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## Too Feminine for Execution?: Gender Stereotypes and the Media's Portrayal of Women Sentenced to Death

Kelsey M. Collins

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TOO FEMININE FOR EXECUTION?: GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THE MEDIA'S  
PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN SENTENCED TO DEATH

by

Kelsey M. Collins

Bachelor of Arts  
Saint Mary's College, 2015

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Accepted by:

Christi Metcalfe, Major Professor

John D. Burrow, Major Professor

Deena Isom, Committee Member

Susan Alexander, Committee Member

Cheryl L Addy, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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The path through my PhD program has not been quick, nor has it been easy. But I am where I am today, at the end of this journey, capable of conquering the next, because of those who have supported me along the way. Thank you to those who never gave up on me and never let me give up on myself. You know who you are.

## ABSTRACT

Traditional gender norms prescribing women as more nurturing and less aggressive than men have led to both the reluctance to view women as capable of violence, as well as a greater willingness to execute men than women in the United States. To make sense of the instances where women are sentenced to death, the media often pathologizes and/or demonizes them. Scholars have found that demonizing and dehumanizing those executed is a necessity to the implementation of capital punishment, both in cases of male and female defendants. To better understand how the news media have framed the gender and racial narratives around women who have been sentenced to death, this study examined newspaper articles written about women sentenced to death in the United States from 1976 to 2020. Using both deductive and inductive coding methods, this study employed a qualitative content analysis to examine news articles about women sentenced to death in the United States since the reintroduction of the death penalty in 1976. The findings revealed the use of gender stereotypes, including four key subthemes: (1) victim as offender, (2) good woman pushed, (3) violating sexual norms, and (4) villainous. Newspapers perpetuated gendered expectations of women through implicit and explicit use of stereotypes and controlling images when describing women sentenced to death but were less likely to draw upon racial stereotypes. White women were also vilified more often than women of Color. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 1998, after 14 years on death row, Karla Faye Tucker was executed, becoming the first woman executed in Texas since 1863. Alongside her boyfriend, Tucker was convicted of murdering a couple she was acquainted with by hacking them to death with a pickaxe. Tucker later reported how she had experienced multiple orgasms as she delivered the deadly blows (Katz, 1998; McCoy et al., 1999; Sigler, 2006). At the time of the murder, Tucker was a drug addict and prostitute, and she had been partying for three days. Despite these facts, by the time she was to be executed, there was a nationwide movement calling for the Governor of Texas to grant Tucker clemency. Those calling for clemency argued that Tucker was a “new person” and that it was impossible to execute the person she was when she committed the murders because that person no longer existed (Katz, 1998; McCoy et al., 1999; Sigler, 2006). This call for clemency and the accompanying “new person” argument was, in part, due to Tucker’s adoption of the Christian faith; within four months of her arrest Tucker had converted to Christianity (Price, 2006). Tucker had fully embraced her newfound faith, offering support to inmates and their families after becoming a counselor through the prison ministry. Another indicator that Tucker had changed came over a decade after she was sentenced to death when she married a prison minister. This Christian transformation led to an appearance in a taped interview on *The 700 Club* on the Christian Broadcasting Network. This



appearance led to the massive letter-writing campaign that urged the Governor of Texas to spare Tucker from execution. The letters argued that Tucker was no longer a danger to society, she was leading a productive life within prison, and her execution would be a waste of a life that could otherwise serve others (Sigler, 2006).

Tucker's conversion to Christianity was not the sole focus of the media attention surrounding her case. Tucker's gender and appearance were often mentioned in conjunction with the public's call for clemency. As University of Houston law professor David Dow explained to the New York Times, Tucker was not the average death row inmate: "She was a woman, white, attractive, articulate and a Christian...A lot of people on death row have three of those characteristics; some have four. But very few have all five" (Verhovek, 1998).

As Dow pointed out, Tucker was unique from other death row inmates, which led to her case garnering nationwide sympathy that is not typically bestowed upon women who commit violent acts. Rather, these women are typically cast in an unsympathetic light, such as in the case of Judi Buenoano. Buenoano was executed in Florida the same year as Tucker for the 1971 murder of her husband.<sup>1</sup> Like Tucker, she was the first woman executed in her state in over a century and, since her arrest, had become a devout Christian. However, unlike Tucker, Buenoano did not strike a chivalrous chord with the public. Instead, she was often referred to as a "Black Widow" who killed the men in her life out of greed (Keitner, 2002). Whereas Tucker had been viewed as a woman in need of saving from the execution chamber, there were no calls for clemency for Buenoano. The difference in the tone surrounding their cases was related, in part, to their physical

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<sup>1</sup> Buenoano was also convicted of murdering her disabled son, Michael, and of attempting to murder her boyfriend, John Gentry.

attractiveness and adherence to feminine standards (Cruikshank, 1999). As a relative of Buenoano pointed out, “[Judi] may not have been as photogenic, as young, or as pretty as Karla, but she was just as good a Christian” (cited in Sigler, 2006, p. 463).

The juxtaposition of the images and ensuing public reaction to Karla Faye Tucker and Judi Buenoano provides insight into the role that traditional feminine ideals play in the news media’s depiction of criminal women. Both Tucker and Buenoano were women who were sentenced to death and later executed. However, despite their shared conversion to Christianity while on death row, which was the apparent driving force in the call for clemency for Tucker, Buenoano failed to garner worldwide sympathy. Instead, Buenoano’s execution received lukewarm, negative media attention (Miller, 2004).

The differences in the treatment of these two women may also be tied to their conformity, or in Buenoano’s case nonconformity, to traditional notions of femininity and feminine beauty. Contrasted with images of Tucker’s long curly brown hair and smiling face, pictures of Buenoano depicted her with a grim expression, supporting a slicked-back, short hair style (Farr, 2000). Tucker was described as having a “angelic smiling face and twinkling eyes,” and she was in a heterosexual marriage to a Christian man that was seen as virginal due to the prison’s no-conjugal-contact policy. Conversely, Buenoano was repeatedly described as an evil man-hater who fed upon the men in her life, killing them for the life insurance benefit. Tucker fulfilled traditional gender stereotypes, which was reflected in the visceral reaction to her death. It appears that the American public could not reconcile her femininity with her state-sponsored execution (Howarth, 2002). Even still, Buenoano was far removed from traditional notions of

femininity, and the result was that her execution was more palatable to the American public than that of Tucker's execution (Farr, 2000; Howarth, 2002; Sigler, 2006). The cases of Tucker and Buenoano comprise two of the small number of women executed each year in the United States. Indeed, women are rarely sentenced to death in the United States, and the novelty of a woman receiving a capital sentence makes these cases exceptionally newsworthy. As Tucker and Buenoano's cases point out, it appears the tone surrounding a female capital offender can depend on her proximity to stereotypical feminine ideals.

Since the reintroduction of the death penalty in the United States in 1976, over 8,000 people have been sentenced to death, with over 98% of those sentenced being male (DPIC, 2020a; Streib, 2006). Although women compose about 51% of the American population, they represent less than 2% of defendants sentenced to death. There are several interrelated factors in play with regards to death sentences, including the presence of statutory aggravating and mitigating circumstances (*Gregg v. Georgia*, 1976). Further investigation into American capital sentencing practices, however, does indicate a reluctance on the part of American criminal justice actors to sentence women to death, reflected in the disparity between the rate at which women commit death-eligible crimes and the rate at which women receive a capital sentence (DPIC, 2020b).

Sentencing authorities within the United States have always had an aversion to executing women. Apart from the Salem Witch Trials near the end of the seventeenth century, women have always been sentenced to death and executed at rates that pale in comparison to their male counterparts (Rapaport, 1991; Streib, 2006). Today, women commit nearly 10% of all death-eligible crimes (those crimes for which the death penalty

can legally be imposed), and yet women only account for 2.1% of those sentenced to death and account for less than 1% of persons executed in the post-*Furman* era (DPIC, 2020b). This hesitancy to impose the death penalty points to a pattern of leniency on the part of decision-makers within the criminal justice system, especially with regards to women who kill.

Research has shown that this leniency may be related to ideals surrounding femininity held by decision-makers (Bell et al., 2019; Fridel, 2019; Steffensmeier & Demuth, 2006), particularly traditional gender ideologies that prescribe passivity and maternal instinct as normative, and even expected, attributes for women (Jerald et al., 2017; Jewkes, 2011). Because of these gender stereotypes, criminal justice actors, who are predominantly male, presume that female defendants pose less of a threat to public safety and would also be more receptive to rehabilitation than their male counterparts (Bell et al., 2019). Post-*Furman* capital sentencing statutes call for individualized sentencing that allows for discretion at the charging, penalty, and post-conviction phases of the criminal justice process (*Woodson v. North Carolina*, 1976; *Lockett v. Ohio*, 1978). These traditional gender norms prescribing women as more nurturing and less aggressive than men have led to both the reluctance to view women as capable of violence, as well as to a greater willingness to execute men than women in the United States (Connell, 1987; Heilman, 2001; Keitner, 2002).

Although representing a small proportion of those sentenced to death, there are women who have transgressed these gender stereotypes and have been sentenced to the harshest penalty—capital punishment. As the earlier examples demonstrate, the portrayal of these women is not uniform. Howarth (2002) argued the portrayal of women on death

row may be related to the femininity of women who kill, with those who do not embody feminine ideals being viewed as more appropriate candidates for capital sentences. The death penalty is a masculine institution, and as Howarth (2002) explicates:

If the death penalty consists mainly of gender violence of men against men, feminine capital defendants who are women may disrupt the meaning and power of the system... the person being executed has to have the qualities of being frightening and relatively easily dehumanized...feminine subjects, not female bodies, confuse and disarm the symbolic machinery of death. To make appropriately condemned, women need to have lost their femininity... (p. 216)

Women who do not conform to traditional notions of femininity are easily masculinized by the media and subsequently court actors, which makes their death sentence more palatable to sentencing judges and juries, as well as the public at large (Howarth, 2002; Keitner, 2002). Essentially, the media pathologizes and/or demonizes them (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009; Gibson, 1982; Whiteley, 2012). Scholars have found that demonizing and dehumanizing those executed is a necessity to the implementation of capital punishment, both in cases of male and female defendants (Howarth, 2002; Keitner, 2002). As Keitner (2002) explains, “The ability to translate the idea of a societal entitlement to execute the most violent offenders into the actual imposition and carrying out of this penalty depends largely on a process of “othering” that allows society to justify taking the life of a convicted criminal” (p. 69). Looking back at the Tucker and Buenoano cases, while Tucker fulfilled feminine ideals, and the public was outraged at her execution, Buenoano did not, and she was demonized in the news.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The present study examines how gender and racial stereotypes are used in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death. A cultural criminological framework is utilized that integrates a feminist lens. Cultural studies examine the production and reproduction of cultural ideas. As an extension of cultural studies, cultural criminology focuses on the media's construction of crime, crime control, and how these constructions influence public perceptions of these issues (Ferrell, 1999). Additionally, feminist criminologists have pointed to the androcentric nature of traditional criminological texts (Belknap, 2001; Brennan et al., 2012; Cook, 2016; Daly & Chesney-Lind). Women and girls were largely ignored in criminological literature until a few decades ago despite female offending being present throughout history, albeit at a lesser rate than male offending (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Naegler & Salman, 2016). Therefore, this study turns attention to the portrayal of women capital offenders within the popular media in relation to feminine norms and expectations to explore the gendered nature of the narratives surrounding these women.

The need to examine media portrayals of violent women is illustrated through the growing body of research on this topic, as well as through findings confirming the media's influence on criminal justice policy and outcomes (Beale, 2006; Lyon, 2008; Moriarty, 2009). Historically, the media's portrayal of women in film, print, and other outlets has served to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, which prescribe women's nature as maternal and passive (Croteau & Hoynes, 2005; Potter & Kappler, 2014; Weare, 2017). Additionally, these depictions are often racialized, and controlling images

are often invoked to denigrate and objectify women of color (WOC) (Collins, 2000). Controlling images are racialized stereotypes of all women, aiding to define acceptable roles and outline expectations for conventional behavior for women. Although controlling images are detrimental to the status of all women, WOC are especially denigrated when they are evoked, because they only depict minority women in a negative light, whereas white women can be portrayed in a positive light if they adhere to conventional standards of femininity (Kakalon et al., 2019; Miller, 2008).

When women commit crime, particularly violent crime, they are frequently viewed as “doubly deviant,” because they have both broken the law, as well as violated cultural expectations of femininity (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Whiteley, 2012). However, as scholars have found, women who, outside of the crime they committed, embody traditional feminine ideals, are treated more leniently by criminal justice actors when compared to their male counterparts (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2004; Leiber et al., 2018). Alternatively, female defendants who are viewed to have stepped outside of cultural expectations of femininity are not given the same lenient treatment (Belknap, 2007; Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Visher, 1983). Rather, these women are painted in an unfavorable light, either being cast as a sympathetic victim with diminished agency (Herzog & Oreg, 2008; Steffensmeier, 1980) or an evil woman who is less than human (Noh et al., 2010; Wear, 2017). Both portrayals reinforce feminine norms by prescribing lenient punishment for women who more closely adhere to traditional notions of femininity and reserving the harshest sentence, capital punishment, for those that violate these prescribed characteristics.

