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Vol. 17/2023

The IJCV

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Suggested Citation:

APA: Park, S., Ko, Y. (2023). “I Need Husband-Distancing”: Experience of Marital Conflict during the COVID-19 Emergency in South Korea. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 17 1-13. doi: 10.11576/ijcv-6343

Harvard: Park, Sihyun, Ko, Yejung. 2023. “I Need Husband-Distancing”: Experience of Marital Conflict during the COVID-19 Emergency in South Korea. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 17: 1-13. doi: 10.11576/ijcv-6343



# "I Need Husband-Distancing": Experience of Marital Conflict during the COVID-19 Emergency in South Korea

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The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of marital conflict during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) emergency in South Korea by adapting the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (VSA; Karney and Bradbury 1995). The public emergency of COVID-19 and social distancing policies caused emotional distress, social isolation, lack of support, and economic crisis in families, increasing the risk of marital conflict. Eleven women who reported experiencing severe marital conflict during the COVID-19 pandemic were interviewed by telephone. The interview data were analyzed through directed content analysis. The women experienced 1) maladaptation to sudden life changes, 2) family role confusion, 3) economic crisis, and 4) invasion of personal space. These adverse experiences, along with the influence of their spouses' personality traits, led to reduced physical and psychological interaction between the partners and severance of their relationship. Attention must be paid to the mental health and well-being of families to prevent their dissolution. There is an urgent need for community-based psychological intervention and support for families who are house-bound for long periods. Additionally, government policies are necessary to lighten or share the childcare burden on families during the crisis, so women are not compelled to take career breaks.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; locked-down families; intimate partner violence; marital conflict; mental health

**Acknowledgement:** This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Korea government (MSIT) under Grant number 2021R1F1A1048142.

The authors of this study declare that there is no conflict of interest.

After the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, governments worldwide made every effort to prevent the spread of the disease by implementing various restriction orders including lockdowns, shutdowns, physical distancing, and stay-at-home policies. Under these circumstances, researchers in the fields of family and violence are now paying attention to safety and health issues within families, issues like family conflict, dissolution, and domestic violence, which they refer to as "opportunistic infections of COVID-19" (Zero and Geary 2020, 57). Long-term confinement at home may exacerbate emotional distress, social isolation, lack of support, and economic crises, all of which affect family health

and well-being negatively (Zero and Geary 2020; Galea, Merchant, and Lurie 2020).

Studies have reported increased marital problems, conflicts, and even domestic violence caused by the impact of national disasters and catastrophic events (Parkinson 2019) or economic crises (Aytaç and Rankin 2009; Kwon et al. 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. A new word, "covidivorce," has emerged, representing intensified marital conflict in families worldwide during the COVID-19 outbreak (Kim 2020). According to recent statistics, the divorce rate in the United States between March and June 2020 was 34% higher than the same period in 2019 (Rosner 2020). A recent study reported that approximately 34% of the sample population experienced in-

creased conflict in their romantic relationships that was related to COVID-19 restrictions, thereby affecting the intimate and sexual lives of couples (Luetke et al. 2020). In China, despite the absence of official data on divorce rates, several studies report an increase in domestic violence linked to COVID-19 (Taub 2020; Zhang 2020).

The situation is similar in South Korea, where a strong social distancing policy was implemented at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2020). Restrictions on gatherings were imposed as of February 18, 2022, including allowing no more than six people to gather, and requiring gatherings to end by 9 pm. Stay-at-home policies that encourage non-face-to-face meetings and telecommuting are being enforced nationally. In addition, violation of national quarantine rules can result in up to one year of imprisonment or a fine of up to 10 million Korean won (US\$ 7,883) (Ryu et al. 2020). Under this circumstance, researchers and healthcare providers in South Korea are concerned about possible family problems, such as parental burnout and confusion regarding family roles during the pandemic, which could lead to family crises and dissolution (Lee and Lee 2021). Several hypotheses have been suggested to explain the increasing marital conflict during the crisis. This conflict may be associated with intensified emotional distress during the pandemic, which negatively affects marital satisfaction (Kwon et al. 2003). Or the turbulent situation may exacerbate the existing power inequalities between men and women, or may even disclose existing domestic conflicts and violence to the outside world (Parkinson 2019).

