ethnic groups in the United States. The author collected data from divorced immigrant Korean women in Los Angeles with a special aim to determine the leading causes for separation and divorce in this population. The most significant reasons for divorce among the immigrant Korean subjects by rank order include (1) frequent physical violence by husband; (2) husband's extramarital affairs; (3) gambling; (4) husband's heavy drinking; and (5) lack of financial support from husband. There is a clear difference in the perception of the leading causes for divorce between the Korean immigrants and the general population. The author's research findings were compared with the study results presented by Albrecht and his colleagues (1983) who surveyed 500 American divorced respondents. According to their findings, in terms of rank order, (1) infidelity, (2) loss of love, (3) emotional problems, (4) financial problems, and (5) physical abuse were the leading causes for divorce among the American respondents. Unlike the Korean immigrant group, domestic violence was identified as relatively less significant in the majority population.

#### Factors Contributing to Wife Abuse

An individual's tendency to use physical force against his wife is associated with a wide array of social and psychological factors (Gelles & Loseke, 1993; Straus, 1980, 1983; Pagelow, 1984). The existing theoretical approaches and empirical studies on family violence suggest that wife battering is not a series of randomly occurring private episodes. According to the feminist approach, it is rather a consequence of deeply ingrained patriarchal values and attitudes of sexual inequality and male dominance inherited from generation to generation (Martin, 1981; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). The feminist theorists emphasize that wife battering should be viewed in the historical context of the patriarchal family structure. This approach is based on the idea that violent acts within the family have been legitimized historically for control and subordination of women.

The patriarchal explanation of domestic violence can be a culturally appropriate and useful theoretical framework for the problem of wife abuse in the Korean immigrant family. As discussed previously, Korean society has a long history of male domination in which women are taught to obey their husbands and accept their submissive role as wives. As immigrant Korean women are increasingly recruited to the labor market, Korean families confront new marital roles. Korean women are no longer confined to traditional domestic duties as homemakers. Despite these changes, many immigrant Korean husbands tend to hold the traditional attitudes of strict hierarchical distinctions between man and wife. Hong (1982) surveyed the patterns of the distribution of power among Korean immigrants in Los Angeles and found that the incidence of husband dominant families far exceeds that of egalitarian families.

It is clear that the tradition of power imbalance between husbands and wives and ascribing superior position for the husband have a great potential for serious family conflict and subsequent domestic violence for many Korean immigrant families:

Throughout history Korean women have been the victims of physical and psychological abuse. Specifically, the battering of women has been justified by the conventions of Korean culture, which is deeply rooted in the philosophy of male domination. . . . Korean society has taught men not only to expect services from and to have authority over women, but also discipline their wives by any means, including violent punishment (Song, 1992: 213).

The earning power or the household workload of the Korean immigrant woman does not necessarily enhance her position nor change her traditional role in the family. The traditional Korean man simply cannot accept a role reversal in the family even though his wife has become the main breadwinner. As women become partners in economic activities, however, they no longer obediently accept the traditional superior position of men (Yu, 1987: 194).

The full-time employment status of Korean wives, lack of cooperation from husbands in carrying out household tasks, and an authoritarian spouse relationship based on rigidly defined marital role expectations can create severe strain for the Korean immi-

grant wives. Korean immigrant women are increasingly aware of their disadvantaged status in the family and likely to seek greater gender equality. While Korean women have greater potential to adopt American norms and values of more egalitarian relationships between spouses, their husbands remain reluctant to accept such changes. Those who resort to violence against their wives tend to believe that their position and authority in the family are challenged. The Korean men who perceive their position in the family as being weakened may find it difficult to tolerate any assertive responses or attitudes of their wives. Those husbands can rely on the use of verbal abuse or violent act in times of stressful events or when confronted with complaints or protests. Yu (1987) reports that collision between the two cultural traditions has resulted in an exceptionally high rate of domestic violence, family breakdown, and the increasing divorce rate among Korean immigrant families.

Added to this cultural factor, environmental variables such as immigration stress and frustrations stemming from adjustment difficulties for Korean men also significantly contribute to the high occurrence of wife abuse in the Korean community. The ecological-systems perspective which emphasizes the influence of external reality and the world of work on individual and family problems lays a theoretical framework for the incidence of violence in the Korean immigrant family (Germain, 1979). It was briefly mentioned above that the majority of Korean immigrant men who held white-collar positions in their home country are likely to lose their occupational status in the United States because of the difficulties in coping with a new language and lack of compatible job experience. A high proportion of well-educated Korean men are currently working as small business owners or unskilled laborers in the American labor market. Most of them are employed in jobs which require working unusually long hours and on weekends. A person's social status and self-esteem depend largely upon occupation and type of work in Asian culture. The loss of occupational status among Korean men has a serious impact on their psychological well-being.

The amounts of stress the Korean men receive every day are unusually high and those who are frustrated in the outside world

tend to ventilate their feelings on their wives. The correlation between domestic violence and the presence of adjustment stress has a strong empirical support. Hong (1993) interviewed 51 Korean men between the ages of 23 and 61 with questions ranging from "How often do you insult your wife?" to "Within the past year have you threatened your wife with a knife or a gun?" He found that wife battering was most commonly found in households where husbands were having difficulties adjusting to their new environment and lifestyles. These findings are consistent with other recent survey results. Shin (1995) also found that, between Korean male batterers and nonbatterers, the batterers experienced higher levels of immigration stress such as underemployment and unemployment. Similarly, Song (1992) found that there was a statistically significant relationship between wife abuse and discrepancy in the pre-immigration and post-immigration employment status of husbands.