Sentencing women to death who transgress traditional notions of femininity serves to reinforce gender norms as well as legitimize capital punishment (Howarth, 2002; Keitner, 2002; Potter & Kappler, 2014). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature on how the media portrays women sentenced to death. Although there are several case studies that examine the most famous cases, including that of Karla Faye Tucker and Judi Buenoano, there does not exist a systematic analysis of media portrayals of all women on death row in the country, or in a particular state, that could broaden our understanding of how the media legitimizes (or delegitimizes) death sentences for women. These portrayals have the ability to influence public opinion, with research showing that public opinion can and does inform and set boundaries on policy implementation (Piquero et al., 2010; Thielo et al., 2016).

### **Purpose and Significance of Study**

Studying the media narratives of women on death row furthers the understanding of how female offenders, and women more generally, may be relegated to a second-class status through the perpetuation of gender and racial stereotypes. Previous literature has uncovered that news media narratives around violent women reinforces gender stereotypes by focusing the narrative on biological drives rather than the notion that a woman can autonomously decide to commit crime (Tillyer et al., 2015). Newspapers are used as the news media source for this study, as they were a dominant source of news and information for Americans at the beginning of the time frame covered (1976-2020) and are largely responsible for the dissemination and perpetuation of culturally valued norms and beliefs (Adams, 1981; Baker, 2011). As no previous systematic analysis of media



portrayals of women sentenced to death exists, this study intends to fill this gap and expand upon studies that have focused on media portrayals of violent women.

To this end, this dissertation focuses on two research questions. First, how are gender and racial stereotypes used in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death in the United States between 1976 and 2020? To address this question, newspaper narratives from these years are first deductively analyzed for gender and racial stereotypes by looking for depictions of women on death row that are (a) in-line with feminine norms, (b) violate feminine norms, and (c) emphasize race/ethnicity. Deductive analysis is used to determine whether gender and racial stereotypes, as defined by previous literature on emphasized femininity and controlling images, are used in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death. Then, to look for themes in the narratives across these larger, deductive categories, inductive techniques are used. Inductive analysis involves drawing conclusions from the data itself. For the purposes of this study, inductive methods are utilized to identify subthemes across the larger, deductive categories as a means of uncovering the nuances in the narratives, as well as patterns and connections in the data.

The second research question focuses on how the narratives differ across race/ethnicity of the women sentenced. This question is derived from theoretical and empirical research on controlling images. Based on previous empirical studies in this area that focus on how the media frames violent women, it is expected that the depictions of women on death row will likely be different for WOC than white women. Therefore, patterns across racial groups are examined and analyzed.

## **Dissertation Overview**

To frame this study's research questions and methodology, two larger areas of literature are reviewed. Chapter two of this dissertation reviews theoretical and empirical literature on crime and the media. The chapter begins with a discussion on how the media shapes reality by first discussing lenses, frames, and decisions of newsworthiness. Next, the media's perpetuation of racial/ethnic stereotypes and the overrepresentation of people of color as criminal suspects is discussed before more specifically discussing Collins' (2000) idea of controlling images. Common controlling images across various racial/ethnic groups are reviewed, as well as how these images stigmatize and affect the lives of all women and WOC, specifically. The chapter ends with a discussion of media portrayals of violent women, concluding with a review of the empirical research on the media's framing of violent women in general, violent WOC, and capitally sentenced women.

Chapter three discusses gender in the criminal justice system by first providing a broad understanding of the social construction of gender and gender stereotypes. Within that discussion, emphasized femininity is introduced and is compared to hegemonic masculinity, followed by the perceived importance of women's compliance in upholding the gender order, incorporating how this plays out in the criminal justice system. Theories on gender sentencing disparity are next discussed, specifically chivalry theory and the evil woman hypothesis. This discussion reviews how these theories explain differences in criminal justice responses and attitudes across race. Next, the literature on gender in sentencing is reviewed with both extralegal and legal factors taken into account regarding gender sentencing disparity. Empirical findings related to the strength and consistency of

sentencing disparities are reviewed, as well as the masculinization of female offenders who are viewed as more deviant. The chapter closes with a review of the few Supreme Court cases that have addressed gender sentencing disparity, as well as a review of the empirical research that exists on gender and capital punishment.

Chapter four presents a roadmap of the methodology of the study. After reviewing the purpose of the study, the chapter explains the population chosen, the unit of analysis, as well as explains the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the study. The research design is explained, as well as the merits of conducting a qualitative content analysis for the purposes of the study. The analytical strategy is then reviewed, including an explanation of the two phases of coding—the first of which was deductive, while the second was inductive. The study’s use of NVIVO is discussed, as well as how the data management software was utilized to code and later identify overarching themes in the data. Finally, the chapter reviews how bias was reduced and reliability was assured in the course of conducting the study.

Chapter five presents the findings of the study and systematically reviews the three overarching themes and four emergent subthemes that were gleaned from the qualitative content analysis. Racial and ethnic differences are discussed as well, and tables are presented that review the findings from the two coding phases. Finally, chapter six connects the findings to previous literature, as well as discusses the implications of these findings, the limitations of the current study, and directions for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### CRIME AND THE MEDIA

This dissertation examines how gender and racial stereotypes are used in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death between 1976 and 2020, as well as racial/ethnic differences in these narratives. In order to answer this question, it is important to understand how previous researchers have approached studies investigating crime and the media, as well as review the current understanding of gender and racial stereotypes within criminological and sociological literature. This chapter begins by first focusing on the former and includes a discussion of the cultural criminology theoretical framework adopted, as well as how the media influences the public's perception of crime and selects what news to report on through lenses and frames. Additionally, this chapter introduces the concept of controlling images and how the media utilizes them in its perpetuation of racial stereotypes. Media portrayals of violent women are discussed, including how some images of gender are privileged over others and how female criminality is typically discussed. The chapter concludes with a review of the empirical research on how the media frames violent women, violent WOC specifically, as well as capitally sentenced women. In doing so, this chapter establishes the theoretical and empirical basis for the study and how it contributes to existing empirical literature.

## ***Cultural Criminology***

Cultural studies examine the production and reproduction of cultural ideas, such as gender or racial stereotypes in society (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Faucher, 2007; Hall, 1996). Stuart Hall, one of the leading researchers in cultural studies, explains that culture is about ‘shared meanings’ (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Mass culture, or popular culture, is the widely distributed forms of media, such as music, art, and literature, that make up the everyday lives of most ‘ordinary people’ (Hall, 1997, p. 2). Meanings, such as stereotypes, which organize our conduct by establishing the norms and conventions that structure social life, are produced through these forms of media and even circulate meanings between cultures through globalized forms of popular culture (Hall, 1980, 1996, 1997; Ferrell et al., 2015). The media’s role in the production and routine dissemination of shared meaning is the central focus of cultural studies (Modleski, 1986; Naugler & Salman, 2016).

Cultural criminology, an extension of cultural studies, focuses specifically on the media’s construction of crime, crime control, and how this construction influences public perceptions of these issues. Ferrell (1999) describes cultural criminology as attempting to “integrate the fields of criminology and cultural studies” (p. 396). Several scholars have illustrated how influential the mass media is in constructing the public’s understanding of crime and deviance and its influence on social and legal control (e.g., Pfeiffer et al., 2005; Pickett et al., 2015; Zhan et al., 2019). Feminist criminologists, however, have pointed out that most of these previous studies fail to consider the power of the media in the context of gender, calling for a feminist approach to both media studies and criminology (Chesney-Lind, 1998; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988).

Cultural criminology complements several qualitative research methods because of its attention toward mass media constructions of crime and criminal justice policy (Ferrell, 1999; Grimes, 2007). For example, Grimes (2007) in her ethnographic content analysis of the construction of the “three strikes” slogan by the mass media examined the influence of the media on public policy. Through the lens of cultural criminology, Grimes (2007) found a strong symbolic connection between three strikes and the murder of Polly Klaas, a child who was kidnapped, raped, and strangled by a man with an extensive criminal record. Newspapers and news programs created a nationwide moral panic<sup>2</sup>, asserting that violent crime was on the rise, even with government statistics reflecting that the opposite was true. The reliance on the media to construct social problems led to public support for Three Strikes laws. Through a cultural criminology framework, Grimes (2007) “demonstrated how symbols constructed by the mass media lead to changes in the broader, macro-level social structure” (p. 91).

### **How the Media Shapes Reality**

Most Americans are never directly exposed to serious crime as either a victim or an offender. Thus, their understanding of crime and its consequences depends on the media's presentation of these issues (Baranauskas & Drakulich. 2018). Unfortunately, scholars have repeatedly found that the media’s presentation of information about crime is frequently misleading (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Dowler et al., 2006). The media, it is argued, presents a distorted reality with images of crime that are not statistically correct (Roberts et al., 2003, p. 79). For example, although crime rates began to drop steadily in the early 1990s, the mass media continued to present violent crime as a serious problem.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example: Griffin & Miller (2008); Zgoba (2004)

Consequently, many Americans continued to believe violent crime to be a significant issue and that crime rates were still rising (Shi et al., 2019).

Hundreds of empirical studies have been conducted worldwide to examine the media's influence on the public's perception of crime and its power to set the public's agenda (Beale, 2006). When news coverage of specific issues increases, it primes audiences to believe that those concerns require more attention on behalf of policymakers. Many studies testing the influence of the news media on public perception of crime have focused on citizens' fear of crime, hypothesizing that watching crime-related programs increases fear of victimization (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018). The research findings in this area appear to be mixed. However, one of the most consistent results has shown that media consumption is associated with increased fear of crime (Gerbner et al. 1977, 1980; Shi et al., 2019). Dolliver et al. (2018), in one of the most comprehensive studies of media consumption's effect on fear of crime, included four separate factors in measuring media consumption: content, amount, medium, and importance of the media consumed. Using a nationally representative sample, these scholars found that increased media consumption magnified support for punitive criminal justice policies, including Three Strikes laws and the death penalty. Additionally, these scholars found that greater exposure to the media led to a heightened fear of criminal victimization and that this fear translated into greater support for punitive criminal justice policies (Dolliver et al., 2018).

Reporters decide what events to report, as well as how they present information to consumers. Some scholars argue that news outlets are political institutions that produce and deliver content through a deliberate and strategic process, although scholars disagree

on whether the news operates as a partisan or nonpartisan system (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Prior, 2013). Levendusky (2013), for example, defines partisan news as “opinionated media outlets and programs that fit the news within a political narrative and create a coherent conservative and liberal interpretation of the day’s events” (p. 566). Across the political spectrum, how reporters select, interpret, and emphasize specific issues are different (Lee et al., 2017). This system often results in conflicting news frames, particularly concerning politically controversial topics. Other scholars argue that the media does not operate under political bias but rather professional bias. Jamieson and Waldman (2003) explain,

Reporters have a bias toward the use of official sources, a bias toward information that can be obtained quickly, a bias toward conflict, a bias toward focusing on discrete events rather than persistent conditions, and a bias toward the simple over the complex. These biases have a far greater role in determining the content of news than any political preferences a reporter might have. (p. 168)

Regardless of the type of bias reporters operate with, it is undisputed that partiality exists within the news (Groeling, 2013). Defined in many ways by scholars, bias is “the influence of journalists’ belief systems on the texts they produce” (Entman, 2010, p. 393). These prejudices are exacerbated by how audiences choose their news outlets. Because people generally feel uncomfortable when faced with information that contradicts their beliefs, audiences selectively expose themselves to like-minded news programs (Lee et al., 2017). This selective exposure results in a cycle where individuals become more grounded in their beliefs and even less likely to listen to opinions that do not match their own (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2010).



## **Lenses, Frames, and the Decision of Newsworthiness**

Economic and marketing considerations frequently override reporters' other considerations of newsworthiness. The media's profit-driven enterprise prioritizes presenting objective and scientific facts (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Quinney, 1970). Reporters' lenses, their view of the world and shifting perspectives, are shaded by these market considerations that serve as the basis for what and how events are reported (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Lipschultz & Hilt, 1999). Jamieson and Waldman (2003) note that when reporters see the "story through the lens of strategy and tactics," they often neglect their role as custodian of fact (p. 2). This power to direct the public's attention to particular issues while diverting them from others is referred to by media scholars as agenda-setting (Beale, 2006; Lee et al., 2017). Priming, then, describes the media's capacity to influence the criteria by which the public evaluates policy, as well as criminal justice and governmental actors (Beale, 2006; Jamieson and Waldman, 2003).

In order to understand how the media achieves a particular view of crime, it is necessary to consider lenses and frames. Frames describe how reporters compile information in news stories as a result of the lenses they choose (Entman, 1993; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018). Goffman (1974) describes frames as condensed packages of information that help consumers categorize and understand the magnitude of information presented. Frames are "the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that a speaker uses when relaying information about an issue or event to an audience" (Chong and Druckman, 2007, p. 100). The way the media frames crime and crime issues affect how people understand crime and consider policy solutions (Beckett & Sasson, 2004). Baranauskas and Drakulich (2018) state, "The framing of

social problems by claims-makers such as those in the media can lead to support or rejection of policy measures related to those problems” (p. 682). Entman (1993) explains how journalists shape public opinion through their use of frames, elucidating that frames:

*define problems*—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes*—identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments*—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies*—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. (p. 52)

Journalists often choose a common frame when describing specific types of events, conditions, or people. Through these standard frames, the media perpetuate stereotypes and shape public opinion (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Littlefield (2008) explains, “the media are the primary agent of socialization in which participants are seduced, educated, and transformed by ideas concerning race, gender, and class on a global level, and these ideas often support white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 676).

