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# Femicide and the Feminist Perspective

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## Abstract

The gender disparity in intimate killings underscores the need for close attention to the phenomenon of intimate partner–perpetrated femicides and theories useful in understanding this pervasive and enduring problem. The most overarching paradigm used is that of the feminist perspective. The purpose of this article is to review the tenets of feminist theory as the most viable and efficacious framework for understanding and explaining intimate partner–perpetrated femicide, to highlight empirical evidence supporting the strength and value of this perspective, to address the contentions of those in opposition to this perspective, and to provide research and policy implications targeted at greater understanding, and, ultimately, lower rates of femicide.

## Keywords

femicide, feminist theory, intimate partner violence, intimate partner homicide, violence against women

In the United States, slightly more than 16,000 individuals are victims of homicide each year (Fox & Zawitz, 2007), and men comprise the majority of victims and offenders of these homicides. For a number of years now, researchers have examined patterns of homicide victimization and offending to try to determine theoretical and empirical explanations for observed trends. Research considering demographic characteristics of homicide victims including gender, for example, is extensive (e.g., Gauthier & Bankston, 2004; Gruenewald & Pridemore, 2009). This research has considered not only gender differences in homicide prevalence over time but also gender differences in the victim–offender relationship (e.g., Swatt & He, 2006).

The term *femicide* refers to the killing of a woman generally, and in the United States, about one fourth of murders committed annually are perpetrated against women

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(Fox & Zawitz, 2007). According to the most recent Bureau of Justice Statistics figures, about one third of women killed are murdered by an intimate partner (IP), compared with about 3% of men who are murdered by an intimate (Fox & Zawitz, 2007). This startling gender disparity in intimate killings underscores the need for close attention to the phenomenon of IP-perpetrated femicides and theories useful in understanding this pervasive and enduring problem. Moreover, IP homicides may be distinctive from other types of homicides, and some have argued they should be considered in a unique category (e.g., Gartner & McCarthy, 1991; Gauthier & Bankston, 2004; Miethe & Regoeczi, 2004). In addition to the gender disparity in intimate homicide victimization, recent trends of declining IP homicides have also been investigated and theoretical explanations suggested for these patterns (Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 1999; Wells & DeLeon-Granados, 2004). Although several different theoretical frameworks have been suggested as appropriate for understanding this phenomenon, the most overarching paradigm used is that of the feminist perspective. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to review the tenets of feminist theory as the most viable and efficacious framework for understanding and explaining IP-perpetrated femicide, to highlight empirical evidence supporting the strength and value of this perspective, to address the contentions of those in opposition to this perspective, and to provide research and policy implications targeted at greater understanding, and, ultimately, lower rates of femicide.

## The Feminist Perspective

Feminist theory, also referred to by Bersani and Chen (1988) as the “patriarchal perspective” (pp. 72-76), is founded on the belief that patriarchy and, consequentially, oppression are common threads in the structures of society (e.g., Radford & Stanko, 1996; Zalewski, 2000). According to proponents, oppressive views of women are not only culturally sanctioned but also embedded in and expressed through all social institutions (e.g., Gates, 1978; Hanmer, Radford, & Stanko, 1989; Radford & Stanko, 1996). Feminist analyses of violence against women center on the structure of relationships in a male-dominated culture, power, and gender (Adinkrah, 1999; Bograd, 1988), and feminist explanations for violence against women consider gendered social arrangements and power central (Hunnicut, 2009). In a classic work from this position, *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*, Bograd (1988) offers, “As feminists, we believe that the social institutions of marriage and family are special contexts that may promote, maintain, and even support men’s use of physical force against women” (p. 12). In particular, the violent behavior exerted by a man against his IP is driven by the desire to maintain power and coercive control over her (Yllö, 1993), which not only explains perpetration, in that it is a result of a structurally granted right to maintain control over women, but also explains victimization by considering the role of the women in a violent relationship and how submissiveness, if only temporarily, may be the necessary means to survival (Walker, 1979).

Feminist explanations of violence also focus on the relationship between this cultural ideology of male dominance and structural forces that limit women's access to resources. Yodanis (2004) states, "In male dominated institutions violence is a tool that men can use to keep women out or subordinate and thereby maintain male power and control" (p. 657). Violence against women, therefore, is a result of the subordinate position women occupy in the social structure, and this subordination is the cultural legacy of the traditional family. In other words, violence against women is one manifestation of a system of male dominance that has existed historically and across cultures (Adinkrah, 1999; Yllö & Straus, 1990).