In addition to those cultural and environmental factors, there is a strong relationship between drinking and wife battering in Korean immigrant families. There is general agreement that violent acts such as assaults and fatal accidents frequently involve heavy drinking. Theories of alcohol's role in battering range from the indirect-cause perspective that alcohol serves as an excuse for the battering to the direct-cause approach that batterers become violent under the influence of alcohol due to physiological changes in the brain (Conner & Ackerley, 1994). Most research reveals that approximately 60 to 70 percent of male batterers abuse alcohol (Roberts, 1988). The husbands with alcohol problems are likely to abuse their wives more frequently and seriously than those who have no alcohol problems.

Culturally, Koreans are highly tolerant and permissive toward male drinking while females seldom drink. Chi and her colleagues (1988) found in their survey that, unlike other Asian groups, alcohol abuse and dependence were strikingly high among Korean males in Los Angeles. Koreans comprise the greatest number of Asian Americans arrested for Driving under the Influence of Alcohol (DUI) in Los Angeles County. The author's study of divorce among Korean immigrants also shows that alcohol related battering is one of the most significant correlates to separation and divorce among Korean immigrant families (Rhee,

1995). For many Korean males who experience adjustment difficulties, drinking can be an avenue to cope with their stressful life situations and it may in turn leads to wife battering.

The following case example illustrates the aforementioned factors and variables contributing to domestic violence in Korean immigrant families:

Mrs. Kim, a thirty-seven-year-old clerk working for a Korean-American trading company, has been married for 12 years. Her husband, forty-two-years-old, is currently working as an independent house painter. Like many other Korean wives, Mrs. Kim was a full-time housewife before coming to America, while her husband held down a job as a highly capable, and respected high school teacher in Korea. When the couple came to America, Mrs. Kim's husband struggled in vain to find a job which is in line with his professional background. He discovered soon after the immigration that the English language barrier was too high to overcome for many new comers and that the teaching credentials he obtained in Korea were useless here. During the rainy season in California, Mr. Kim is short of work, and Mrs. Kim becomes the main breadwinner. When Mrs. Kim secured the current clerical position five years ago, her husband appeared to feel threatened, and somewhat ambivalent about his role as the head of the household. Ever since they came to this country, Mr. Kim has complained that his wife has an attitude problem, neglects her housework, and does not obey her husband any more. Recently, her husband drinks at least once a week with his friends outside the home and comes back drunk very late at night. When Mrs. Kim complains about his drinking, he attacks her verbally and physically.

### Implications For Research and Practice

Emotional stress and violence in the family are two serious problems that Korean immigrants are increasingly exposed to in the process of adjusting to the new environment. A cultural variable of male domination, high levels of immigration stress, and heavy drinking among Korean men are identified as the major factors contributing to domestic violence in the Korean family. However, it should be noted that there are considerable variations among Korean immigrants in terms of levels of acculturation, socio-economic status, and types of immediate family problems leading to wife abuse. It will be valuable to examine whether

differential income levels, economic independence of Korean immigrant women, and long-term residence in the United States have significant effects on the occurrence of serious domestic violence.

The devastating impacts of domestic violence on the victims and their family members are numerous and manifold. The life-threatening experience of battering results in various social and psychological responses including fear, feelings of shame and embarrassment, helplessness, social isolation, damaged self-image, depression, and eventual despair among female victims. Little empirical data are available regarding the main social and psychological effects of family violence on Korean female victims and their children. There is a need for in-depth examination of how extensively the life-long experience of abuse is reflected in social and emotional difficulties and physical morbidity among Korean immigrant women.

Since the Korean women were brought up in the male dominant culture and taught to value tolerance for oppressive treatment within the family, they tend to show more passive reactions to physical or emotional abuse in comparison to American women who are reported to be more assertive in coping with domestic violence. While some of the Korean victims choose to leave their abusive husbands by obtaining temporary restraining orders or marriage dissolution from court, many other women are trapped in their own values and remain in the abusive relationship hoping that time would resolve their problems. The majority of the police reports in Los Angeles county concerning domestic violence in the Korean community are made by neighbors or relatives of the victims. Not many Korean female victims are willing to report the incidence of wife abuse to the police or get assistance from family service agencies. The lack of assertiveness or expressiveness may reinforce their husbands' violent acts against them and further endanger not only the victims themselves, but their children as well.

Like other Asian immigrant groups, the Koreans usually do not discuss their family problems with strangers or even close friends with a strong cultural belief that such an expression might bring in social stigma. Community family service agencies and mental health facilities serving diverse Asian immigrant groups

need to establish domestic violence intervention and prevention programs for Korean victims at high risk and batterers. A program which is designed to assure anonymity and accessibility is a culturally appropriate practice strategy in working with Korean immigrant families. For example, establishing a telephone hot line which provides confidential crisis intervention services to female victims, and publishing educational articles periodically in local Korean newspapers about the extent of the problem, prevention strategies, and the legal aspects of domestic violence will be helpful in reducing the urgent problem of family violence in the Korean community.

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