Cognitive psychologists have developed the idea of a script when discussing the public’s expectations concerning crime news. Abelson (1976) explains that a script is “a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual” (p. 33). Scholars have argued that crime news generally follows a script with two distinct elements: crime is violent, and criminals are non-white males (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). These elements distort the reality of crime and perpetuate racial stereotypes (Slakoff, 2020). The media have historically propagated ideas about gender, race, and ethnicity that places these groups at a disadvantage through controlling images (Littlefield, 2008; Windsor, 2011).

Scholars have also exposed the media's perpetuation of racial/ethnic stereotypes and the resulting misconceptions regarding people of Color, including a heightened fear among white individuals of victimization at the hands of people of Color (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Mastro et al., 2009). Dixon and Linz (2002), in their content analysis of pretrial publicity (PTP), revealed that reporters were more likely to make potentially prejudicial statements about criminal suspects of Color than they were about white suspects. The researchers found that Black and Latino individuals were twice as likely to be associated with prejudicial statements, such as discussions of their criminal history, compared to their white counterparts. Dixon and Linz (2002) also found that prejudicial statements made in association with defendants of Color were most common when the victim was white.

### ***Controlling Images***

Scholars have found that an overrepresentation of people of Color as criminal suspects in both the news media, as well as crime dramas, can lead to a general belief that crime is a Black phenomenon and that people of Color are more prone to violence than their white counterparts (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Welch, 2007). Additionally, researchers have shown that exposure to harmful, stereotypical information about victims of Color can sway attitudes toward the victim and offender, resulting in victim-blaming, which impacts sentencing (Dukes and Gaither, 2017; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

Through a process of selective reporting, the media strategically shape our picture of reality. Bart argues, “sexism is integrated into the structure of society, present in each institution” (1971, p. 734). This sexism both defines what women’s roles are within social institutions, as well as operates to keep them within their oppressed position (Bart,

1971). One way that this sexism is perpetuated is through the media's use of controlling images. Scholars describe the process of using controlling images as affecting the populace's ability to make objective decisions, because the information given to them is biased (Littlefield, 2008; Murray et al., 2001). The concept of controlling images was introduced by Collins (2000). Although Collins (2000) focused her discussion on the infliction of controlling images on Black women, these images are used to denigrate and objectify women of all races (Miller, 2008). Controlling images define who we are and assign acceptable roles and behaviors to each of us.

A common controlling image used against women is the Madonna-whore dichotomy (MWD), which polarizes perceptions of women as either good and chaste or bad and promiscuous (Bareket et al., 2018; Kahalon et al., 2019; Tanzer, 1985; Tavis & Wade, 1984). Feminist scholars argue that the MWD stems from desires to reinforce patriarchy and ties a woman's worth to her sexuality (Conrad, 2006; De Beauvoir, 1949; Tanenbaum, 2000). Recent empirical literature supports this argument. Bareket and colleagues (2018) found that endorsement of MWD correlated positively with patriarchal ideologies and sexist attitudes in Israeli men. Kahalon et al. (2019) confirmed the generalizability of Bareket et al.'s (2018) findings among men in the United States. Interestingly, the scholars did not find this relationship among German men, which they suggested was related to more tolerant attitudes toward sexuality in Germany than in the United States and Israel.

Collins (2000) contends that the dominant group uses controlling images to justify all forms of oppression as a natural part of life, including racism, sexism, and poverty. Images of women create barriers for them to succeed in areas outside of historically

relegated occupations related to the pink-collar ghetto (Littlefield, 2008; Mastracci, 2015). The MWD is used against all women; however, its meaning differs when referring to WOC. Powerful controlling images disseminate misguided messages about WOC that perpetuate their oppression and inform policies and behavior that maintain structural barriers, such as lack of access to gainful employment and education (Collins, 2000; Slakoff, 2020). Researchers have studied these controlling images in the context of several forms of media, including, feature films (Givens & Monahan, 2005; Haskell, 1999), music videos (Emerson, 2002), and advertising (Reinharz & Kulick, 2007). Some of the central controlling images that dominate Black women's lives date back to America's history of slavery. These images parallel that of Latina and Asian women in America. First, though, the images given to white women are reviewed.

### **Images of White Women.**

Scholars have pointed to examples of controlling images of white women throughout history (Handau & Simien, 2019; Hammer, 2009). Welter (1966) delineates four characteristics that define a true woman: submissiveness, domesticity, piety, and purity (p. 151). She explains that if a woman does not satisfy these requirements, she is not considered a true woman. This portrayal can be considered a controlling image because it reinforces racial privilege and gendered oppression. The controlling image of white womanhood simultaneously privileges white femininity while subordinating Black womanhood and maintains hierarchies of femininity across other social categories, such as class and sexual orientation (Handau & Simien, 2019). Although the cult of true womanhood privileges white women, it is said to privilege white, middle-class, heterosexual women who embody the four characteristics laid out by Welter (1966).

Hammer (2009) expands on this issue, stating, “These images of “true,” or white women [are] juxtaposed onto images of women of ethnicities other than white. Thus, controlling images of one group automatically influence all those with which they intersect in life” (2009, p. 203). Because what is considered “true” femininity is assumed to be related to white women, controlling images of WOC do not leave room for these women to be held to the same high standard give to white women, thus relegating them to solely negative imagery.

### **Images of WOC.**

The most pervasive image of Black women is the Mammy, a stereotype that originated in the South during slavery but continues to represent the economic conditions of poor Black women today (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; West, 1995). The Mammy is a caricature of the female Black domestic servant whose long hours of work go uncompensated, but whose loyalty to her white master is unwavering (Fontaine, 2011; Hall, 1997). The other stereotype that was borne out of slavery practices, and more particularly the value placed on Black female slaves being determined by their capacity to bear children and their sexual desirability, is the Jezebel (Fontaine, 2011; West, 1995).

The Jezebel is depicted as closer to the white standard of beauty than the Mammy and is portrayed as hypersexual and capable of exploiting men through seduction (Dunn, 2008; Fontaine, 2011). Today, the Jezebel is portrayed as the stereotypical “bad Black girl” with an insatiable appetite for sex. The third historical image of Black women is that of the Sapphire, a figure that got her name from a character of the same name on the *Amos and Andy* radio show of the 1950s. The Sapphire is the Mammy antithesis, portrayed as a hostile and nagging wife whose primary role is to emasculate Black men

through frequent verbal assaults (West, 1995). Today, the Sapphire image is more commonly referred to as “The Angry Black Woman,” and expectations dictate those labeled as such are quick to anger, mean-spirited, and abusive (Fontaine, 2011; Yarbrough & Bennett, 1999).

Hall (1997) explains that stereotypes “get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development” (p. 257). The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire images of Black women are typically attached to poor, working-class Black women and are determined by surface-level traits, such as their marital status and appearance. However, when Black women do not adhere to the fundamental characteristic of being poor, it is harder for the media, and in turn, individuals, to label them as one of these three images. Thus, another stereotype of Black women has emerged to categorize professional, highly educated middle-class Black women—the Superwoman (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Like the Mammy, the Superwoman can handle large amounts of undesirable work; however, unlike any previous stereotypes, the Superwoman is articulate, independent, and extremely talented (Mitchell & Herring, 1998; Thomas et al., 2004; Wallace, 1979). Black women labeled Superwomen are expected to be tough, resilient, and do it all without asking for help (Hall, 2015; Shorter-Gooden & Jackson, 2000).

Stereotypes of Latina women are generally in-line with Black women, however, under different labels. The stereotypical “good” Latina woman lives according to *marianismo*, which dictates that women should not have sex outside the confines of marriage and even then, only for purposes of procreation. They should also be

subservient to their husbands and value motherhood above all else (López & Chesney-Lind, 2014). However, when Latinas are represented in the news and other media forms, they are depicted as either hypersexual, attractively exotic, gang members, or domestic workers (Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Medible, 2007; Hernández, 2009; Vargas, 2010). Additionally, the recent highlight on immigration has new outlets depicting Latina mothers as conniving criminals who use their “anchor babies” to obtain citizenship and financial gain at U.S. taxpayer expense (Berg, 2002; Foster, 2017; Lederer, 2013). Assumptions accompany these stereotypes of Latina women, such as the idea that they can provide cheap labor because they are uneducated. Thus, they become easy targets for exploitation (Karjanen, 2008; Lopez, 2013).

Scholars have also found that controlling images are used to render Asian women as hyperfeminine, slavishly dutiful, and sexually available for white men (Espiritu 1997; Nemoto, 2006; Tajima 1989). Pyke and Johnson (2003) explain, “This Lotus Blossom imagery obscures the internal variation of Asian American femininity and sexuality, making it difficult, for example, for others to “see” Asian lesbians and bisexuals” (p. 36). These controlling images paint Asian American women as easy targets, making them especially vulnerable to abuse from men (Nemoto, 2006; Tajima 1989).

The stereotypes reduce WOC to a few attributes that are felt to be natural but result in internal and external oppression (Goffman, 1963; Román, 2000). WOC are stigmatized in a manner that positions them as the “other” and signals an array of discriminatory practices that inhibit important life changes (Goffman, 1963; Hall & Witherspoon, 2015; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). The dissemination of controlling imagery leads to targets of these images internalizing their inferiority and provides a



template in which they make meaning of their everyday lives (Pyke, 2000). Even more, there is evidence of the pervasiveness of this imagery, as well as the effect it has on WOC.

The empirical evidence related to the effect of controlling images has focused on how these images affect the development of gender identity among Black girls and how this development is connected to the ways in which Black girls embody behaviors and beliefs that counter dominant norms (Ashcraft & Belgrave, 2005; Jacobs, 2016).

Walton's (2013) study of how Black women are portrayed in the media found that participants recognized that Black women were most commonly portrayed as uneducated and hypersexual. Furthermore, the participants described Black women as appearing as "Modern Jezebels," "Baby Mamas," "Angry Black Women," among other unflattering portrayals. Scholars suggest that Black women's constant exposure to these controlling images, beginning at a young age, results in adolescent experiences marked by cultural dissonance: Black girls begin to perceive themselves as devalued members of their society because of their gender and race (Jacobs, 2016; Walton, 2013). Walton (2013) also found that Black respondents most identified the positive portrayals of Black women as the most accurate depiction of real-life women. In contrast, white respondents more frequently identified the negative portrayals of Black women as most accurate.

Research on social cognition has shown that implicit bias is intrinsic to the human brain and is activated and exacerbated through exposure to stereotypical language embedded in news media messages (Moriearty, 2009). Conversely, counter-stereotypic portrayals of people of Color and women, which contain information that disconfirms stereotypes, have been found to influence judgments and even diminish unrelated

individuals' prejudicial inferences (Murphy, 1997; Power et al., 1996; Saleem et al., 2017; Sui & Paul, 2017).

### **Media Portrayals of Violent Women.**

Reporters, operating through patriarchal structures, construct gender and women's activities such that some images of gender are privileged over others, thereby reinforcing gender stereotypes in the process (Bullen, 2009; Goodall, 2012; Sharda, 2014). In news discourse, crime is a gendered concept (Jewkes, 2011; Middleweek, 2017; Smart 1977b). Therefore, when a woman commits a violent act, her sex is the focus of the narrative surrounding the crime, and biological drives are commonly used as an explanation when reporters speculate about her possible motives (Doerner & Demuth, 2010; Herzog & Oreg, 2008; Tillyer et al., 2015). This focus on possible internal drives results in stories that paint these women as either evil monsters or hapless victims incapable of making an autonomous decision due to mental health struggles. Scholars have coined these overarching labels as mad, sad, or bad (Noh et al., 2010; Wear, 2017).

When female criminality is discussed by the media or criminal justice actors, individual wrongdoing is the focus rather than the underlying systemic issues that mark these women's lives (Maidment, 2007). Antiquated ideas by Lombroso and Ferrero (1895/1980) of biological abnormalities being at the root of female criminality are prevalent in contemporary media depictions of women who kill. Reporters often explain female-perpetrated homicide as stemming from raging hormones or mental instability. The overarching argument is that the woman acted violently, because she lost control due to a medical condition (Pollack, 2005; Weare, 2013). This sentiment results in these female offenders receiving lenient treatment by the criminal justice system. Women who

are arguably suffering from mental illness are viewed as lacking the agency required for a harsh sentence (Morrissey, 2003; Wear, 2013). The case of Andrea Yates serves as an example of this treatment.

Yates was convicted of murdering her children but received light sentences after arguing insanity (Denno, 2003; Meyer et al., 2001; Resnick, 2007). Yates, who drowned her five children in a bathtub, was found not guilty by reason of insanity after her defense maintained she was suffering from postpartum depression at the time of the murders (Connell, 2002). Due to the ruling of insanity, Yates was not eligible for the death penalty and instead served a few years in a mental hospital before being sent to serve a life sentence in a minimum-security prison. Yates escaped the death penalty in one of the largest death penalty states in the country, because of her argument that she was ‘mad’ at the time of her crime.

There is also a class of female offenders that are removed from the lenient treatment shown to women such as Yates: women who are labeled as ‘bad,’ because they are viewed less like women and more as inhuman monsters. The media paints this class of female offenders as ‘bad,’ thereby demonizing and masculinizing them in the news. Such treatment is magnified in a criminal justice system that seeks harsh punishments against them (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). The discourse surrounding “bad” women is rooted in gender norms, as these women are viewed as being completely divorced from traditional feminine ideals, and therefore they cannot be provided the type of leniency generally afforded to women who commit a crime (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009; Chesney-Lind, 1999). “Bad” women are believed to have stepped too far outside of gender norms by being sexually deviant or violating

expectations surrounding their role as mothers (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Huckerby, 2003).