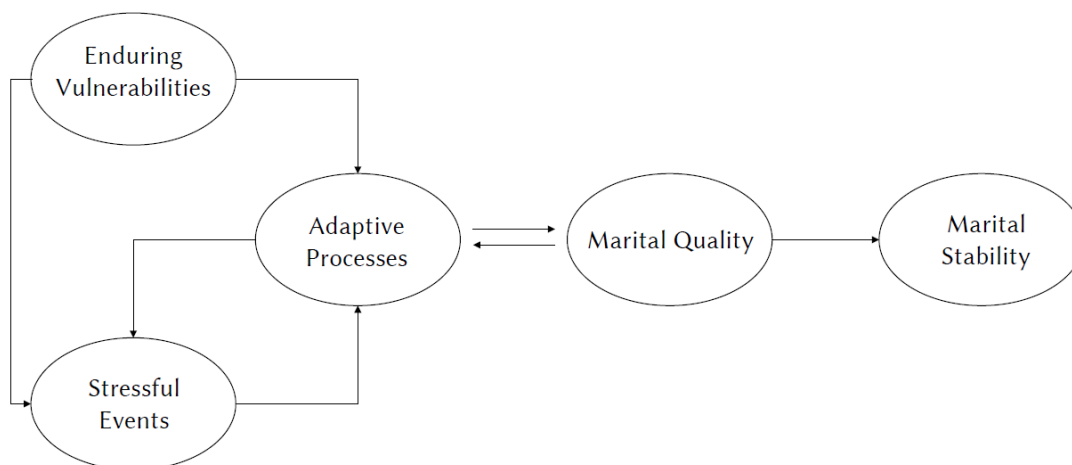
In general, marital conflict is known to be a risk factor for physical and mental health and family well-being. It is associated with lower marital quality and stability (Ahmadi et al. 2015), poor mental and physical health in married couples (Fincham 2003; Troxel et al. 2017), and negative symptoms and behavioral consequences in children (El-Sheikh et al. 2006; Philbrook et al. 2018). Interpersonal marital conflicts do not always negatively influence the relationship (Troupe 2008), but if they are not successfully managed, they could lead to severe consequences including divorce, family dissolution (Birditt et al. 2010), intimate partner violence (Vives-Cases, Gil-González, and Car-

rasco-Portiño 2009), and even homicide (Fincham 2003).

The experiences of marital conflict are known to differ between men and women (Mousavi 2020). Since women are reported to experience higher mental distress and economic vulnerability than men during the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al. 2020; Cho 2021), women might be more vulnerable to relationship conflicts. UN Women (2021) also stresses the need for public attention to be paid to the increasing violence against women amid the COVID-19 pandemic, calling it a "Shadow Pandemic." In particular, South Korean society remains patriarchal. Moreover, women in South Korea have become more economically vulnerable during the pandemic, as the service industry, where the majority of women work, was the first industry to experience significant negative impact of COVID-19 restrictions (Cho 2021). Women's vulnerability exacerbated by cultural and economic factors during the pandemic would adversely affect their well-being and safety, as well as couples' relationship dynamics.

So far, there have been no studies specifically addressing marital conflict during COVID-19. In this study, therefore, we examined marital conflicts during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Korea, particularly from women's perspectives. We used the vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VSA) model to understand this phenomenon (Karney and Bradbury 1995). The VSA model represents the mechanism of marital changes by understanding the dynamics of five components: individual vulnerabilities, stressful events, adaptive processes, marital quality, and marital stability (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Hence, this study's research question was "*What are women's experiences of marital conflict during the COVID-19 public health crisis in South Korea?*"

Figure 1: A vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage (Karney and Bradbury 1995, 23)



## 1 Literature Review

### 1.1 Sociocultural Background to Understanding the Korean Family

A comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of familial and marital relationships necessitates an understanding of the sociocultural backgrounds to which the families belong. For many years, South Korea has been influenced by Confucianism. The central tenets of Confucianism regulate values and virtues in interpersonal and intergenerational relationships and has an influence in many Asian countries (M. Park and Chesla 2007). Confucianism stresses the importance of family, and its code of ethics emphasizes family cohesion and harmony. The Confucian ideas of cohesion and harmony within groups advocate for traditional roles and adherence to ethical rules that are based on an individual's status and are designed to help the individual achieve the appropriate values. For instance, children learn to obey their parents, support them, and glorify them by achieving social success (S. Park and Schepp 2015). Men, either as fathers or eldest sons, are expected to lead their families, while women, as mothers or daughters, are expected to follow the men and take care of family affairs and children (S. Park and Schepp 2015). However, since feminism arose in South Korea in the 1970s and the levels of education and social participation of women increased, voices calling for women's rights have also increased (Kim 2011). South Korea currently has various policies to ensure women's rights and safety. For example, the South Korean government is encourag-