The feminist perspective is not without its critics, however. One notable opponent is Felson (2002, 2006), who argues that domestic violence is a deviant, but not sexist, behavior as men commit most violence generally, not just domestic violence. He claims that "sexism plays at most a trivial role in rape and physical assault on wives" (Felson, 2006, p. 21). Moreover, he asserts that we should study why men do not victimize women more than they do rather than focus on why they victimize them as much as they do. Felson believes that the high rates of domestic violence are due to the amount of contact and conflict present within families, which he supported with data from his 1980 interviews of couples in Albany County, New York. He found people were more willing to engage in violence with strangers than with family members, though he also attributes the "low" rates of partner violence against women to the chivalry shown to them by society and, thus, their partners.

Feminist researchers would likely agree that people generally would report a greater willingness to engage in violence with strangers than with family, given that most violent crime is neither lethal nor perpetrated against IPs, but this fact alone does not negate the findings of feminist researchers who have consistently found differences in male versus female violence against partners. Felson (2002) does note the findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) where women were much more likely to experience physical and sexual violence at the hands of a male IP in the United States, but he attributes these reported differences to the presentation of the survey to participants as one of personal safety, which he claims would elicit more reports of serious victimization. With regard to gender inequality, Felson rejects the feminist contention that women have less power in their intimate partnerships and claims that research has not supported the notion that men have more power in relationships. Furthermore, he argues that as people tend to choose partners who have similar characteristics as themselves, violent people likely choose violent partners, which he believes "should moderate the gender difference in propensity to violence" (Felson, 2002, p. 58). However, in his 2010 study with Lane of prison inmates convicted of assault and homicide, they report that "female offenders were much more likely than male offenders to report abuse by a partner" (Felson & Lane, 2010, p. 328) and "women are much more likely than men to have been abused by their partner and other adults . . ." (p. 331). They then report the opposite within the same article: that "the results [of Gender  $\times$  Partner interaction analyses] suggest that men (not women)

who assault their partners are particularly likely to have experienced partner abuse” (p. 329) and that “female offenders are much less likely to have been abused by a partner than male offenders” (p. 332).

Felson further criticizes feminist scholarship for being too focused on severe domestic violence and continual abuse, two phenomena he implies are feminist exaggerations. While he does concede “. . . violence, particularly when it is serious, is often repeated,” he feels “it does not justify the use of the phrase “continual abuse” (Felson, 2002, p. 44). Furthermore, he discredits Johnson’s (1995) typology for including domestic terrorism, which characterizes the most extreme and brutal forms of domestic violence, as well as the existence of battered women syndrome, claiming these too are feminist exaggerations. However, in disclosing limitations of their 2010 inmate study, Felson and Lane note that the study did not include measures to account for male offender’s attitudes toward females, dominance of women by males, or prior treatment of females by males in the study. They further note, “We cannot rule out the possibility that some male IPV offenders are motivated by misogyny. It would be surprising if that were not the case” (Felson & Lane, 2010, p. 333), though his earlier position that sexism plays but a minimal role in violence against women would indicate findings such as these would indeed be surprising.

Felson’s criticisms are applied more broadly as well, with his assertion that feminists’ methodologies have been “inadequate” and their conclusions “erroneous” (Felson, 2002, p. 223). Furthermore, he notes, “Assertions about the effect of sexism should be based on scientific evidence, not political compromise” (Felson, 2006, p. 23). Ironically, the validity of his own limited empirical evidence in his 2002 book is questionable as he provides relatively few details of his methods, making it impossible to scientifically evaluate his conclusions. Given the contentiousness of this debate, it is useful to examine the evidence from decades of research to better understand the phenomenon of femicide and the implications for gender in the various theoretical frameworks available for testing and understanding.

### *Gender Inequality and IP Homicide*

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a well-established social problem affecting millions of people all over the world (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Although women and men both are affected by this crime, many prominent IPV experts have concluded that women do not abuse at rates equal to men, that women typically abuse for reasons different than men (i.e., self-defense versus control), and that men cause much more injury in frequency and severity than women who abuse their IPs (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Kimmel, 2002; Nazroo, 1995; Saunders, 2002; Schwartz, 2005). In short, “violence against women is a product of a gendered arrangement; . . . they are being targeted precisely because of their gender” (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 557). Although these claims have received vitriolic criticism by some (e.g., Felson, 2002; Straus, 2006), a recent report by the World Health Organization on violence concluded that worldwide, “the overwhelming burden of partner violence is borne by women at the

hands of men” (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002, p. 89). The burden of intimate partner homicide (IPH) is also a woman-centered social problem.

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that the proportion of female murder victims killed at the hands of their IPs has been increasing, whereas the proportion of male murder victims killed by an intimate has been decreasing (Fox & Zawitz, 2007). Gauthier and Bankston (2004) concluded that identifying the sex ratio of killings (SROK), or the ratio of female to male homicide perpetrators, is extremely important, as is understanding the reasons for the differential. They found the female to male SROK for all cities in their study was 61, but when disaggregated by race, it was 30 for Whites and 92 for Blacks, which they posit explains the generally high SROK in the United States. Much discussion among scholars has been generated as a result of women’s disproportionate risk for lethal victimization at the hands of an IP. As gender is at the heart of the differential risk, these discussions have included as a primary focus the feminist theoretical framework.