Lesbians who commit murder are often typecast as bad, and they are, in turn, defeminized and dehumanized, which results in them being portrayed as gender-neutral monsters worthy of capital punishment. The treatment of Aileen Wuornos by the media epitomizes this idea. Wuornos received notoriety for the rarity of her crimes; she was one of very few female serial killers known to the United States. Despite the severe abuse and incest she had suffered in childhood, as well as her claim that she had only killed in self-defense, Wuornos failed to garner any sympathy. Instead, her sexual deviance as both a prostitute and a lesbian were widely acknowledged, and she was repeatedly referred to as a monster (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Pearson, 2007).

Additionally, mothers who have murdered their own children can be categorized as 'bad' if the murder cannot be explained by a psychological impairment, such as postpartum depression. These women are 'bad' not only because they have committed murder but also because they have destroyed the construction of motherhood by murdering their own children (Crawford & Unger, 2004; Mottarella et al., 2009; Wear, 2017). Society's construction of motherhood places an expectation on women to become loving, nurturing mothers. Women who kill their children, absent a diagnosed mental disorder, are portrayed as wicked, with the media often explicitly using the name of the mythical figure, Medea, who represents the archetypal bad mother who killed her children in a fit of jealous rage (Goc, 2009). This again transforms female offenders who transgress what are considered to be emphasized femininity standards. Susan Smith, a South Carolina woman who drowned her two children by pushing her car into a lake with

the children strapped inside, is an example of a modern Medea. Susan was often portrayed by the media as a selfish woman who killed her children in the hopes of beginning a new life with her lover (Grabe et al., 2006; Hasian & Flores, 2000). Smith was described as a bad mother who committed an indefensible act and became a symbol of what awaited women who violated traditional notions of motherhood (Hasian & Flores, 2000).

In the context of the criminal justice system, members of the public formulate their opinions of crime policy and offenders based on how the media frames these topics (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Mastro et al., 2009). Scholars have also argued that the media portrays offenders as fundamentally different in order to make their punishment more palatable (Haney, 2005; Keitner, 2002). This is pertinent in death penalty cases, as public opinion has been found to play a significant role in capital sentencing policy and practice (Beale, 2006; Lyon, 2008; Moriearty, 2010). Thus, the media exaggerates and essentializes these apparent differences, too often encouraging the public to “assign the offender the mythic role of Monster” (Pillsbury, 1989, p. 362).

### **Empirical Research of Media Framing of Violent Women**

Scholars have found evidence of the media’s tendency toward dehumanizing criminal offenders (Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013). Sloop (1996), in his analysis of the media’s portrayal of offenders between 1950-1993, found evidence of a dramatic shift away from depicting offenders as redeemable and capable of change. Instead, he found a tendency toward showing offenders as predatory and dangerous individuals beyond reform, with violent offenders most often depicted as animalistic and senseless individuals when compared to non-violent offenders. Women, however, do not fit nicely into the category

of violent offender due to gender stereotypes that indicate women are gentle and compassionate (Gupta et al., 2013; McSweeney, 2021). When women commit violent crimes, they are viewed as “doubly deviant,” because they have both broken the law as well as transgressed gender norms (Bontrager et al., 2013). This results in female offenders being framed differently than their male counterparts.

Empirical research on the media’s framing of violent women has shown that newspapers exhibit a greater need to find reasons for women’s offending in comparison to male offending (Estrada et al., 2019). Additionally, research indicates that the media provides these explanations through depicting violent women as sad (victims) or mad (pathological) (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). Eastal et al. (2015), in their meta-analysis of the previous literature examining media discourse surrounding women who commit murder, found that these portrayals are affected by the woman’s relationship with her victim. For example, when a woman kills her violent partner, she is not held accountable for her actions; instead, she is painted as a victim of her partner, rather than a perpetrator of a crime. Additionally, Eastal et al. (2015) found that women who kill their children are framed as mad, suffering from some form of maternal defect at their time of their crime. Researchers have found that newspapers grapple with mothers killing their children by explaining the offense as only occurring among the “sickest women” (Barnett, 2005, p. 19). In doing so, gender stereotypes that paint women as inherently maternal remain intact, explaining that only women suffering from a severe form of mental illness harm their children.

Although some authors have distinguished between the mad and sad frames, others have found empirical evidence of these frames being lumped together. For

example, Noh et al. (2010) in their examination of U.S. and Canadian newspaper articles from 1978 to 2002 concerning battered women who kill found that over one-third of articles portrayed the women as irrational or insane due to suffering from battered woman syndrome or post-traumatic stress disorder. This framing of female perpetrators of violence as victims fits into both the mad and sad frames; it paints women who kill as victims (sad), as well as suffering from some mental incompetence at the time of their crime (mad).

Still, there is other empirical literature that has found no evidence of the ‘sad’ frame, while confirming the media’s perpetuation of the ‘mad’ frame. McSweeney (2021) in her content analysis of the television show *Snapped* found evidence of the media’s perpetuation of the ‘mad’ and ‘bad’ frames surrounding violent women but found no evidence of the ‘sad’ frame. In her thematic analysis of the first season of the true crime series, McSweeney found the dominant discourse used in the explanation surrounding female-perpetrated violence was madness. Women were often described as out of control due to emotional distress, being under the influence, or because of a mental illness. All of these descriptions align with the idea that women who commit violence are suffering some form of mental malady that leaves them unable to quell their emotions and actions.

Another common theme uncovered in the empirical research on media framing of violent women is the vilification of female offenders. For example, McSweeney (2021) found women were commonly described as inherently bad in most episodes, with “badness” tied to either being pathologically abnormal or promiscuous. Women who were considered pathologically abnormal were described and depicted in the series as

sexually deviant by engaging in lesbian relationships, unfeminine in their appearance, or cold and calculated through the planning of the crime.

Additional empirical evidence of the media's focus on the depravity of violent women furthers the argument that women who commit violence, in particular, receive the harshest media treatment compared to their non-violent female counterparts. Grabe et al. (2006), in their content analysis of a census of newspaper articles published in a major city newspaper, found that violent women were journalistically framed as suffering from internal impulses related to depravity of the mind, including greed and revenge, whereas external influences, such as poverty, were more often used as explanations behind nonviolent crimes perpetrated by women. Additionally, Andersen et al. (2021) in their content analysis of media articles published in Canadian and US news outlets found that violent girls are often framed as villainous or animalistic, however their findings revealed a racialized component, whereby girls of Color were constructed more often as inhuman and uncivilized. Differences in how the media frames WOC in comparison to their white counterparts has also been well established in the empirical literature.

### **Empirical Research on Media Framing of Violent Women of Color**

A substantial body of literature has demonstrated the discriminatory ways in which the media frames race and crime (Dixon & Linz, 2002; Welch, 2007). People of Color are overrepresented as criminal suspects both in crime news, as well as crime dramas, and crime is often painted as a racial/ethnic issue (Larson, 2006; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). For example, Collins (2014) in her content analysis of Canadian crime newspaper articles, found a significant difference in the language surrounding offenders of Color versus white offenders. White offenders were framed as not representative of



their racial group, with newspapers providing more individualistic explanations for their criminal behavior, such as personality disorders or ‘monsters in the mind’ (Collins, 2014, p. 94). News stories covering crime perpetrated by people of Color, on the other hand, provided no such explanation, implying that non-white criminals are normal, making their crime require no further narrative beyond a description of the offense.

Studies that have specifically analyzed how the media frames violent WOC have revealed similar findings. Scholarship indicates that WOC are framed in a more unfavorable light than their white counterparts in crime news, and that often the media utilizes harmful gender and racial stereotypes when painting a picture of crime (Hall & Witherspoon, 2015; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). For example, Brennan and Vandenberg (2009) in their content analysis of front-page news articles from two major newspapers found that stories about white female offenders were more likely to provide excuses for their offenses and overall used a more favorable tone in comparison to their minority counterparts. Articles about white female offenders emphasized neutralizers, based off Sykes and Matza’s (1957) techniques of neutralization, to provide justifications behind white women’s offenses. Alternatively, over two-thirds of the stories written about WOC were negative, attributing guilt using exacerbators, such as stating the woman committed her crime in her own self-interest. Overall, the authors concluded that white women were framed under the ‘mad’ and ‘sad’ narratives, whereas WOC were more likely to be framed under the ‘bad’ narrative (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009).

These conclusions have been reached by later empirical research as well, including a content analysis that found white female offenders were framed under sympathetic themes, including references to them being a good person and acting in self-

defense, whereas Black and Hispanic women were framed using unsympathetic themes, including reference to them being a bad person (Slakoff & Brennan, 2019). Empirical research has been conducted focusing on capitally sentenced women, specifically, as well.

### **Empirical Research on Media Framing of Capital Women**

The empirical research on the media's framing of capital women has uncovered a pattern of dehumanization and vilification of women who kill and are sentenced to death. Farr (2000), in her case study of media reports of the 35 women on death row in 1993, focused her analysis on 5 of these women who identified as lesbians. Farr (2000) found that these women were masculinized and described as "man-haters" who chose to vent their rage and desire for revenge through killing (p. 49). Farr (2000) explains that these women were treated harsher by the media than their heterosexual counterparts by describing their other marginalized statuses, "e.g., drug addict, prostitute, welfare recipient, as composite parts of a heinous whole" (p. 62). Farr (2000) argues that this harsh treatment by the media led to these women receiving a death sentence, even in the instances where their cases did not warrant the gravity of circumstances required under capital sentencing statutes, explaining that the embodiment of defeminized and dehumanized evil that these women were portrayed under were the reasons why they received the sentence they did.

Another empirical analysis of the media's depiction of capitally sentenced women reached conclusions similar to Farr's (2000). Gado (2008) examined the discourse surrounding the six women who were legally executed by the state of New York in the twentieth century and uncovered a process of demonization orchestrated by the media.

Gado (2008) argues that the unrelenting media coverage of female killers translated into women being more harshly treated by news outlets than their male counterparts. He also argues that the press ultimately contributed to the women being sentenced to death, given that the media messages were powerful enough to influence judgements in the case by criminal justice actors.

Although this prior literature has looked at the news media discourse surrounding specific segments of the female death row population, such as lesbian death row inmates (Farr, 2000) or women executed in a specific state (Gado, 2008), no study to date has taken a survey of the news narratives surrounding a population of women sentenced to death in the US. In doing so, this study provides the first comprehensive analysis of how the American news media views women who have been sentenced to death and explores whether previously emergent themes in the narrative surrounding violent women are perpetuated when discussing women on death row.

## CHAPTER 3

### GENDER AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Previous literature indicates that the media applies gender and racial stereotypes to violent women. Therefore, it is necessary and informative in the context of understanding media narratives regarding women on death row to better understand how gender operates within the criminal justice system. This chapter discusses this topic by first reviewing gender and gender stereotypes, as well as what it means to “do gender.” The concept of emphasized femininity is discussed—a concept that helps later establish the groundwork for a deductive approach to answering the study’s first research question. Then, this chapter reviews how gender unfolds in the criminal justice system, focusing on theories of sentencing disparity and a look at capital punishment through a gendered lens. Finally, the empirical research on gender and capital punishment is reviewed. Overall, this chapter establishes how gender operates within the criminal justice system and begins to look at how gender and racial stereotypes influence the likelihood that a woman will be sentenced to death.

#### **Defining Gender**

Gender is the social construction of masculine and feminine identities based on sex assignment at birth. Sex is different from gender, such that sex refers to assigned biological and physical traits, primarily related to the reproductive organs, whereas gender is performative, or something “we do” (Lorber & Moore, 2002; Street & Dardis,

2018; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Individuals are assigned a gender at birth based on their biological sex. What is considered appropriate behavior for their assigned gender is shaped and reinforced by social practices and expectations throughout their lives (Lorber & Moore, 2002; Rousseau, 1762/2009; Talbot, 2008). Several stereotypes surround each gender, and the expectations tied to these stereotypes, shape individuals' behaviors and their reactions to others (Ridgeway, 2014; Steele, 2003).

Within patriarchal society, gender and gender relations are primary components in maintaining the social structure (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Giddens, 1976). As Messerschmidt (2014) writes,

The key to understanding the maintenance of existing gendered and sexual social structures is the accomplishment of such practices through reflexive embodied social interaction. Social actors perpetuate and transform social structures within the same interaction; simultaneously, these structures constrain and enable gendered and sexual social action. The result is the ongoing social construction of gender and sexual relations. (p. 26)

“Doing gender” is a phrase coined by West and Zimmerman (1987) to explain that gender is best understood as socially constructed in the ongoing interactions of daily life (Miller & Carbone-Lopez, 2015). Scholars explain that the “doing” of sex, gender, and sexuality is not a static, finished product but rather a construct influenced by specific social situations (Messerschmidt, 2014; Miller, 2002). Furthermore, individuals situationally embody gender roles according to their unique experiences. As Miller & Carbone-Lopez (2015) explain, “‘doing gender’ is simultaneously ‘doing race,’ ‘doing class’ and ‘doing place,’ in an intersectional way” (p. 7). Feminist scholars and

psychologists over the past few decades have recognized that not all women share the same experiences or self-identify as heteronormative, cis-gender women - all of which lead to differences in the expression of their gender identity, as well as others' reactions to them (Collins, 1990, 1995; Miller & Carbone-Lopez, 2015).