ing men to participate in housework and childcare. According to 2007 statistics, South Korean men spent on average 21 minutes doing housework in a day while women spent 264 minutes (4.4 hours). This gap has been steadily decreasing: men now spend 56 minutes and women 192 minutes (3.2 hours) on housework (Korean Statistical Information Service 2020; Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2020). However, these social developments often provoke conflict within families, especially between individuals who still adhere to traditional values and those who do not. Differences over traditional values have often led to family conflicts, and this has become one of the main reasons for divorce in South Korea (Jung, No, and Ha 2015).

### 1.2 The Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model

Karney and Bradbury (1995) presented a path of marital change via the VSA model (Figure 1). The VSA model has been widely used to explain the mechanism of the quality and stability of both marital and non-marital relationships (Pietromonaco and Overall 2022). According to this model, marital quality, which can lead to marital stability, is developed through the processes of adaptation within a marriage. Specifically, the accumulated experiences of behavioral exchanges between couples, which are consistently appraised by them, can influence marital quality. If couples fail to adapt, the marital quality declines, which in turn increases marital instability. Conversely, marital quality also impacts the adaptive process in mar-

riage; in other words, high marital quality increases couples' abilities to solve problems and support each other (Karney and Bradbury 1995).

In addition, the adaptive processes in marriage are affected by spouses' capacity for enduring each other's vulnerabilities and external stressful events (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Vulnerabilities refer to an individual's background and personal traits, such as education level, social competency, and childhood experiences with parents and family, that are brought into the marital relationship. Many studies have demonstrated adverse longitudinal influences on marital trajectories caused by certain characteristics of spouses, such as alcohol misuse (S. Park and Schepp 2015) and witnessing parental violence in childhood (Islam et al. 2017). These vulnerabilities create stress for couples or exacerbate the adverse effects of stressful events. Stressful events refer to life stressors, such as unemployment and daily workload, faced by couples (Karney and Bradbury 1995). These affect the adaptive process of marriage, and vice versa; poor marital adaptation makes couples more vulnerable to stressful events.

## 2 Method

### 2.1 Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from July 14 to August 31, 2020. Eligible participants were women who a) experienced increased marital conflict or violence during the COVID-19 outbreak, b) were able to complete the phone interviews on their own, and c) agreed to participate in this study. Participants were recruited using flyers that stated the study's purpose and procedure; these were widely distributed across social networking services and women's online communities. Adult women who perceived severe marital conflict during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic and were interested in participating in this study were asked to send a text message or email to the researchers. Women from across the country who contacted the researchers were asked several simple questions to assess eligibility and safety aspects. The women were provided with further information about the study; after this, informed consent was sought, and appointments for the in-depth interviews were

scheduled.<sup>1</sup> All women who contacted the researchers participated in the study, as they all met the eligibility criteria.

Semi-structured phone interviews with the participants were conducted by a psychiatric nursing specialist, with each interview lasting 1–2 hours. The main questions/prompts were: 1) Please talk freely about your experience as a couple during the social distancing period necessitated by COVID-19; 2) How has your marital relationship changed after the COVID-19 outbreak compared to before the outbreak?; 3) What do you think was the main cause of conflict between couples during COVID-19; and 4) How did you deal with conflict as a couple during COVID-19? Follow-up questions were asked spontaneously to deepen the understanding of participants' emotions and experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed nearly verbatim. After completing the interview, each participant was compensated with US\$ 35 (40,000 Korean won). After recruiting eleven participants, we ceased recruitment as the data reached saturation, and no new ideas emerged. Specific characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 1.

### 2.2 Data Analysis

Directed content analysis was utilized to analyze the data. This approach pursues validation and extends existing frameworks and theories (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). We deemed this methodology suitable for this study, as we sought to understand the phenomenon of marital conflict based on a VSA model (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Directed content analysis has a more deductive approach, as it requires predetermined key concepts or categories to be set prior to data analysis.