Research on IPH concludes, almost without exception, that females are at greater risk than males (e.g., Browne, Williams, & Dutton, 1999; Campbell, 1992; Chimbos, 1978; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Gauthier & Bankston, 2004; Paulsen & Brewer, 2000; Rosenfeld, 1997; Smith, Moracco, & Butts, 1998). Moreover, Websdale (1999) describes IPH as “a profoundly gendered affair” (p. 25) in that men commit most IPHs and for different reasons than their female counterparts. Specifically, men usually kill in conclusion to an ongoing pattern of abuse, and/or due to estrangement by a female partner, and women usually kill their male partners out of self-defense (Browne et al., 1999; Campbell, 1992; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Paulsen & Brewer, 2000; Rosenfeld, 1997; Smith et al., 1998; Swatt & He, 2006). In fact, women are more likely to be killed by their intimate male partner than by any other type of perpetrator (Browne et al., 1999; Browne & Williams, 1989; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Paulsen & Brewer, 2000; Wilson, Johnson, & Daly, 1995). In addition, research shows that women are at least twice as likely to be killed by their IP as males (Browne et al., 1999; Paulsen & Brewer, 2000; Puzone, Saltman, Kresnow, Thompson, & Mercy, 2000).

Research on domestic violence has consistently found that the death of an intimate at the hands of a partner is often the result of ongoing or continual violence in the relationship (Browne, 1987; Campbell, Glass, Sharps, Laughon, & Bloom, 2007; Goetting, 1991; Smith et al., 1998). Moreover, others have argued that to understand IPHs, it is also necessary to understand them as gendered events (e.g., Websdale, 1999). Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly (1992), for example, state, “Men often kill wives after lengthy periods of prolonged physical violence accompanied by other forms of abuse and coercion; the roles in such cases are seldom if ever reversed” (p. 81). Therefore, theoretical models that adequately explain assaults among IPs may also provide important frameworks for the analysis of IPH. One such framework considers gender inequality as the primary conceptual schema for understanding violence, including homicide. Gender equality proponents argue that female victimization is a result of men’s advantaged position in society and their interest in maintaining this position often by using

violence. A feminist perspective would argue that advances in gender equity, therefore, should decrease the risk for femicide as men lose the ability to control women. In contrast, routine activities would predict that as women gain equality, changes in their lifestyle put them at increased risk for victimization. However, there is always the potential for a backlash to occur when women start to gain equal status with men if their advancement is seen as a threat. Such a backlash would result in increased risk for violent victimization and, consequently, femicide.

Evidence from cross-sectional research on the relationship between gender inequality and female homicide victimization is mixed. Stout (1992), for example, found higher rates of female homicide victimization in states with larger percentages of women in management and administrative occupations. In addition, female homicides were also more likely to occur in states with higher percentages of female unemployment. Bailey and Peterson (1995) found higher rates of female victimization in cities with larger differences in educational attainment between men and women. However, they failed to find similar relationships for other measures of gender inequality. Other researchers have found a positive association between the female labor force participation rate and homicide among nonmarital intimates (Parker & Toth, 1990) and IPs in general (regardless of marital status; Avakame, 1999). Titterington's (2006) research expanded the definition of gender socioeconomic inequality to include the ratio of male to female full-time employment, the proportion of female-headed households above the poverty line, and college education. This multidimensional index of gender socioeconomic inequality was positively associated with female homicide victimization. Pizarro, DeJong, and McGarrell (2010) also included a multidimensional variable to measure gender inequality but found it was not significantly associated with homicide victimization. The authors hypothesize that if men and women were equally disadvantaged, gender equality may not be important. Early work by Gartner, Baker, and Pampel (1990) argued that the contradictory findings observed with respect to the relationship between gender inequality and female homicide victimization could be explained by understanding how gender stratification shaped both the situational and motivational contexts for female homicide victimization. Their cross-national analysis of the gender gap in homicide found that "non-traditional roles increase the relative risk of female homicide victimization in countries where women have not yet obtained a fair degree of social and economic power" (Gartner et al., 1990, p. 607).

More recent research has expanded the gender inequality work by considering both women's absolute status and status relative to men as well as the intersections among gender, race, and class (Vieraitis & Williams, 2002). This research found higher homicide rates where men and women are more equal. In other words, they found support for a backlash hypothesis. However, after disaggregating by race, this model only worked for White women. Specifically, the White female homicide rate was greater in cities where White men and women were more equal. Similarly, Pridemore and Freilich (2005) found gender income inequality did not explain overall female homicide victimization rates; however, it was significantly associated with White non-Hispanic female

homicide victimization. Furthermore, their research demonstrated that these homicide rates were regionally patterned with higher rates in southern states.