Stereotypes play a crucial role in cognitive decision making, operating to help humans make sense of the world around them by simplifying information presented to them (Heilman, 2001; Talbot, 2008). In the context of gender, a stereotype is a generalized belief that an individual will act in a certain way based on their sex. Gender stereotypes are widely shared beliefs surrounding the norms that differentiate masculine and feminine (Gupta et al., 2013). The expectation is that males are assertive, aggressive, and independent, whereas females are kind, gentle, and sympathetic (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gupta et al., 2013; Heilman, 2001). These attributes are oppositional, and members of a culture believe that the attributes lacking in one gender category are prevalent in the other (Ellemers, 2018; Heilman, 2001). In this manner, patriarchy functions as an organizing principle that results in gendered experiences (Batton & Wright, 2019; Chesney-Lind, 2006).

All other categorizations, such as teacher or doctor, are nested in prior understandings of male or female and the expectations surrounding gender stereotypes (Fiske, 1998; Ridgeway, 2014; Talbot, 2008). As Ridgeway (2014) explains, "This initial framing by sex never quite disappears from our understanding of others or of ourselves in relation to them" (p. 975). Gender stereotypes influence how individuals expect others to act and how individuals choose to behave themselves. Research has found that stereotypical expectations can lead to stereotypical responses, reinforcing culturally

established stereotypes and maintaining a system of social stratification (Ellemers, 2018; Kray et al., 2002).

Gender is a category that establishes and reinforces social inequality (Jensen, 2017; Lorber, 1997; Ridgeway, 2014; Street & Dardis, 2018). Masculinity and femininity are qualities and attributes understood as characteristic of men and women. Within a patriarchal society, what is considered masculine is esteemed over what is considered feminine (Ellemers, 2018; Jensen, 2017). Because of this imbalance, gender becomes a social stratification system that ranks men above women. Thus, gender is one of the primary ways that people organize their lives, because it is a process that creates different social statuses that aids in the assignment of rights and responsibilities among the sexes (Lorber, 1991; Schram et al., 2019). Society depends on a predictable division of labor, and gender divides work into the public and private spheres through defining what is considered masculine and feminine work (Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007; Lorber, 1991). This division of labor by gender has led to the creation of what scholars have termed the “pink-collar ghetto,” which describes the deeply institutionalized patterns of employment that have led to a heavy concentration of women in low-wage jobs aligned with patriarchal conceptions of “women’s work” (Bremner, 1992; Mastracci, 2015; Miller, 1995; Rayburn, 2003). Women do not choose to remain within the “pink-collar ghetto.” A lack of information, sex discrimination, and other related factors prevent women from gaining access to higher-paying, non-traditional occupations (Mastracci, 2015).

Historian Joan Scott defined gender as “the social organization of sexual difference” (1999, p. 2). Gender inequality is the social domination of males and females’

devaluation (Mujcic, & Frijters, 2013; Schram et al., 2019). The subjugation and discrimination of those who fall outside of mainstream gender identities result from their failure to meet social expectations (Heilman, 2001; Talbot, 2008). This gender bias perpetuates gender inequality by promoting cultural norms and punishing those who do not adhere to them (Lorber, 1991; Weare, 2013). Individuals replicate gender expectations through the behavior they learned as appropriate for their gender, or conversely, through their rebelling against these norms. As Lorber (1991) points out, “It takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how [gender] is produced” (p. 112).

### ***Emphasized Femininity***

Emphasized femininity is the form of femininity based on women’s compliance with the subordination to men, and it is the most culturally valued form of femininity (Connell 1987, 2001; Currier, 2013; Korobov, 2011). Emphasized femininity expectations include accepting marriage and childcare, dependence, and sociability (Connell, 1987; Heilman, 2001). Like hegemonic masculinity, which is viewed as the ideal form of masculinity and dictates that men are stoic, aggressive, and tough, emphasized femininity is a process of performing femaleness in a socially defined and appropriate way (Currier, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Emphasized femininity is an offshoot of gender norms surrounding masculinity; “doing femininity means reacting to men and cultural definitions of masculinity” (Currier, 2003, p. 723). As Korobov (2011) states, “Masculinity is inextricably defined in relation to femininity, that men’s achievement of masculinity is intimately dependent on, and vulnerable to, women’s complicity with traditional or emphasized femininity” (p. 51). Thus, men are placed in a



vulnerable position when women resist emphasized femininity standards, because masculinity measures depend on women's compliance with traditional femininity (Korobov, 2011; Tolman et al., 2002; Ussher 1997).

Individuals' expectations surrounding emphasized femininity support patriarchal structures, because they are restrictive in the standards set for women's qualities and attributes. The expectation is that individuals are compliant and accept their second-class citizen status within a patriarchal society. Scholars have exhibited how this plays out in various aspects of the criminal justice system, including drug markets (Miller & Carbone-Lopez, 2015). The drug trade is an environment dominated by men, with drug-involved women perceived to be lacking the agency and autonomy necessary to be fully contributing members (Adler, 1985; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Although this results in women taking subordinated roles to men within the drug trade, researchers have noted that women occupy various roles with varying degrees of autonomy (Deitzer et al., 2019; Fleetwood, 2014). Women within the drug market learn to emphasize violence and emotional attachment to prove themselves capable (Grundetjern & Sandberg, 2012).

Deitzer et al. (2019) found that women's roles within the meth market were characterized by distinct patterns of gender performance, dependent upon whether they led the meth cook or their partner did. When women took a supporting role in a partner cook, they demonstrated emphasized femininity, stating that they only participated in the cook because their partner pressured them into it. Additionally, these women took a caretaking role, maintaining the cleanliness of the cooking environment. The scholars found about half of the women in their study took a lead role in the cook and embodied a patriarchal control position. These women argued that their cooking, cleaning, and

organizational skills make them more adept meth cooks than men (Deitzer et al., 2019). Through their study, Deitzer et al. (2019) exhibited the different ways women choose to embody femaleness and how this is dependent on their social environment. The expression of gender identity is contingent upon interactions with others, a notion scholars refer to as *the embodiment of gender* (Messerschmidt, 2014; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

## **Gender in the Criminal Justice System**

### **Theories on Gender Sentencing Disparity**

Scholars have offered several theories to explain why women at every stage of the criminal justice process receive lenient sanctions, and many of these theories are grounded in the ideas of gender social construction and emphasized femininity discussed above. Chief among the existing theories are chivalry theory and the evil woman thesis, both based on gender stereotypes (Anderson, 1976; Koons-Witt, 2002; Moulds, 1978; Nowacki, 2019; Pollak, 1950). Chivalry theory argues that society views women in a paternalistic manner and sees them as needing male protection (Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Salvucci, 2011; Visher, 1983). The chivalry thesis is premised on cultural stereotypes surrounding gender and argues that because women are weaker and more submissive, they receive more lenient treatment by the criminal justice system (Carroll, 1996; Herzog & Oreg, 2008; O'Neil, 1999). Much like death penalty statutes that ban capital sentencing for children, the mentally disabled, and the insane, women are commonly stripped of the agency required for a severe sentence. While male offenders are viewed as independent individuals who are responsible for their actions, female offenders are frequently perceived as victims of their circumstances, having not received the necessary guidance

and supervision that women deserve, which left them defenseless and immature (Herzog & Oreg, 2008; Steffensmeier, 1980). Women are stereotyped as submissive, weak, and childlike, and thus, they should be protected rather than punished when they offend (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Stolzenberg & D'Alessio, 2004). However, this leniency is not always extended to all women, as there are some that society has deemed “unworthy of protection” (Belknap, 2007; Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Visher, 1983). WOC, for example, are sometimes found as less likely to benefit from paternalistic sentiments, and they are thus, in certain instances, more likely to receive harsher sentences compared to their white counterparts (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Crawford, 2000; Doerner & Demuth, 2010). Still, some research has found this not to be case (Freiburger, 2010; Metcalfe & Chiricos, 2018), or even that WOC receive lighter sanctions than white women (Bickle & Peterson, 1991; Sphon & Beichner, 2000; Steffensmeier & Demuth, 2006).

Race is not the only factor that differentiates which women will receive lenient treatment versus those that will not. Women who commit masculine crimes or do not conform to traditional gender roles in their everyday lives (i.e., single or childless women) are arguably less deserving of chivalrous treatment (Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Goulette et al., 2015; Koons-Witt, 2002; Smart, 1977a). The evil woman thesis explains why some female defendants do not receive lenient treatment. Instead, only women who embody emphasized femininity, such as the traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother, enjoy lenient treatment by the criminal justice system (Belknap, 2001; Bickle & Peterson, 1991; Chesney-Lind, 1978; Daly 1987; Nagel & Hagan, 1983; Reckless, 1957; Rodriguez et al., 2006; Visher, 1983).

Unlike the chivalry hypothesis, the “evil woman” thesis argues that men use their power to keep women in a subservient status by using the criminal justice system to punish women who threaten the social order. Women who commit traditionally masculine crimes, specifically violent crimes, exhibit behavior that contradicts emphasized feminine standards and, consequently, are treated harsher (Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Goulette et al., 2015). The “evil woman” thesis also explains why WOC can receive harsher punishment than their white counterparts, such that negative media portrayals of WOC paint them as less worthy of protection (Belknap, 2007; Black, 1980; Sharp et al., 2000). Additionally, WOC can be perceived as more crime-prone by court actors, resulting from the interaction effect of sex and race, leading the criminal justice system to treat WOC harsher than white women (Goulette et al., 2015). Court actors may perceive Black women to be louder and more forceful than their white counterparts, which results in Black female defendants being painted in a less favorable light by court decision-makers (Collins, 2000).

Arguably, regardless of race, women receive lenient treatment within states’ imposition of capital punishment. As of April 2020, of the 28 states that had retained the death penalty, only 15 had sentenced a woman to death since 1976. Furthermore, even though all 28 death penalty states have executed multiple male inmates, only eight states have executed a woman since 1976 (DPIC, 2020b).<sup>3</sup> Women have historically not been considered good candidates for the death penalty (Rapaport, 1990). The crime more often committed by women—domestic murder—is viewed as less worthy of capital

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<sup>3</sup> These states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, and Virginia

punishment than the felony murders more often committed by men (Rapaport, 1990; Shatz & Shatz, 2012).

### **Gender in Sentencing**

Scholars note that the public is generally less punitive toward females who commit crimes compared to their male counterparts (Bell et al., 2019; Cain et al., 2017). Not only are there far fewer women in prison compared to men, but studies have shown that women generally receive more lenient sentences (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2004; Leiber et al., 2018). In the context of the death penalty, women are sentenced at a minuscule rate compared to men, with a much smaller proportion of death-eligible crimes committed by women receiving a capital sentence than men (Rapaport, 1991). Several factors, both legal and extralegal, play a part in women's more lenient treatment in capital cases.

The most important legal factor to consider in capital sentencing disparity between men and women is that, since 1976, there must be at least one aggravating circumstance found to sentence a defendant to death (*Gregg v. Georgia*, 1976). One of the most common aggravating factors used in capital sentencing is the commission of felony murder, which is a murder that takes place during the commission of another violent felony, such as rape, kidnapping, robbery, or arson (Salvucci, 2011; Sharon, 2011). Nearly eighty percent of inmates on death row in the United States are there because of a felony murder conviction; however, women commit only about six percent of the nation's felony murders (Salvucci, 2011; Rapaport, 1991).

Another commonly occurring aggravating factor often used in seeking a death sentence is the heinous, atrocious, or cruel (HAC) aggravator, which denotes a crime that

is considered shocking to the public conscious (Rosen, 1985; Sharon, 2011; Welner et al., 2018). The Supreme Court has argued that the HAC aggravator allows arbitrariness to seep into the capital sentencing process due to the lack of guidance in interpreting this standard given to judges and jurors (*Godfrey v. Georgia*, 1980; *Maynard v. Cartwright*, 1980). This standard does not narrow the class of death-eligible defendants, because all murder is considered atrocious and cruel. Therefore, the HAC standard allows for enormous discretion in its interpretation (Rosen, 1985; Welner et al., 2018; Winchester, 2016). Although the Supreme Court has held that this standard can contribute to arbitrariness in sentencing, several states and the federal government still count HAC among their lists of aggravating factors that can be considered; however, it cannot be the only aggravating factor found when the jury recommends death (DPIC, 2020a; *Godfrey v. Georgia*, 1980).

Nevertheless, the various states have differing opinions as to the arbitrariness of the HAC aggravator. For example, whereas Arizona has ruled that the standard is not unconstitutionally vague (*Walton v. Arizona*, 1990), Georgia courts have barred the death penalty's imposition if HAC is the only aggravating factor found by the sentencing authority (*Godfrey v. Georgia*, 1980). This difference in interpretation of the HAC aggravator leaves room for arbitrariness in the country's imposition of the death penalty. Sentencing judges are not given any guidance in determining the heinousness of a crime, thereby allowing extralegal factors, such as the gender of the offender, to influence decisions. Studies have shown that there are less rational and often more visceral reactions to women who commit violent acts. These emotions often act as extralegal

factors in sentencing disparity (Bontrager et al., 2013; Chesney-Lind, & Eliason, 2006; Viki et al., 2005).