<sup>1</sup> The specific plans for this study were reviewed in advance and approved by the institutional review board of C University (IRB#: 1041 078-202005-HRSB-123-01). All participants underwent informed consent procedures. During the first contact with the participants, we assessed their safety by asking 1) whether they were experiencing partner violence and 2) whether it was safe for them to participate in the interview from their home. If they said they were experiencing partner violence, we provided contact numbers of institutional hotlines and legal information for domestic violence victims. If they said their homes were not safe for the phone interviews, we strongly suggested that they be interviewed alone in their car, where they would be safe from infection and domestic violence.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the participants**

ID	Age*	Occupation	Length of marriage*	Number of children	Ages of children*
C01	38	Worker at a public office full-time mother (due to COVID-19)	5	1	5
C02	31	Full-time researcher full-time mother (due to COVID-19)	4	1 + Pg**	4, 0
C03	34	Office worker	7	2	7, 3
C04	38	Café manager	5	2	5, 3
C05	33	Full-time mother	7	1	5
C06	48	Full-time mother	19	1	18
C07	61	Full-time mother	36	3	33, 30, 27
C08	63	Full-time mother	38	3	36, 32, 30
C09	36	Office worker	9	1	8
C10	43	Office worker (currently on maternity leave)	5	2	4, 2
C11	36	Full-time mother	9	2	9, 7

\* in years, \*\* Pg: Currently pregnant

In this study, we set five domains—key concepts of the VSA model—in advance: a) stressful events, b) adaptive processes, c) enduring vulnerabilities, d) marital quality, and e) marital stability. First, all interview transcripts were read multiple times until the researcher had a complete understanding; then, the researcher identified the codes. Similar codes were merged into concepts. In total, forty-eight concepts emerged, and the researcher defined each concept and listed it under one of the five predetermined domains. Similar concepts in each domain were further categorized into themes and subthemes. Four themes emerged in the stressful events and adaptive processes domains, two themes in the marital quality domain, and one each in the enduring vulnerabilities and marital stability domains. The four themes that emerged in the stressful events and adaptive processes domains were grouped into categories. Member checking was conducted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. To do so, participant C04 checked the coding scheme and confirmed that the results reflected her experiences. Specific categories, themes,

and subthemes under each domain are listed in Table 2.

### 3 Key Themes from the Interviews

“Right now, the family is a little uneasy because of COVID-19. It has never been like that before, but I think it is because the COVID-19 situation has been [going on for] so long. I didn’t feel lonely being alone in the house before, but I feel it now, and conflicts between couples arise because of that.” (C09)

The key themes from the interviews were extracted based on the main concepts of the VSA model: stressful events, adaptive processes, individual vulnerabilities, marital quality, and marital stability. Specifically, Korean women experienced various stressful events due to COVID-19. How they adapted to those events affected their families and marital relationships. The vulnerabilities that wives perceived in their husbands, which they had previously endured, were amplified. This adversely influenced their marital adaptation during the pandemic. This eventually affected the quality and stability of their marital relationships.

**Table 2: Qualitative themes based on the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage**

Domains	Categories	Themes	Subthemes
Stressful events and adaptive processes	I. Maladaptation to sudden life changes	I-a. <i>Stressful event</i> : Being confined in my home indefinitely	- Enduring a precarious crisis - Suffocated because of the lack of social interaction
		I-b. <i>Adaptive process</i> : Deepening conflict with husband triggered by fear and distress of COVID-19	- Having more frequent conflicts with the husband - Being oversensitive to their spouse's outings due to fear of infection
	II. Family role confusion	II-a. <i>Stressful event</i> : Increasing family care needs	- Increased housework as all family members stay at home - Caring for children at home all day long
		II-b. <i>Adaptive process</i> : Being forced to make sacrifices due to being a woman	- Taking responsibility for child-rearing and family care - Being furious at husband's attitude of taking wife's sacrifices for granted - Being furious at the husband who never participates in housework - Losing self-esteem because the husband did not appreciate the value of housework
III. Economic crisis	III-a. <i>Stressful event</i> : Worsened family economic situation	- Decreased family income due to COVID-19 - Increased living expenses due to COVID-19	
	III-b. <i>Adaptive process</i> : Economic crisis triggers role confusion and marital conflict	- Being anxious about an economically inactive husband - Sense of economic crisis triggers conflicts - Confusing role changes between husband and wife	
IV. Invasion of personal space	IV-a. <i>Stressful event</i> : Personal boundary invaded	- Being stuck with the husband all day long - Wishing for personal time and space	
	IV-b. <i>Adaptive process</i> : Picking on each other	- Nothing in common to share with the husband - Bickering because of different parenting values - Arguing because of different expectations concerning housework	
Enduring vulnerabilities	Husband's characteristics	Husband's characteristics made things worse	- A patriarchal person - A violent and impulsive person - A person raised in an adverse childhood environment
Marital quality	Reduced physical and psychological interaction	Reduced marital interaction despite physical proximity	- Reduced conversation with husband - Reduced physical affection from husband
		Staying as far apart as possible to avoid conflict with husband	- Staying as far apart as possible from husband in the house - Not provoking husband to avoid conflict
Marital stability	Severance of the relationship	Distancing and withdrawal from husband due to repeated conflict	- Conflicts become routine due to the prolonged lockdown - Ending the relationship with husband due to unresolved conflicts