Using a time series analysis of homicides from 1930 to 1995, Marvell and Moody (1999) found that changes in female role and status measured by female labor force participation and the divorce rate did not affect the female homicide victimization rate or the number of women killed by IPs. The authors conclude further that trends in female homicide victimization rates are primarily a function of offender characteristics and not characteristics of victims or situations. Although there is some evidence to suggest that gender inequality is associated with IPH, definitive conclusions about this relationship cannot be drawn at the present time. Existing research is primarily cross-sectional in design and is therefore unable to consider changes in the status of women as they relate to changes in IPH. As noted by Vieraitis, Kovandzic, and Britto (2008), we cannot truly understand the relationship between gender inequality and homicide victimization rates without measuring the change in gender inequality over time, which extant research has yet to thoroughly examine. In addition, the research on domestic homicide does not often consider important racial and ethnic differences in both gender inequality and domestic homicide, and it is likely that differences in indicators of gender inequality are not the same across racial lines. Furthermore, the relationship between femicide and gender inequality may vary by region (DeWees & Parker, 2003; Pridemore & Freilich, 2005). Finally, a majority of the research on domestic homicide focuses on homicides occurring in large cities and excludes homicides that take place in more rural areas.

### *Status Disparities*

Gender inequality has also been considered at a more micro level as status disparities within the couple dyad. As education and employment are directly related to the household income and, thus, family resources, there are implications for these factors on IPV. As discussed in a previous section, overall societal trends concerning female socioeconomic status may have some effect on homicide rates, but researchers have also identified risks associated with disparities between partners concerning their education, employment, and income, though literature on the topic reveals some inconsistencies in findings (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981; Kaukinen, 2004; Lambert & Firestone, 2000; Taylor & Nabors, 2009).

Some researchers have discovered that when a woman has a lower educational attainment than her male IP, she is at a higher risk for multiple types of abuse, ranging from psychological to severe physical abuse (Anderson, 1997; Hornung et al., 1981; Kaukinen, 2004). However, others have found an increased risk for women with higher educational attainment than their male partners (Kaukinen, 2004; Lambert & Firestone, 2000; Taylor & Nabors, 2009) and also in cases where the woman has a higher occupational status compared with her male partner (Hornung et al., 1981; Kaukinen, 2004). In fact, in a comparison of women who were not abused, abused but



not killed, and women who were killed by partners, Taylor and Nabors (2009) found that women with higher educational attainment than their partners were more than 10 times as likely to be killed by them compared with women with the same educational attainment as their partners. Similarly, researchers have found that men who earn less income than their female partners are more likely to be violent toward them (Anderson, 1997; Gauthier & Bankston, 2004; McCloskey, 1996).

Findings such as these support the feminist perspective which contends that some men may feel that the economic dependency on the part of their partner gives them power and control over her (Anderson, 1997; Gauthier & Bankston, 2004). These men will feel threatened when their perceived power and control is challenged by the female partner gaining economic resources (Anderson, 1997; Gauthier & Bankston, 2004). As a result, they turn to psychological and physical violence to compensate for their sense of loss of power (Lambert & Firestone, 2000) and for their sense of inadequacy in their role as the provider (Gauthier & Bankston, 2004; Kaukinen, 2004). These abusive tactics may also include femicide when the potential autonomy afforded to women with increased financial resources to leave the relationship is countered with lethal violence by the male. However, Campbell and associates (2003) in their national case control database specifically looked for evidence of status inconsistency in education, employment, and/or income and did not find an independent association of any of these separately or in combination with femicide. Similarly, Vieraitis et al. (2008) found no support for gender inequality as an increased risk factor for femicide, but this was true for both intimate and nonintimates in their cross-sectional city design.

Improvements in women's statuses increase their access to opportunities and resources, reducing their economic dependence on men and, consequently, should reduce the likelihood of violence. Moreover, greater economic independence may increase options for leaving abusive relationships, reducing the likelihood of IPH as a result of diminished exposure (Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 2003; Gauthier & Bankston, 2004). However, if men feel they are entitled to a higher socioeconomic position simply because they are men, then advances by women are likely to result in an increased level of violence and consequently increased risk for femicide.

At least one study has found evidence to support the exposure reduction theoretical framework for sexual violence against women (Bailey, 1999). Specifically, decreases in the income gender gap from 1980 to 1990 were associated with a significant decrease in rape rates during the same time period. Other measures of gender inequality, however, including educational and occupational attainment were not significantly associated with changes in rape rates. In addition, although race (specifically % Black population) was included in the statistical models as a control variable, changes in gender inequality and rape rates were not examined separately for different racial groups.