There has been extensive research regarding the strength and consistency of the association between gender and sentencing (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2004; Steffensmeier et al., 1993). Some female offenders, however, are viewed as more deviant than others. Female offenders who more closely adhere to emphasized feminine standards are provided more leniency within the criminal justice system than their male counterparts, but this leniency does not extend to women who break the stereotypical feminine role (Carroll, 1996; Parisi, 1982; Shatz & Shatz, 2012). In some ways, WOC automatically deviate from emphasized femininity, because they are outside the ideal white femininity (Belknap, 2007; Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Visher, 1983). Additionally, women who have committed crimes considered more “masculine” have also broken emphasized feminine standards through their actions (Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Goulette et al., 2015; Koons-Witt, 2002; Smart, 1977a). These concepts align with chivalry theory and the evil woman hypothesis (Anderson, 1976; Crew, 1991; Nagel & Hagan, 1983).

### **Gender and Capital Punishment**

Scholars have repeatedly pointed out capital sentencing disparity across gender lines. However, this issue has only been addressed by the nation’s courts a handful of times. The first time gender was discussed in the context of the death penalty was in *Furman v. Georgia* (1972), by Justice Marshall. Although it was not the crux of his argument, Justice Marshall believed it was significant that there was disparate treatment of women under the various capital punishment schemes. In his concurring opinion, he

explained that because the purposes of capital punishment are equally applicable to both sexes, the death penalty, to be considered a constitutional punishment, should be equally applied to both men and women (p. 342). However, Justice Marshall asserted that “there is overwhelming evidence that the death penalty is employed against men and not women” (p. 365). To substantiate his claim, Justice Marshall noted that women who commit homicide are sentenced to death at much lower rates compared to their male counterparts. Although men kill four to five times more frequently than women, they are sentenced to death and executed at rates that far exceed that. However, the Supreme Court has ruled that statistical evidence of sentencing disparity is insufficient evidence that there has been a breach of the Equal Protection Clause. The precedent for this argument was set in *McCleskey v. Kemp* (1987).

Although *McCleskey* (1987) primarily focused on potential racial bias among capital sentencing judges and juries, Justice Powell briefly mentioned gender as another “irrelevant factor” that could “easily be extended to apply to claims based on unexplained discrepancies that correlate to membership in other minority groups” (p. 316). Justice Powell went on to explain the apparent inappropriateness of *McCleskey*’s claims, arguing,

Also, there is no logical reason that such a claim need be limited to racial or sexual bias. If arbitrary and capricious punishment is the touchstone under the Eighth Amendment, such a claim could — at least in theory — be based upon any arbitrary variable, such as the defendant's facial characteristics, or the physical attractiveness of the defendant or the victim, that some statistical study indicates



may be influential in jury decision-making. As these examples illustrate, there is no limiting principle to the type of challenge brought by *McCleskey*. (p. 317-318)

With this statement, the USSC attempted to restrict potential parallel challenges of discrimination, even when the defendant provides strong statistical evidence of implicit bias. Equal protection claims have been addressed on the grounds of age (*Stanford v. Kentucky*, 1989; *Thompson v. Oklahoma*, 1988), mental competency (*Atkins v. Virginia*, 2002; *Ford v. Wainwright*, 1986; *Penry v. Lynaugh*, 1989), and race (*McCleskey v. Kemp*, 1987), however, the USSC has yet to hear an equal protection challenge based on sex. The closest to this type of claim was a case heard by the state supreme court of Arizona.

In *State v. White* (1991), the Arizona State Supreme Court sat en banc to hear defendant Michael Ray White's appeal that his conviction of first-degree murder and resulting death sentence violated his Equal Protection rights. White based his claim on the fact that his female co-defendant had been convicted of the same crime and received life imprisonment instead of a death sentence. White argued that this disparity resulted from sex discrimination and noted that, although women commit ten percent of all first-degree murder in Arizona, no woman had been sentenced to death under Arizona's current sentencing guidelines (*State v. White*, 1991, p. 513). The Arizona Supreme Court disagreed with White, holding that the sentencing jury found mitigating circumstances in the female co-defendant's case that resulted in them recommending leniency. However, no mitigating circumstances were found in White's case. Under this reasoning, the court found no merit in White's equal protection claim.

The jury in the female co-defendant's case noted among the factors sufficient to warrant leniency was that she was "a kind and caring mother" and that her "potential for

violence was minimal” (*State v. White*, 1991, p. 514). These ideas that the sentencing jury perceived about White’s co-defendant relate to traditional notions of femininity and are understood as part of the reason why women receive lenient treatment by the criminal justice system.

Research on capital sentencing in the United States has primarily focused on victim effects across racial and gender lines on the likelihood of receiving a capital sentence. Some scholars have argued that race effects are stronger than gender effects in terms of jurors’ perceptions of death eligibility in capital cases (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Girgenti, 2016). Baumgartner et al. (2015) point out that, although Black men are the primary victims of homicides, their killers are the least likely to be sentenced to death. However, Girgenti (2015), in his study of capital jurors’ perceptions, uncovered a “hierarchy of ‘deathworthiness’” in which “defendants who murder white females are the most likely to receive a death sentence, closely followed by those who kill white males, then Black females, and finally Black males” (2015, p. 323). Ultimately, research has consistently shown that the death penalty is most likely to be imposed in instances where the victim is white (Baldus & Woodworth, 2003; Baldus et al., 2002) or female (Hindson et al., 2006; Holcomb et al., 2004).

There is a fairly large literature that has pointed to a “white female effect,” indicating that this race-gender combination in a victim has the highest likelihood of receiving a death sentence compared to any other (Holcomb et al., 2004; Richards et al., 2016; Stauffer et al., 2006). For instance, Holcomb et al. (2004) in their examination of homicides in Ohio, found that even when controlling for legally relevant factors including aggravating circumstances, cases involving a white female victim had the

highest likelihood of receiving a death sentence. Additionally, the researchers found that white female victims were the only statistically distinct victim dyad (2004). They explain that the severity in responses to white female victims may account for other findings of a and overall white and overall female victim disparity, at least to some degree. However, other scholars have reached divergent conclusions. Stauffer et al. (2006), in their examination of North Carolina homicides, initially found a white female victim effect. However, the introduction of control variables via logistic regression did not yield any gender or race effects. Rather, their findings indicated cases involving white female victims fit the profile of a death-eligible murder more often due to the aggravating circumstances more often associated with them (2006). This study pointed to the need to dive deeper into possible case characteristics in explaining the possible “white female victim” effect.

Williams et al. (2007) provided one of the first studies endeavoring to explain these disparities by focusing on case variables. The researchers found empirical evidence indicating that cases involving the sexual degradation of the victim had the highest probability of receiving a death sentence. The authors conclude, “. . . the sexual nature of female victimization, in particular the degradation and humiliation of the victim, is the key to understanding the female victim effect” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 886)

Expanding on these findings, Phillips et al. (2012) analyzed over five hundred capital cases within one county, focusing on the DA’s decision about whether to seek the death penalty. The researchers largely confirmed Williams et al.’s (2007) findings linking sexual degradation with an increased likelihood of the DA choosing to seek the death penalty but added to their analysis a look at the effects of media coverage. Although the

authors admit that establishing perfect causal order impossible, they minimized any issues in determining causal order by only examining newspaper articles published before the grand jury indicted a defendant for capital murder. Their findings suggested, “sexual degradation shapes media coverage, and media coverage shapes the DA’s decision to seek the death penalty—a decision that often seals the defendant’s fate” (2012, p. 140). Overall, they argued that to explain sentencing disparities in capital cases one must consider the interaction between case attributes and larger social institutions, like the news media.

Far less research has examined *offender* effects on the likelihood of capital sentencing, especially looking at offender gender, presumably due to the vast majority of individuals sentenced to death being men (thereby eliminating the variation in this variable). Although scholars have long established capital sentencing disparity in which women receive the death penalty at far lesser rates than they commit death eligible crimes, few have gone beyond positing chivalric beliefs among criminal justice actors are behind the discrepancy (Herzog & Oreg, 2008). Streib (2006), in his comparison of cases where men and women received the death penalty, could not find a logical explanation behind the apparent gender discrepancies in the application of the death penalty among those who had sentences that were later reversed, were executed, and remained on death row. He concluded, “The most obvious empirical conclusion to be drawn from these data is that this practice has been rare and inconsistent, with little suggestion of it being grounded in a rational process” (Streib, 2006, p. 118).

Scholars who have attempted to further explain capital gender sentencing disparities have looked at differences in aggravating and mitigating circumstances in

criminal cases as a possible explanation (Reuter, 1996; Farr 1997; Shatz & Shatz, 2012). Farr (1997) in her examination of the 35 women on death row in 1993 found that female cases resemble noncapital cases more so than the cases of men sentenced to death. Women on death row were more likely to have murdered a loved one, whereas stranger killings are viewed as more serious by juries, and thus, more often receive the death penalty when they are male-perpetrated. Additionally, Farr (1997) examined racial differences across women sentenced to death. Overall, she found that WOC were overrepresented among the female death row population, and there was more variation in their crimes than that of white women; WOC less frequently killed loved ones (p. 276). Farr also found that WOC had the least number of aggravating factors in their cases, indicating bias against WOC by sentencing authorities.

Later scholars have examined racial disparities among the female death row population and revealed some nuances of capital practices. Greenle and Geenle (2007), in their study of all women on death row from 1973 to 2007, found that although African American and Native American women were sentenced to death at disproportionately higher rates than women of other races, they have a greater chance of not being executed due to their sentence being reversed or commuted. White women, on the other hand, are executed at a much higher rate than women of other races. The scholars explain, however, that due to the small number of women who receive the death penalty, explanations for these disparities are speculative at best (Greenlee & Greenlee, 2007).

Clearly, more work needs to be done in examining the rare instances in which women are sentenced to death. Previous literature examining this phenomenon is dated, and scholars have been reluctant to move beyond speculation in discerning why those

women sentenced to death are the “chosen” minority of cases. By providing a content analysis of a major source of public sentiment, i.e., newspaper articles, this study attempts to move beyond speculation and examine the public narratives around women sentenced to death. By examining newspaper narratives, this dissertation attempts to illustrate how women sentenced to death are portrayed and whether this portrayal differs across race/ethnicity.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on media portrayals of women sentenced to death in the United States between 1976 and 2020. Scholars have consistently found evidence which would support the belief that most of the public derive their understanding of crime and criminals from mass media accounts (Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Chan & Chan, 2012; Potter & Kappler, 2006). Gender stereotypes that produce the expectation that all women are passive leave little room for the public to imagine a female homicide offender, particularly one whose crime is egregious enough to be considered death-eligible. The criminal justice system has historically treated women with leniency (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2004; Leiber et al., 2018). However, there is evidence that this leniency is extended only to women who fulfill traditional feminine standards in terms of their behavior and lifestyle (Franklin & Fearn, 2008; Goulette et al., 2015). Given the criminal justice system's response to women and the death penalty, as well as the media's portrayal of crime and criminals, this study proposes to examine the following research questions: (1) How are gender and racial stereotypes used in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death in the US between 1976 and 2020? (2) How do these narratives differ across race/ethnicity of the women sentenced?

In line with the research questions, the purpose of this study is to examine the narratives with respect to gender and racial stereotypes and how media messages can “punish” women who transgress emphasized femininity. This dissertation draws from the qualitative tradition of content analysis to examine how the news media support patriarchal values in their coverage of women who are sentenced to death and how women are conceptualized when they are in line with or violate these norms. The goal is to identify patterns in the narratives surrounding women sentenced to death and to examine differences between the depictions of white women and WOC. To achieve this goal, all women sentenced to death in the United States since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976 through 2020 were included, representing the full population of women sentenced to death during that time period. The population included 66 women—41 (62%) white women and 25 (38%) WOC. Because there was already a small population of WOC, and this population was unevenly distributed with 16 Black, 6 Latina, 2 Asian and 1 Indigenous women, all WOC were grouped together and labeled as such.

The year of 1976 was chosen as the starting point of the time frame, because the Supreme Court’s decision in *Gregg v. Georgia* (1976) is viewed as the beginning of the modern capital punishment era. This court decision lifted the four-year moratorium on the death penalty previously put in place by *Furman v. Georgia* (1972), which led to all death sentences that were pending at the time to be reduced to life imprisonment. In *Furman* (1972), the Supreme Court held that capital punishment, as it was currently being implemented, violated the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. The Supreme Court in *Furman* (1972) mandated a level of consistency across states in their application of the death penalty. Following *Furman* (1972), states that wanted to reinstate the death



penalty were forced to reevaluate their sentencing statutes and remove any practices that had previously resulted in arbitrary or discriminatory practices. Over the following four years, 37 states revised their death penalty laws to overcome the Supreme Court's concerns. Then, in *Gregg v. Georgia* (1976), the Supreme Court reevaluated the new capital sentencing procedures implemented by states, including the use of bifurcated trials and the inclusion of statutory aggravating and mitigating circumstances, which resulted in a system that was consistent with constitutional principles, thus reinstating the nation's death penalty. The year of 2020 was chosen as the end of the time frame, because it represents the year preceding the "pause" in executions put into place with respect to federal executions, although state-level executions continued.