### 3.1 Stressful Events and Adaptive Processes

#### Category I: Maladaptation to Sudden Life Changes

*a) Stressful Event: Being Confined in My Home Indefinitely.* The government's strong social distancing policy made it difficult for people to go out and restricted their daily socioeconomic activities. Wives initially thought that these uncomfortable changes would be temporary; however, as the situation prolonged, they felt their lives were full of uncertainty. All wives experienced various negative emotions including anger, sadness, disappointment, loneliness, sensitivity, and guilt, triggered by the sudden changes and various restrictions on their daily lives. Participant C02 said she felt suffocated in this situation and felt that her home was like a quarantine facility:

"This is a wait without a promise... This situation, which repeats over and over without an ending, is so suffocating... The hope that it would be resolved quickly made me more desperate."

*b) Adaptive Process: Deepening Conflicts with Husbands Triggered by Fear and Distress of COVID-19.* All wives said that conflicts with their husbands became more frequent after the outbreak of COVID-19, and small conflicts were often amplified. Couples became emotionally sensitive during this public health crisis, and the distress from sudden life changes and the fear of COVID-19 infection made them highly sensitive. They were afraid of being infected and stigmatized should they contract the disease. Thus, couples were sensitive about where their spouses went and whom they met. Frequent fights occurred because of the restraints on each other's going out and complaints regarding this:

"My husband said he was going to play golf. I asked, 'Why should you go there during this public crisis? I don't care if you get COVID-19 alone, but if you get it, we're all going to catch it .....' That's why we had the biggest fight." (C09)

#### Category II: Family Role Confusion

*a) Stressful Event: Increasing Family Care Needs.* Family members came to spend a considerable amount of time at home, and this entailed an increased amount of housework. Most families in this study ate all three daily meals at home. As most kindergartens and day-care facilities were closed, the younger children spent all day at home and needed to be cared for and educated by their families:

"I have to do all the housework, play with my child, and cook when it's time to eat. This situation makes me very busy without a break, so I'm burning out." (C05)

*b) Adaptive Process: Being Forced to Make Sacrifices Due to Being a Woman.* The wives said that the increased burden on their families required someone to make sacrifices, and these were mainly expected from women. They were asked to take responsibility for the increased housework and childcare because they were women and mothers. Some wives were asked to quit their jobs for the family: two wives (C01 & C02) quit their jobs instead of the husbands quitting theirs because they could not find any institution or person to take care of their children during the COVID-19 outbreak. C03 spoke of her husband's criticism:

"[He said] 'Why do our children have to go to emergency baby care in this situation? It is because you did not quit your job. If you had quit your job, our children could be safe.'"

C02 mentioned how she was angered by her husband's attitude of taking women's sacrifices for granted when dealing with the public health crisis:

"He just said he couldn't help... he told me, 'I know you are going through a lot but it's all mothers' work ... your work. Mothers have to work more until COVID-19 is over.'"

Many wives also expressed anger toward their husbands who were at home but did not participate in housework or childcare, citing traditional values. C07 experienced strong anger leading to frequent conflicts with her husband:

"My husband was scolding me for forgetting my duty as a housewife and not preparing a meal for him. So, I asked him 'Why do you consider me a housewife? You are also at home!' ... we are all on the same page."

Many wives also expressed strong disappointment in their husbands, who did not appreciate their efforts in making sacrifices and constantly devalued household chores.