By extension, the theoretical underpinnings of this model have also been applied to the intimate homicides of women. Several researchers have suggested, for example, that the decline in IPHs might be explained by the simultaneous decline in the rate of marriage occurring as a result of the greater economic independence of women



(Browne & Williams, 1993; Rosenfeld, 1997). Dugan and associates (2003) consider exposure reduction in the larger criminological framework of control theories and argue that “effective exposure reduction diminishes the opportunities for violence in intimate relationships” (p. 175). Consequently, intimate partner femicide risk should also be reduced. Their study of 48 of the largest U.S. cities found mixed support for exposure reduction on IPH with some factors reducing risks for particular groups but not others. Moreover, and perhaps more troubling, several variables were associated with a retaliation effect. That is, rather than reducing risk, they increased risk for victimization. One possible explanation for the contradictory findings is that “information myths” about availability and access to resources designed to reduce exposure may act as barriers to these very resources (Westbrook, 2009).

There are also persuasive arguments suggesting that intimate violence may increase rather than decrease as women’s status changes. In fact, existing research suggests that the relationship between gender inequality and violence against women may not be linear, but rather curvilinear. Greater economic resources may increase the possibilities for leaving a violent or conflict-ridden relationship. At the same time, however, research has suggested that the termination of an intimate relationship may also increase the risk for serious or lethal violence (Browne, 1987; Wallace, 1986; Wilson & Daly, 1993).

Where women’s assumed subordination is questioned and more alternatives to marriage are available, conflicts and violence between IPs may actually be more likely to occur (Ellis, 1987; Feld & Straus, 1990). An increase in the amount of violence may subsequently increase the risk for lethal outcomes. Other, more macro research has found that in states where the status of women was low, the rate of violence against wives was double the rate of violence by them (Yllö, 1993). In states where the status of women was high, the amount of violence by husbands and wives was comparable (Yllö, 1993). Higher rates of IPV, regardless of the perpetrator, may increase the risk for IPH.

### *Sexual Terrorism/Sexual Proprietariness*

Caputi and Russell (1992) associate femicide with the term “sexual terrorism” (p. 15) and explain that one cause of sexual terrorism is a sense of entitlement, whereby many males believe they own and can therefore control women. Sheffield (2007) argues the term is appropriate “. . . because it is a system by which males frighten and, by frightening, control and dominate females” (p. 111). This concept of entitlement is also commonly referred to as “sexual proprietariness” (Daly & Wilson, 1988) and is frequently cited in literature pertaining to femicide, beginning with the pioneering work of Radford and Russell (1992) and followed by numerous studies (e.g., Browne et al., 1999; Campbell, 1992; Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997; Websdale, 1999; Wilson & Daly, 1992; Wilson et al., 1995).

The term sexual proprietariness refers to the tendency for men to believe they own women, particularly their sexuality and reproductive abilities (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

Sexual proprietariness is equated to property ownership, where men own “their” women and children and are entitled to use force and violence if necessary to maintain control of their “property” (Campbell, 1992; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Feminists have argued that this concept has been institutionalized and woven into the structure of society, both in historic and modern times (Campbell, 1992; Wilson & Daly, 1992; Wilson et al., 1995).

In her landmark study of homicides in Dayton, Ohio from 1975-1979, Campbell (1992) looked at 73 femicide cases to determine context of the homicide and relationship dynamics (i.e., relationship of victim to offender, homicide motive). She concluded,

... property ownership, power, and control are at the core of homicides between partners. The tradition of male ownership of women and male needs for power are played out to horribly violent conclusions. The message of femicide is that many men believe that control of female partners is a prerogative they can defend by killing women. (Campbell, 1992, p. 111)

Researchers highlight the paradoxical nature of femicide. With the fundamental premise of sexual proprietariness being control and power over women, it is the loss of control that moves some men to seriously harm or kill their partners (Websdale, 1999; Wilson et al., 1995). Killing is an extreme alternative to exert a final mechanism of control, regardless of the specific motive (i.e., jealousy). When a male kills his female IP, it is, in essence, an acknowledgement by the male that he has lost control in the relationship. While these acts may be intentional killings or death resulting in what was intended to be aggravated battery, the motive is the same. In fact, Gauthier and Bankston (2004) note that the use of violence against their partner is essentially a form of social control by abusive males and that legal protections in place to help women in abusive relationships may actually serve to heighten their lethality risk. This loss of control is believed to be the substantive issue on which violence against intimate female partners is centered (Campbell, 1992; Websdale, 1999; Wilson & Daly, 1992; Wilson et al., 1995). In fact, it is the issue of control that has led researchers to contend that females in nonmarital relationships are at greater risk of femicide as nonmarital relationships may be more autonomous and a female partner might be able to leave more easily than if she were in a married relationship (Browne et al., 1999).