To ensure an all-inclusive sample of articles was gathered for the 66 women, every newspaper article that was written and could be located on each woman was first collected. Two world news databanks were used to identify the articles: Nexis Uni® and Newspapers.com™. Search terms usually only consisted of the first and last name of the offender. In a few instances, more unique identifiers were needed because some of the woman had common surnames. In these instances, victims' names were used as additional search terms with the name of the woman sentenced to death, which narrowed the results down to relevant articles. No other search terms were utilized. The inclusion criterion was that the newspaper article mentioned one of the women sentenced to death (n = 1639 articles). All but two women had multiple articles written about them. No articles could be found on two white women. Additionally, two WOC, one Black and one Indigenous, had articles written about them but the articles contained no other descriptors

than their name, and thus fell outside of the inclusion criteria. This resulted in these two women also being dropped from the sample.

After this step, two exclusion criteria were applied. Articles were deleted that only listed the name(s) of the woman/women on death row (n = 553 articles) and/or just described the death penalty in generalized terms (n = 93 articles). This process left a total of 993 articles covering 64 women—39 (61%) white women with a total of 835 articles (84%) and 23 (36%) WOC with a total of 158 articles (16%). On average, there were about 20 articles for every white woman sentenced to death and about 7 articles for every WOC.

It is important to note that, although this dissertation seeks to uncover how gender and racial stereotypes are used in newspaper narratives, newspapers are reflections of the biases and stereotypes invoked by journalists (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Some scholars argue that the media operates under a political bias (Lee et al., 2017), whereas others contend the media operates under a professional bias (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). Regardless, it is undisputed that partiality exists within journalism (Groeling, 2013). In this respect, using newspapers as a unit of analysis presents a potential drawback. Still, using newspaper articles as the unit of analysis allows for an exploration of the general narratives surrounding women on death row, with future research needed to further understand whether the biases and leanings of the journalists are influencing these narratives in a systematic way.

Also, it should be recognized that people draw from many media sources in their daily lives, not just newspapers. Newspaper readers often represent a single demographic—associated with higher levels of education and income (Zhou et al.,

2021)—so a study of newspaper narratives might only speak to how this specific public is influenced by portrayals of women sentenced to death. Despite these limitations, newspapers still represent a mainstream media source (Bucy & Affe, 2006), are commonly used in media studies of criminals (e.g., Collins, 2014; Northcutt Bohmert, 2019), and are increasingly being read by users from anywhere, anytime, due to their availability online (Arulanandam et al., 2014).

## **Research Design**

### ***Qualitative Content Analysis***

Content analysis is used as both a quantitative and qualitative research method (Berelson, 1952; Kaefer et al., 2015; Kort-Butler, 2016). Content analysis involves examining forms of media or communications to identify patterns, trends, meanings, and categories of vocabulary used to convey types of messages and contextualizing various statements within the larger media form (Tewksbury, 2009). Within criminological research, the overarching goal of content analysis is to “reveal a culture’s story about crime” (Kort-Butler, 2016, p. 1). As Kort-Butler (2016) explains,

Media and popular culture sources are viewed as repositories of cultural knowledge, which capture past and present ideas about crime, while creating and reinforcing a culture’s shared understanding about crime. (p. 1)

Qualitative content analysis, more specifically, utilizes documents to understand culture. It requires the systematic reading of these documents done with an analytical eye to look for deeper meanings within the media messages (Kort-Butler, 2016; Schreier, 2012). Qualitative and quantitative research are the two primary approaches used in social science research (Copes et al., 2020; Tewksbury, 2009). Whereas quantitative

analysis is often theory-driven and utilizes a numerical style in its methods and conclusions, qualitative research is subject driven and employs a verbal style (Noaks & Wincup, 2004; Tewksbury, 2009). This difference makes qualitative research better equipped to address the research questions and provide an in-depth analysis of gender and racial meanings found within the narratives of news stories.

Because discourse analysis is another common methodology utilized by similar studies, it is important to explain why content analysis was chosen as the methodology over discourse analysis. While both methods look at language and meanings, content analysis assumes the consistency of meanings, whereas discourse analysis highlights the precarious nature of meanings and focuses on the shifting nature of language (Hardy et al., 2004, p. 20). The present study assumes that the meanings attached to the language surrounding women sentenced to death do not change over time. Rather, the changes analyzed in this proposed study are shifts in the predominant descriptors used to portray women sentenced to death over the decades. Additionally, content analysis is both objective and systematic to the extent that multiple coders can interpret the coding frame and its definitions in a uniform way (Kassarjian, 2001). Discourse analysis is subjective with meanings “created, supported, and contested through the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts” (Hardy, 2001, p. 28). As this study is the first of its kind, replicability is important. Thus, content analysis was considered the optimal methodology for this study’s purposes.

### **Analysis Strategy**

This dissertation consisted of two phases of coding. The first phase of coding employed a deductive qualitative approach to content analysis and the second took an

inductive approach. Qualitative content analysis focuses on providing a comprehensive description of the matter under investigation (Kohlbacher, 2006; Schreier, 2012).

Deductive qualitative research is differentiated from other qualitative approaches in that the original intent of the method is theory testing, such that the structure of the analysis is based off of previous knowledge, such as theory, models, and literature reviews (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012). Therefore, deductive research moves from the general to the specific (Burns & Grove, 2005), and theory and prior research would be driving the coding process. Conversely, inductive qualitative research is data driven and involves the researcher drawing key concepts and categories from the data itself, rather than from theory (Schreier, 2012).

Phase one of coding utilized a concept-driven, deductive approach. As this study sought to determine if gender and racial stereotypes were used in the news articles on women sentenced to death, the coding themes in phase one drew upon the literature focused on gender stereotypes (Gupta et al., 2013; Heilman, 2001) and emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987, 2001; Currier, 2013; Korobov, 2011). These research areas guided the formation of the research questions and thus were used in the formation of initial codes. Using the qualitative data management software, NVIVO, three categories were created as parent codes in the codebook, including: (1) in-line with feminine norms, (2) violating feminine norms, and (3) racial stereotypes. All 993 articles in the sample were read and relevant passages were coded under these three codes, such that any given article could fall under multiple of these codes.

The second phase of coding utilized inductive techniques. Specifically, open-coding techniques were used to identify and code sections of data into descriptive codes

(Glaser, 2016). Several subthemes within the deductive codes were identified throughout this phase of coding. After all passages were re-read, the inductive codes were reviewed, patterns and connections in the data were identified, and the initial inductive codes were collapsed into larger conceptual subthemes. It should be noted that not all initial inductive codes identified could be collapsed into larger conceptual subthemes, so the focus of the findings was placed on those that did. Appendix A provides a full codebook.

### **Reduction of Bias and Reliability**

It is important to note that the only coder for this dissertation is a white, cisgender, heterosexual female and feminist criminologist, so the data may be interpreted differently by coders of different demographic and philosophical backgrounds. In line with Hall's (1973, 1980) model of encoding/decoding, I decode media messages through my own lens. His model illustrates the process in which media messages are produced by journalists and then interpreted by consumers, explaining that the news narratives are shaped by journalists' frames and organizational preferences and limitations. Producers have a specific message that they want to replicate. However, audiences decode media communications through their own meaning-making practices within the context of their everyday lives (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Hall, 1980). As one individual "decoder," it is important to consider my position and take particular care to bolster the legitimacy of the data. Thus, standpoint theory, as well as measures to ensure reliability and validity in the analysis, were considered and utilized.

Standpoint theory is utilized in many feminist studies (Belknap, 2007; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Standpoint theory starts with the acknowledgment that "one's social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know" and must be taken into account at

the beginning of research design (Harding, 2004, p. 44). The most important stance of standpoint theory is that one's own perspectives are shaped by their own political experiences (Heckman, 1997; Wood, 2005). It is imperative for qualitative researchers to recognize their own positions and how their perspectives may influence their work, as these biases may impact their examination of the data (Patton, 2002). It should be acknowledged that the only researcher on this paper is a white, cisgender, heterosexual, feminist criminologist. Care was taken throughout the coding process to recognize the potential influence of the researcher's own position as a means of ensuring that any bias would not influence the outcomes. The deductive coding was used to initially within the analytic approach aided in this process, as codes were strictly based off previous empirical literature. Then, in the second phase of coding, which involved inductive methods, articles were read and re-read to ensure that all themes present in the data were identified and none were missed.

Qualitative scholars have argued that there are different criteria for judging qualitative research in comparison to quantitative research, such as reliability and validity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Instead, many have supported Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is fostered through an understanding of the extant literature in the area as it compares to the findings of the project. In this case, that would include the literature on gender stereotypes, media portrayals of violent and capital women, and media portrayals of violent WOC. If similar themes emerge, then credibility is built in the findings. The instances where the present findings are not supported by previous findings,

provides an opportunity to consider other explanations that may be more accurate in answering the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Transferability, dependability, and confirmability are fostered through the extensive notes taken during the coding process that clearly documents the methodology, as well as the codebook that defines each category, theme, and subtheme. These steps allow for researchers to infer whether the current findings can transfer to another setting (transferability), test the consistency of the findings in future studies (dependability), as well as replicate the current project to determine if they reach similar conclusions (confirmability). With these measures in place, this study sought to ensure optimal trustworthiness and replicability.



## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative content analysis. As described above, the articles were first coded deductively to identify references that were (1) in line with feminine norms, (2) violated feminine norms, and (3) emphasized racial stereotypes. Within these initial deductive themes, four dominant subthemes were identified: (1) Victim as offender, (2) Good woman pushed, (3) Violating sexual norms, and (4) Villainous. Categories and themes were not mutually exclusive; in practice many articles were described under multiple categories or themes. Table 5.1 presents the number of articles coded under each category and theme. Nearly two-thirds (71.5%) of the articles in the sample described the women as behaving in-line with feminine norms, and the two main subthemes that emerged within these articles were (1) Victim as offender and (2) Good woman pushed. Additionally, over half of the articles (58.4%) in the sample described the women as violating feminine norms, with the two prominent subthemes that emerged from these articles being: (1) Violating sexual norms and 2) Villainous. Finally, only 33 of the articles (3.3%) implicated racial stereotypes in describing the women on death row. Given the limited number of articles in this category, no subthemes were identified. The discussion below reviews each of these themes and subthemes in depth.

Table 5.1 Frequency of Themes and Subthemes

<b>Theme/Subtheme</b>	<b>Total Articles</b>	<b>Percent of Sample</b>
In-line with Feminine Norms	710	71.5%
Victim as Offender	186	18.7%
Good Woman Pushed	188	18.9%
Violating Feminine Norms	580	58.4%
Violating Sexual Norms	273	27.5%
Villainous	215	21.7%
Racial Stereotypes	33	3.3%

*Note:* n = 993 articles. Because categories and themes were not mutually exclusive, columns do not add up to 100%

### **In-Line with Feminine Norms**

Table 5.2 presents definitions and example quotes for the first theme—in-line with feminine norms—and the two emergent subthemes. This deductive theme stemmed from the literature on gender stereotypes (Gupta et al., 2013; Heilman, 2001) and emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987, 2001; Currier, 2013; Korobov, 2011). As such, articles were coded under this theme if the women were described as behaving or appearing in ways that align with emphasized femininity and feminine norms. Newspaper articles often described women as appealing and gentle, attributes aligned with what it means to be a good woman. Because gender stereotypes dictate that women are incapable of violence, women described under this category were far removed from their offense. The excerpts below demonstrate the overall tone of these depictions.

"I'm not surprised he fell for Brenda," Akers said. "She was so kind and so sweet and so soft-spoken." (Raymond, 2004)

"She looks like she should be home baking cookies for her grandchildren, or maybe doing AT&T's "Reach Out and Touch Someone" commercials. Sweet-

faced, plump and rosy-cheeked, friendly but a little shy. In a word, wholly appealing, the sort of woman you might instinctively trust, even be tempted to hug.” (Stumbo, 1984, p. 1)

Table 5.2 Definitions and Example Quotes for the In-line with Feminine Norms Theme

<b>Theme/Subtheme</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Quotes</b>
In-line with feminine norms	Woman described as behaving or appearing in ways that align with emphasized femininity and feminine norms, i.e., being emotional, childlike, or a good mother	<p>“Brenda Andrew was a Girl Scout leader and homeroom mom whom family members call incapable of violent crime” (AP, 2001, p. 5)</p> <p>““She was no more capable of planning this than my 10-year-old grandson,’ he said.” (Doane, 2010, p. 1)</p>
<i>Victim as Offender</i>	Woman described as having an abusive childhood or as suffering from domestic abuse and that these previous abuses led to their offense	<p>“Allegations or abusive behavior and infidelity by Xavier Caro might evoke sympathy for a woman forced beyond the brink of rationality” (Chawkins, 2001, p. 20)</p> <p>“Chamberlin's family told her court-appointed psychologist that she had been sexually abused during her early life and emotionally abused by an alcoholic mother.” (Maute, 2006, p. 1)</p>
<i>Good Woman Pushed</i>	Woman described as a good Christian and/or a good woman. Her crime was viewed as totally out of character to the people who knew her before the act of violence.	<p>“But she was a real nice gal, real personable.” (Buey, 2004, p. 1)</p> <p>“Betty was an immaculate house-keeper and a great cook. She frequently left little love notes around the house for Barker, which pleased him to no end, Ms. Lennon said.” (Culver, 2000, p. 1)</p>

Women who adhered to emphasized feminine norms in their actions and appearance were so far removed from violence that newspapers sought to reconcile their crime with the femininity. To explain how a good woman could have ended up committing the ultimate violent act, newspapers adopted two narratives: (1) these women had been victimized to the point of violence, or (2) they were pushed to commit their crime in a different way. Both narratives served to reduce the women's culpability in such a way that she could retain her femininity while still having committed the crime.