#### Category III. Economic Crisis

*a) Stressful Event: Worsened Family Economic Situation.* Most wives who participated in the study expressed strong feelings of anxiety, voicing their concerns about the worsening economic situation in their families. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the income of many of the participants' families either declined or ceased. Moreover, their living expenses increased dur-



ing this period, as family members spent most of their time at home:

"These days, we're losing money in our bank account. Spending remains the same, and the income has decreased." (C08)

*b) Adaptive Process: Economic Crisis Triggers Role Confusion and Marital Conflicts.* The family's economic crisis contributed significantly to conflicts between couples. C06, who was a full-time housewife, said she felt anxious when she saw her husband out of work due to COVID-19:

"He closed his office about two months ago due to the outbreak of COVID-19. We are anxious since we don't know how long this situation will last... He often nags me when I buy something."

The wives who continued to work during the COVID-19 period talked about the role changes between husband and wife. C03 and C04 described their husbands and children having a hard time due to role confusion in the family, as the husbands oversaw child-rearing and household chores:

"I think my husband is feeling a little depressed ... Before, my husband didn't participate in any childcare or housework, but as only I work, it must be hard for him to take over these roles." (C03)

"Due to the COVID-19 situation, the roles of moms and dads in any house have become ambiguous. It's confusing for children as well, and it causes more trouble between the couples." (C04)

#### **Category IV. Invasion of Personal Space**

*a) Stressful Event: Personal Boundary Invaded.* The wives suffered from not having enough time and space for themselves as they stayed at home with their husbands all day long. Increased shared time and invaded personal boundaries triggered extreme depression and frustration in couples. Almost all the participants shared thoughts on the need for personal space as a couple, as C04 said:

"The couple should be able to stay apart for a while. Couples should not stay in the same house for this long. We both need our time and space."

*b) Adaptive Process: Picking on Each Other.* While living physically close to each other for longer durations, the couples experienced various triggers for conflicts such as different methods of childcare, housework, and cooking:

"The reason we keep fighting is because we stay together in a small house all day long. Couple fights are all trivial, you know... not closing the toothpaste lid, or something like that" (C10).

C05 shared her story about arguing with her husband due to his way of caring for their son:

"When I was working in the kitchen, I asked my husband to look after our boy... the way he took care of him was so weird. He put the child in front of the computer showing him YouTube, and he [the husband] watched TV alone."

C07 said she had to stay together with her husband but they had nothing in common to share about life, which in turn led to marital conflict: "Whether it's about politics or TV shows, we can't agree on anything."

#### **3.2 Enduring Vulnerabilities: The Husband's Characteristics**

##### **Husband's Characteristics Made Things Worse**

Many wives tried to understand their marital conflicts based on the characteristics of their husbands. Eight wives stated that their husbands were patriarchal. C11 described her husband's patriarchal characteristics, saying that his tendency to control and impose restrictions became more severe during the social distancing period:

"My husband says he can go outside, but I can't, because I'm a woman and mother ... My husband is patriarchal and tends to ignore women."

Seven wives shared stories about their husbands having violent and impulsive tendencies even before the outbreak of COVID-19. Some women tried to understand their husband's characteristics by understanding his adverse familial and parental childhood environments.

#### **3.3 Marital Quality: Reduced Physical and Psychological Interaction**

##### **Reduced Marital Interaction Despite Physical Proximity**

The wives said that despite the decreased physical distance, interaction with their husbands decreased after the COVID-19 outbreak. They said that they could not be bothered to be curious about each other's lives because they stayed at home all day. C09 said: "We just look at our cell phones without saying anything. Actually, I don't think we talk a lot these days." C01 reported that the frequency of physical contact based on affection also decreased: "We're to-

gether all day long, so we have less time to kiss, less time to make eye contact, less conversation."

### **Staying as Far Apart as Possible to Avoid Conflict with Husbands**

Repeated conflict often led to domestic violence. Three women talked about their experiences of physical violence caused by amplified conflicts; the police were involved in two of these cases. The wives said that the couples ended up trying their best not to provoke each other to avoid conflict and violence. Many wives including C08 said, in their homes, they stayed as far away from their partners as possible to avoid their movements overlapping:

"I'm trying to avoid him, and I think he is, too. Before my husband comes out to eat, I eat alone, and when he comes out, I go into my room."

### **3.4 Marital Stability: Severance of the Relationship Distancing and Withdrawal from Husband Due to Repeated Conflict**

As the COVID-19 situation continued, conflict with their husbands became common for most wives, and relationships irrevocably damaged. C01 said that she became so uninterested in the situation that she did not bother to resolve the conflict with her husband or talk to him:

"I'm tired of fighting with my husband now. As this situation has been prolonged, fighting with my husband has become routine."