### *History of Violence/Estrangement*

As homicide is often the conclusion to chronic abusive and threatening behavior by the male against his female partner, this abusive context as well as leaving or attempting to leave the relationship on the part of the female victim are often named as the most significant risk factors (Adinkrah, 1999; Block & Christakos, 1995; Browne et al., 1999; Campbell, 1992; Chimbos, 1978; Dawson & Gartner, 1998; Dobash et al., 1992; Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997; Goetting, 1991; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Smith et al., 1998; Websdale, 1999; Wilson & Daly, 1992; Wilson et al., 1995). Studies of intimate partner

femicide typically report rates between 70% and 90% with regard to history of violence in the relationship. For example, of the cases in which Smith et al. (1998) were able to determine a history of violence in their 1994 study of North Carolina homicides, 95.8% of femicide cases had a history of violence. Similarly, Websdale (1999) found that 86.6% of his sample of Florida femicide cases had a history of violence. Understanding how gender inequality is related to exiting abusive relationships, therefore, may provide important information regarding femicide risk. For instance, Davies, Ford-Gilboe, and Hammerton (2009) found that leaving an abusive relationship may be even more difficult for women with higher socioeconomic status primarily because their male partners are likely to continue to abuse and harass them. Motherhood also may place women at a greater risk for coercive control and abuse because of the ties to the abuser (Davies et al., 2009). It is also noteworthy that studies show women who kill their partners are usually victims of violence at the hands of that partner (e.g., Swatt & He, 2006).

The issue of estrangement is also common in femicide (i.e., “If I can’t have you, no one can”; e.g., Campbell, 1992; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Felson (2002) has argued that the threat of separation and divorce gives women power over men, as does withholding sex, which he argues should decrease violence victimization. However, numerous studies have substantiated the notion that leaving a violent relationship presents the most dangerous risk to a woman, leading to “abandonment rage” on the part of her IP (Browne et al., 1999, p. 73). In their study of trends in IPH for the 25-year period of 1980 to 1995, Browne et al. (1999) found that 53% of male perpetrators were separated from their wives when they killed them. Similarly, Websdale (1999) found that 58.2% of his sample had left or attempted to leave the violent relationship, and half of the women in Campbell’s (1992) study killed by IPs were estranged at the time of the murders. Other researchers have found similar results of at least 50% estrangement in their studies (Campbell et al., 2003; Goetting, 1991; Stout, 1991, 1993; Wilson & Daly, 1993).

The period of time after the separation seems to be the most critical point regarding the risk for femicide. Specifically, the first 2 months after separation up to 1 year is the most volatile time period identified by experts (Browne et al., 1999; Stout, 1991, 1993; Wilson & Daly, 1993). Browne et al. (1999) caution that although the months immediately following estrangement may appear to be those with the highest risk for femicide, estranged male partners may commit femicide several months or even years after the separation. Even so, abused women who leave their abuser will eventually be safer from homicide and reabuse than abused women who stay, as the vast majority of abused women who leave are never killed by their partners.

### *Jealousy*

Although history of abuse and estrangement are prominent trends throughout the literature on intimate partner femicide, jealousy and possessiveness have been suggested as more explicit motives (e.g., Adinkrah, 1999; Block & Christakos, 1995).

Morbid jealousy, directly stemming from sexual proprietariness, is a common motive for intimate partner femicide, as is excessive possessiveness (Block & Christakos, 1995; Chimbos, 1978; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Mason & Blankenship, 1987; Websdale, 1999; Wilson & Daly, 1992, 1993; Wilson et al., 1995). In their study of Canadian homicides between 1974 and 1983, Daly and Wilson (1988) reported that police were able to determine a motive in 1,006 out of 1,060 spousal homicides. Although 21.3% of those were attributed to jealousy, the researchers asserted that the figure is grossly unrepresentative of the role that jealousy actually plays in IPHs particularly as a majority of the cases they examined were not attributed to anything more specific than an argument of some sort or anger on the part of the perpetrator. Goetting (1991) reported similar findings in her study of Detroit, Michigan femicides occurring in 1982-1983, where 39.2% of the homicides were attributed to a domestic dispute.

General motives labeled by police are often to determine whether an incidence was a case of premeditation or impulse, but do not explain any substantive conflict. It is possible that any one of the cases given a general label could have been caused by a suspicion or discovery of infidelity (Wilson & Daly, 1992). Male jealousy can be the result of different issues, such as perceived or real infidelity and/or estrangement. Both represent a loss of control, and when a male kills as a result, he is acting out of aggressive proprietariness where he considers adultery and estrangement to be a direct violation of his rights (Wilson & Daly, 1992, p. 90).