C07 said she had given up on her marital relationship:

"Fighting each other only damages each other's health and makes no difference. I have given up on our relationship. Communication is impossible. I do not want to talk to him anymore."

## **4 Discussion**

According to Fincham (2003), external stressors have a significant impact on marriages and can exacerbate or magnify smaller, insignificant issues; thus, a lack of conflict resolution skills affects a marriage more when external stressors are involved. Corroborating his findings, we also observed that external stressors and maladaptation to stressful situations played a significant negative role in marital relationships and stability. In addition, we observed a vicious cycle arising from the mutual influences of stressful events and adaptive processes shown in the VSA model. Increased

distress due to COVID-19 led to conflicts and maladaptation in couples, which again placed significant stress on them, making them vulnerable to external stresses. We observed this cycle in four thematic aspects: maladaptation to sudden life changes, family role confusion, economic crisis, and invasion of personal space.

The first mutual influence between stressful events and adaptive processes was related to sudden life changes. Stressful situations due to restrictions and the fear of infectious disease provoked deeper spousal conflicts, which caused more stress and vulnerability for couples. Specifically, the public stigma that arose during the 2015 MERS-CoV outbreak in South Korea was repeated during the COVID-19 emergency (Shigemura et al. 2020; Torales et al. 2020); thus, the wives became fearful not only of infection but also of public criticism and stigma. This made both parties more sensitive to the issue, causing adverse reactions to each other's outings. Additionally, during a period when confirmed cases were constantly being reported and people's daily lives were characterized by discomfort, the wives complained of psychological symptoms, such as anger, depression, anxiety, and sensitivity, as predicted by psychiatrists (Torales et al. 2020). During a public crisis, interpersonal conflicts increase psychological symptoms such as depression or PTSD (Mowbray 2020). Therefore, it was highly plausible that conflict during the present crisis led to a vicious cycle, wherein the couples' mental health deteriorated, leading in turn to further conflict.

The second mutual influence between stressful events and the adaptive process was related to family role confusion. The COVID-19 emergency demanded family-related changes. According to a recent survey, the increased time that families were together (84.1%) and higher household working hours (85.2%) were perceived as the biggest changes during the pandemic (K. E. Park 2020). To adapt to these changes, women were expected to make sacrifices for their families, which led to conflict with their husbands and more anger and distress. For the couples in this study, childcare was one of the biggest concerns. Since the modernization of South Korean society and the increase in women's education and social participation, social security systems have started to take over the

traditional roles of women, such as caring for children. The government has played a huge role in this by implementing various policies and providing social systems to promote women's economic and social participation (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family 2020). However, as those support systems ended due to the public health crisis, women were compelled to perform those traditional roles again. This is supported by a recent study, which found that both men and women shouldered increased parenting responsibilities during the pandemic; however, women's responsibilities showed a greater increase than that of men (Choi 2020). The data showed that parental responsibility for caring for elementary school-aged children increased from 5.0% to 7.0% before and during the pandemic for men, respectively, while this increased from 20.1% to 35.2% for women (Choi 2020).

Another mutual influence occurred between stressful events and the adaptive process related to worsened family economic situations, followed by family role confusion and subsequent marital conflict. Economic instability due to COVID-19 was a huge stressor for couples, as anticipated by Kaur, Goyal, and Goyal (2020). A recent survey reported that economic changes had the greatest effect on stress, compared to other changes such as increased housework hours, increased childcare hours, increased family time, and decreased interactions with extended families (K. E. Park 2020). Economic difficulties caused severe conflicts and even violence between couples. Often, these conflicts were caused by the switching of traditional roles between men and women. This is consistent with the findings of a previous study in South Korea, which reported that the risk of intimate partner violence was often increased in a patriarchal society where men feel inferior (Yoon, Yang, and B. K. Park 2012).

The final mutual influence of stressful events and the adaptive process was related to the invasion of personal space. Women complained of a high degree of distress due to lack of personal time and space, which caused marital conflicts. Such marital conflicts made them crave more personal space and time; however, the restriction policy did not allow this. Interestingly, a similar phenomenon has been reported by various studies in South Korea that examined adverse marital relationships in middle-aged couples where

the men were retired (Byun et al. 2007; Nah and S. H. Park 2004). These studies showed that the increased time spent at home by men after retirement created marital conflicts (Byun et al. 2007; Nah and S. H. Park 2004). Nah and S. H. Park (2004) explained that this was because of a loss of "public identity" as perceived by Korean men. Many Korean men believe that they should spend more time outside in society and have sufficient income to fulfill their traditional gender roles; however, when they lose their jobs, men and their families find it hard to adjust, leading to domestic conflicts. Indeed, women in this study also expressed dissatisfaction over their partners staying at home. Thus, there is a cultural rationale for this, and it is not simply related to sharing a great deal of time and space at home with their husbands. An in-depth study examining the cultural aspect will be needed in the future.