In every society they have studied, Wilson and Daly (1992) have found that most cases of intimate partner femicide are due to the husband's violent reaction to his wife's infidelity (real or imagined) or her plans to leave him. They also point out that when men kill because of suspicion of infidelity or estrangement, many researchers will couple those motives and label them as jealousy. Similarly, Campbell (1992) explains that jealousy of women is a proprietary derivative of attempts by their male IPs to control and possess them. In her study of homicides in Dayton, Ohio, Campbell (1992) determined jealousy to be the motive in 64% of the cases. She also pointed out that none of the male perpetrators in her study had actual evidence of sexual infidelity and that jealousy also included things such as not wanting the female partner to pursue a career and resenting time spent with the children. In her later national intimate partner femicide study, 79% of the abusers who killed or almost killed their partners were characterized as being extremely jealous, saying things like "if I can't have you, no one can" (Campbell et al., 2003). Others have added pregnancy to the list of potential sources of jealousy in a controlling partner (e.g., Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2006).

In addition to the issues established above, autonomy-limiting factors and resource deprivation, namely, income, are significant in IPV and femicide (Avakame, 1998; Frye & Wilt, 2001; Wilson et al., 1995). In addition to the overall family resources, differences between partners' achievements and contributions may exacerbate the power and control issues already present in an abusive relationship or may incite violence in a nonabusive relationship (Lambert & Firestone, 2000).

## Alternatives to the Feminist Framework

Researchers who have examined intimate partner femicide through other theoretical perspectives report that alternative theories failed to provide adequate explanations. A few brief examples are as follows:

- Social disorganization theory has emerged as a possible framework for explaining femicide, however, currently findings are inconsistent. For example, Frye and Wilt (2001) examined femicide through social disorganization theory and found it to be useful in predicting and reducing non-IPHs but inadequate in affecting the incidence of IPH, specifically femicide. They further asserted that the prioritized integration of feminist theory in femicide research is imperative to predict and end femicide. In contrast, Browning (2002) found some support for social disorganization theory, as community-concentrated disadvantage was significantly associated with increased risk for femicide. Other disorganization factors were not significant, however.
- Finding some support for social disorganization theory, Benson, Wooldredge, Thistlethwaite, and Fox (2004) found higher rates of IPV among more disadvantaged communities, suggesting the importance of community context and the link between race and the crime of IPV. However, their measure of IPV was limited in its ability to measure severe violence. Consequently, it may have only included what Johnson (1995) has termed common couple violence and as a result may have limited relevance for explaining femicide.
- Social learning theory could be used to explain the intergenerational transmission of violence (Chimbos, 1978; O'Leary, 1988), accounting for the presence of relationship abuse prior to homicide, but it fails to provide evidence of a correlation to femicide.
- Kratcoski (1988) reported no correlation when considering perspectives including stress, systems, exchange/social control, and social learning theories to explain family homicide.

In a recent study, Warner (2010) tested three common theoretical models used to explain IPV, including the feminist perspective, the family violence perspective, and the general violence perspective. Using National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data, she examined a series of competing hypotheses by comparing the three perspectives. She found that women were more likely to be victimized by an IP than any other type of offender, with this and other compelling evidence leading her to conclude that the feminist perspective was the most efficacious model for IPV. Others, however, have suggested that IPH offenders are no different than other violent offenders (Felson & Lane, 2010) and should therefore not be studied distinctively from one another, but rather IPV should be studied in the context of violence in general without regard for gender-motivated causes of violence (Felson, 2006). Similarly, Marvell and Moody (1999) argued that by focusing on differences in violent victimization, theories

become too narrow and policy implications are limited. Their study looking at male and female homicide victimization rates found similar trends over time suggesting that they are “driven by the same forces . . . [and] the most common reason for the common forces is that the murderers are similar, even though the victims and situations are not” (p. 892). However, they do suggest their results are limited to explanations of victimization, not offending, and there exists the possibility of differences among male and female violent offenders.

Others have argued “that conventional perspectives are better at accounting for the types of femicides that are similar to male homicides—that is, killings of acquaintances and strangers—but fall short at accounting for more typical types of femicide” (Gartner & McCarthy, 1991, p. 308). More recently, Lauritsen and Heimer’s (2008) study considering gender differences in trends of violent victimization by crime type and victim–offender relationship found some interesting results that could potentially shed light on the debate about whether IPH should be considered as a separate phenomena. Specifically, they found that female rates of IPH victimization were greater than male rates and continued to increase throughout the time period they considered. The authors attribute this pattern to the decline in male intimate homicide victimization. They state, “Explanations of some forms of violence against women may have much in common with broader explanations about violence, but . . . there are likely to be unique causes of intimate partner violence” (Lauritsen & Heimer, 2008, p. 143).

According to Schwartz (2005), “The most important research finding of the past two decades is that violence can only be understood in the context of gender inequality (p. 8). The feminist perspective has repeatedly sustained empirical testing as an efficacious theoretical framework for understanding and explaining IP-related femicide. Although other theoretical explanations may be useful in explaining femicide in general, the feminist perspective is uniquely suited to explain intimate partner femicides in particular. This is because of the emphasis on sociostructural oppressive views of women (e.g., Radford & Stanko, 1996) as well as the contention that the context of heterosexual relationships provide a culturally sanctioned perceived right on the part of men to assert and maintain power and control over their female IPs (Adinkrah, 1999; Bograd, 1988; Yllö, 1993). This is underscored by the fact that a woman’s risk for femicide dramatically increases when she leaves or attempts to leave her partner. According to feminist theorists, the ultimate expression of power and control is femicide (Websdale, 1999; Wilson et al., 1995).

## **Implications for Future Research and Policy**

### **Research**

The ultimate goal of femicide research and homicide research in general is to provide understanding that will ultimately lead to decreased rates. We have attempted to provide a thorough review of the feminist perspective on femicide, including criticisms by one of the most outspoken opponents of this perspective, and inconsistencies in



findings across studies regarding a number of important areas within homicide research. Clearly, more work remains. Studies tend to either focus separately on macro-level factors or micro-level factors and do not often integrate the different levels (Parker & Toth, 1990). Future research should incorporate a more holistic perspective to generate more thorough understanding. Moreover, there is debate about whether IPHs should be considered as separate and distinct events from other types of homicides. Wells and DeLeon-Granados (2004) argue that different trends by gender, ethnicity, and marital status present enough evidence that IPH not only should be considered as a unique phenomenon but also should be disaggregated. We believe it is important for future research to focus on differences in race and class and to consider testing the efficacy of the feminist perspective in the study of same-sex relationship violence. In addition, geographic patterns and differences between urban and rural populations must be examined with regard to differential rates of incidence and prevalence of femicide as well as differences in legal and community responses to victims of IPV.

In their landmark study, Dugan and colleagues (1999) attributed the decline in domesticity, improved economic status of women, and increases in resources for domestic violence victims to the decline in IPHs. These changes affected the rates for male victimization to a much greater extent than to female rates, as women's improved social status minimally affected the rate for female victimization, even increasing it in certain cases. Most homicide research uses urban areas; however, recent work by Jennings and Piquero (2008) suggests that rurality may be a relevant consideration for IPH research. Their findings are particularly informative in light of findings by Dugan et al. (1999) of the differential impact of exposure reduction, as shelters are more often located in urban areas. Others have noted the relevance of the decline in male IPH victimizations in their explanations for the overall decline (e.g., Lauritsen & Heimer, 2008; Wells & DeLeon-Granados, 2004). Future research will need to consider the impact of the changing labor structure as a result of the economic recession on women's overall status relative to that of men, particularly in the labor force, and preferably using a longitudinal methodology to measure changes over time (Vieraitis et al., 2008).

## *Policy*

Certain legal strategies, such as mandatory arrest, were enacted to protect women in abusive relationships. However, experts note that these policies may further endanger women, given the context of IPV as one of power and control on the part of the abuser. Gauthier and Bankston (2004) argue, "Laws intended mainly to protect women from abuse seem to expose them to a greater risk of lethal violence . . ." (p. 116). They point out that these well-intentioned legal interventions do not actually provide women with the resources they need to exit an abusive relationship. Furthermore, others have argued that the simple existence of resource availability does not mean that victims have the knowledge that the resources exist or that they accurately understand their options (Westbrook, 2009). Therefore, we would strongly encourage the sustenance and enhancement of domestic violence services available for women to be considered

a priority for policy makers, particularly given the current state of economic cutbacks in programs such as these nationwide. In addition, women should be notified of services and offered assistance at the time of intervention, whether that is in the context of an arrest or a women seeking help within the community. This necessitates training on the part of law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and service providers across the continuum of social services to ensure they not only know about the existing programs available but also are able to evaluate need and collaboratively work across agencies to meet those needs. In addition, to ensure that correct information reaches individuals who need it, myths about services and requirements to access these services need to be addressed (Westbrook, 2009), and research should continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the various existing legal interventions as well as the potential for others. Other strategies such as laws restricting firearm access for individuals with restraining orders against them or warrantless arrests have demonstrated some success at reducing IPHs overall (Zeoli & Webster, 2010).

In light of the strengths of the feminist perspective discussed in this review, including consideration of criticisms against it, we argue for the continued recognition of feminist theory as an efficacious theoretical perspective for the study of femicide. As supported by decades of scientific research, gender differences do exist in the phenomenon of homicide, with intimate partner femicide representing a particularly complex phenomenon in need of a framework well suited to test the effects of gender and other dimensions of social inequality in these events. We believe the evidence provided by a rich history of feminist research has substantiated this as a dominant perspective with which to continue research as well as advocacy for change and equality.

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