The spouse's personality traits affected COVID-19 related stress and coping competencies in couples, as suggested by the VSA model. This is consistent with a study demonstrating the high impact of a spouse's personality and character traits on their married life (Claxton et al. 2012). In the current study, many wives talked about their spouses' characteristics, which were mostly patriarchal, aggressive, and impulsive. The patriarchal spouses often expected their wives to take over the housework and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the spouses' aggressive and impulsive attitudes often provoked severe forms of marital conflict or even partner violence.

The dynamic of stressful situations, maladaptation, and the spouse's traits eventually affected the quality of marital relationships. The wives commonly expressed that while they became physically close to their husbands, they interacted less frequently. Their physical proximity for long durations coupled with the experience of stress was likely to cause destructive responses and behaviors toward their partners; responses like yelling, criticizing, and blaming negatively affect relationships and provoke repeated conflicts and marital tension (Manalel et al. 2019; H. J. Park 2017). The wives were eager for "distancing from their husbands" and longed for private time and space.

This study revealed the phenomenon of marital conflict in South Korea during the pandemic using the VSA model. Our findings have several implications. Theoretically, the VSA model has been applied in various studies to understand the dynamics of marital relationships; however, most studies were conducted in Western countries (Gonzaga, Campos, and Bradbury 2007; Langer, Lawrence, and Barry 2008). This study further verified the model by applying it to South Korean individuals within their own cultural context. Health professionals worldwide, including psychologists and health care providers, could collaborate to create a practical application that could assist people who are house-bound for long periods. Community-based psychological interventions and support for such individuals are necessary. The goals of psychological intervention should encompass reducing psychological symptoms, assessing domestic violence, and enhancing familial and marital relationships. To do this, web-based strategies are strongly recommended during the lockdown period. Finally, on the policymaking front, our findings emphasize the importance of appropriate policies. There is an urgent need to develop government policies that can help reduce burdens on families during the crisis. In patriarchal societies like South Korea, a new childcare policy is imperative to prevent women from having to give up their careers to look after their children. Emergency childcare centers equipped with a quarantine system should be created so that dual-income couples are not required to make sacrifices. It is also important to provide an environment in which policies support the ability of couples to simultaneously work and take care of children at home. Providing incentives to companies to grant employees paid leave for family care or adopting telecommuting until the pandemic ends may be beneficial. In addition, ongoing social campaigns to emphasize gender-neutral household roles are particularly needed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In many studies, the examination of South Korean cultural characteristics has focused on the health of the family (S. Park and Schepp 2015; S. Park, Schepp, and D. Park 2016); however, studies conducted in special conditions such as the pandemic are lacking. In that respect, this study is meaningful. The COVID-19

pandemic will end eventually, but considering that outbreaks of infectious disease occur periodically (in South Korean society, these have included SARS in 2002, MERS in 2015, and COVID-19 in 2019), we hope the findings of this study can enhance families' quality of life and healthy adaptation in the future.

Some limitations to this study must be considered. First, although we determined that data saturation was achieved, eleven is indeed a relatively small sample size. We experienced difficulties in recruiting participants, as few women, especially those living with their partners, volunteered to participate. Second, dyadic interviews may enhance the understanding of marital conflict from both perspectives; however, in this study, both parties could not be interviewed. Finally, the socioeconomic status of the participants could not be assessed nor considered for further clarity into the couple's marital experiences.

## 5 Conclusion

Many countries are currently struggling with turbulent effects brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is important to trace confirmed cases and slow down the spread of the disease, attention should also be paid to analyzing how these life-environment changes affect the quality of life and well-being of individuals. This study explored the phenomenon of marital conflict in South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed various factors of Korean wives' stress related to the COVID-19 emergency, which intensified marital conflicts and caused marital quality and stability to deteriorate. Measures against this pandemic must not be limited to vaccines and treatments alone; there is a pressing need for a system that helps people manage this crisis with a certain degree of stability and improved life quality. Policies and evidence-based education are needed to prevent family dissolution during and after the pandemic.

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