### *Victim as Offender*

The first inductive subtheme to emerge within this larger theme was "victim as offender." This subtheme accounted for less than a quarter (18.7%) of the articles reviewed. Narratives describing the women under this theme portrayed them as having suffered physical and sexual abuse and neglect during their childhoods or as suffering from domestic abuse in their marriages. Overall, the previous abuse suffered by these women was used as an explanation for their offense. This focus served to diminish the women's culpability by pointing to the circumstances under which these women grew up or were currently living in as the central reason behind their crime. The following examples demonstrate the overall tone of these depictions:

She talked also of a childhood during which she was always afraid, when she was cherished only for her long days of work in the tobacco field. Her father, she said, was a brutal, hot-tempered man who began molesting her when she was only 13.

Her childhood fears and resentments, she said, were largely responsible for the complex drug addiction that led to her crimes. "As I grew older, I was never able to cope with bad situations," she said. (James, 1984, p. 1)

Mrs. Row eventually admitted she set the fire but claimed she only wanted to damage the house so she and the children could get away from Randy, whom she accused of abusing them. (Associated Press, 1994, p. 4)

Rather than contextualize the violence, these depictions framed the women's crimes as resulting from circumstances that were beyond their control. Women who had suffered severe abuse and neglect during their childhood were described as unable to control their actions because of their lack of a healthy upbringing. For example, in a Pensacola News Journal article titled, "Murderer's kin detail her troubles," the newspaper explicitly stated that coming from a "broken home" left her "unable to make good life decisions" (Heisig, 2012, p. A3). This stripped the woman of her agency, instead painting her as childlike and unable to form her own motivations. Additionally, women suffering from domestic abuse were argued to have only acted to escape their abuser, as exemplified in the second excerpt above. This minimized the repercussions of their actions because the women's motive to escape violence became the focus of the news story, rather than the deaths that resulted.

Some newspapers took this a step further by pointing to battered woman's syndrome as the reason for the woman's homicidal reaction to years of repeated abuse. These descriptions often brought in both a description of domestic abuse, as well as abuse in childhood, thus reinforcing the overall tone of the woman as a sympathetic figure in

need of support. For example, in the first excerpt below, the newspaper noted that the woman claimed her prior abuse as the justification for killing two husbands, again describing her as committing her offense to escape her abuser. The focus on the abuse she suffered throughout her life serves to diminish the gravity of her actions. In the second excerpt, the woman was explicitly described as suffering from battered woman's syndrome and that the abuse at the hands of her husbands, as well as childhood abuses, led to mental health struggles, further painting her as a sympathetic figure not in control of her actions.

The only reason offered, in the article is she was a victim of domestic violence throughout her life. Her father beat her when she was a child and then, when she grew up, she married five different men, all of whom beat her. This, she claims, is justification for shooting two men in the back of the head and burying them in her back yard, according to the article. (Hawkins, 2000, p. 3)

Lucio's first husband was an abusive alcoholic and second common-law husband, Robert Antonio Alvarez, also physically and psychologically abused her, Villarreal said. One younger sister bullied and abused her and another younger sister protected her, Villarreal said. CPS records show Lucio has symptoms of battered woman syndrome, as well as those of a child sexual abuse victim, resulting in depression, Villarreal said. (Essex, 2008, p. 1)

Both women are portrayed as never having had a chance to live passive, stereotypically feminine lives due to the violence that they had suffered. Instead, it is argued that all these women knew was violence, and the issues related to the abuses they

suffered resulted in them acting out in a way outside of the bounds of emphasized femininity. These descriptions allude to the fact that these women needed help rather than punitive criminal justice matters, calling for chivalrous treatment.

### ***Good Woman Pushed***

In addition to women being described as sympathetic victims turned offenders, depictions of women as a “good woman pushed” were also used in the newspaper narratives that was in line with feminine norms. This, again, accounted for less than a quarter (18.9%) of the articles reviewed. Within this subtheme, the women were described as inherently good women, and their crimes were viewed as out of character and ultimately surprising to those who knew them before. Whereas in the previous subtheme women were described as never having a chance to live stereotypically feminine lives, the women under this theme were described as falling in-line with feminine norms in their day-to-day, such as being maternal and caring for others. To reconcile their femininity with the crime they committed, these women were described as good women who were pushed to do a bad thing. Thus, the crime was viewed as an anomaly and did not change the fact that the woman was good-mannered and virtuous. This is illustrated by the excerpt below.

She has reinvented herself as a counselor of sorts, a calming maternal influence to fellow inmates, they say. "She is a caring person with a deep faith who was pulled into participating in a terrible act that was completely out of character for her," said her attorney, James Rocap. (Glod, 2010, p. A12)

The femininity of the women was repeatedly mentioned in terms of their behaviors and works. The women were often described as skilled in traditionally

feminine hobbies such as cooking, crafting, and housekeeping, illustrated in the first excerpt below. This further removed them from the traditionally masculine traits that are associated with violence, thus reinforcing that these women either acted out of character or were altogether innocent. Because their crime was viewed as an anomaly, newspapers suggested that these women did not pose a threat to society. Often newspapers would state this explicitly, by highlighting these traits as reason for why the woman should be granted clemency, as illustrated in the second excerpt.

"She was interested in school, studying, going to church and helping others. She was always the first one to offer help." Like her mother, Brenda was gifted in home economics, cooking and sewing... (Raymond, 2004)

Those at Emory consistently rallied in her support before the execution. Candler third year student Christy Oxendine remembered visiting Gissendaner as she was knitting in prison. "[She knit] blankets, caps and booties for inmates who had their kids [in prison]," she said. Oxendine did not expect that the Board would deny clemency. (Sullivan, 2015, p. 1)

Many of these women were also described as "good Christian women." Although not explicitly referencing their sexuality, this alluded to the Madonna-whore dichotomy, which polarizes women as either good and chaste or bad and promiscuous (Bareket et al., 2018). Because these women were Christian, they were automatically framed as virtuous, good women. This further removed the women from their crime and was used by those that knew them to describe the crime as completely out of character, again alluding to their innocence and explicating the need for clemency.



Everyone who knew her, including relatives of the victims, was astounded. Velma Barfield had always been regarded as one of the kindest, most thoughtful women around. People were especially impressed with her church-going ways three times a week, every Wednesday night and twice on Sunday. She taught Sunday school classes and had gotten many of her live-in nursing jobs through church recommendations. (Stumbo, 1984, p. 1)

"Kelly is a wonderful person, a wonderful mother and a wonderful sister in Christ," Lakeson said, before the execution. "In a way I'm surprised - but also not surprised because the Parole Board has disappointed us before." (Sullivan, 2015, p. 1)

Newspapers grappled with the idea that that these women embodied feminine norms but also committed a violent act. To reconcile their femininity with their crime, newspapers depicted the women in two main ways: victims as offenders and good women pushed. Women under the victim as offender subtheme were childlike and, at times, out of control, which was used as an explanation for their violence. Women described as good women pushed were explained to be righteous women who diverted from femininity for a moment but remained good women. The second category of women, however, strayed far enough away from societal expectations of femininity that this divergence was used against them.

### **Violating Feminine Norms**

The second deductive theme, violating feminine norms, also stemmed from the literature on gender stereotypes (Gupta et al., 2013; Heilman, 2001) and emphasized

femininity (Connell, 1987, 2001; Currier, 2013; Korobov, 2011). As outlined in Table 5.3, women were coded under this theme if they were described in ways typical of gender stereotypes surrounding masculinity and thus violated the ideals of emphasized femininity. Within this theme, newspaper articles often described women as aggressive, dominating, and indifferent—a stark contrast to the demure nature expected of women. The women described were completely disconnected from traditional feminine ideals of motherhood, virtuousness, and sympathy. Instead, these women were either painted as sexually deviant or lacking humanity. The excerpts below demonstrate the overall tone of these depictions.

Chamberlin – who never divorced her first husband – had three different children by three different men over a 15-year period. (Maute, 2006, p. 1)

Quintin Allen told police his mother became enraged and started beating the victim after Wright said she didn't take the money, and that he "only participated out of fear that (Margaret Allen) was going to physically harm him. (Kennerly, 2005, p. 1)

The cold, vicious, calculating and brutal nature of her crimes shows that Montgomery knew exactly what she was doing, Strong said. "This was the act of a monster," he said. "She needs to be put to death." (Hrenchir, 2021, p. A4)

Two inductive subthemes emerged under this larger theme: (1) violating sexual norms and (2) villainous. Each subtheme discussed the women in terms of how they violated feminine norms, albeit in distinctive ways.

Table 5.3 Definitions and Example Quotes for the Violating Feminine Norms Theme

<b>Theme/Subtheme</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Quotes</b>
Violating feminine norms	Woman described as behaving or appearing in ways that do not align with emphasized femininity and feminine norms, i.e., being cruel, manipulative, or a bad mother	<p>“The lady is simply a cold-blooded, vicious, deliberate murderer.” (Thompson, 2000, p. 7)</p> <p>“In a rage of profanity and insults, convicted serial killer Aileen Wuornos....told prosecutors, observers and the judge, ‘You are all going to hell.’” (Word, 2002, p. 28)</p>
<i>Violating Sexual Norms</i>	Women described as having affairs, using their sexuality to manipulate, having sex outside of the confines of marriage, or as sex workers	<p>“Kelly Gissendaner and her lover won't stand trial until next year on charges they killed her husband, but pretrial maneuvering is intensifying.” (Schneider, 2015, p. 6A)</p> <p>“They say she used sex and money to get Matthew Shallenberger and Rodney Fuller to carry out the murder for a share of her stepson's \$250,000 life insurance.” (Doane, 2010, p. 1)</p>
<i>Villainous</i>	Women described as inherently bad – they were described as angry individuals, cold-blooded, monstrous, predators.	<p>“Mader portrayed McDermott as a woman so cold-blooded that she cared for and comforted Eldridge after the March 21 attack, while secretly plotting the second attempt on his life.” (AP, 1992, 12)</p> <p>"She is a hunter when she kills. She hunts her victims down and then she kills them" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 22)</p>

### *Violating Sexual Norms*

The first subtheme to emerge was “victim as offender.” More than one quarter of the articles reviewed were coded under this theme (27.5%). Narratives described the women as behaving in a way alternative to the expectations of femininity and explicitly discussed their sexuality. Through the newspaper’s focus on the women’s sexual practices, the women were described as deviant in a way specifically reserved for women, i.e., violating what it means to be a good wife and acting immorally.

Emphasized feminine norms dictate women accept marriage. Women described as violating sexual norms were described as abandoning their marriages through filing for divorce or engaging in extramarital affairs. This disparaged the women by depicting them as failing to fulfill their primary feminine roles and duties, as exemplified below. In the first excerpt, the woman’s husband is depicted as performing more of a parental role than her, a clear violation from feminine maternal standards. Additionally, the woman is presented as rejecting her marital role through filing for divorce. In the second excerpt, the woman is described as having had an affair and then not grieving her husband’s death, thereby both violating what it means to be a good wife and violating feminine sexual mores by carrying on an extramarital affair.

Brenda Andrew is charged in the Nov. 20 killing of her husband, Rob Andrew, 39, as he came to pick up the children for the Thanksgiving holiday. She had filed for divorce. (Baldwin, 2002, p. 4)

A used-car salesman who had an affair with Buenoano said he slept with the supposedly grieving widow either the day of or the day after her husband's burial.

(Harakas, 1990, p. 63)

Both excerpts paint the women as bad wives, which goes against the ideal “good woman.” As stated above, women are supposed to accept marriage and childcare above all else, however these women were described as doing the opposite. This served to vilify the women and thus painted them as unsympathetic characters.

Additionally, emphasized femininity dictates sex for a woman should only be for the purposes of procreation and that sex should not happen outside of the confines of marriage (López & Chesney-Lind, 2014). However, women in this subtheme were repeatedly described as sexually deviant, a narrative that ties into the Madonna-whore dichotomy previously discussed. These women were described as having lovers, a term associated with having sex outside of marriage and inextricably linked to whore imagery. These descriptors were often accompanied with the women being portrayed as using their sexuality to conspire with men to kill. The negative impact of their sexual deviancy is exhibited in the excerpts below. In the first, it is explicated that the woman received the death penalty because of her promiscuity, and the second describes a woman sentenced to death even when it was made clear that someone else killed her husband. Both illustrate the punitive consequences women face when they are labeled as sexually deviant.

"She was sentenced harshly because she used sexuality and adultery to mastermind a murder plot against loved ones..." (Jonsson, 2010, p. 1)

Police say they broke the case when Owen confessed and told them the killing was his lover's idea. Owen said Kelly Gissendaner dropped him off at the couple's Auburn house so he could kidnap Doug Gissendaner and later brought gasoline to burn her husband's car. (Hartstein, 1998, p. J1)

Women were further punished for their perceived sexually deviant behaviors through their sexual activities being put on display. Newspapers repeatedly referenced the women's sexuality and sexual exploits, even when these had little to do with the criminal case against them. Women's sexual lives were graphically described, and they were often depicted as dressing provocatively, as illustrated in the excerpts below. The women were aligned with whore imagery, which automatically signaled that the women were bad and implied their guilt.

The marriage was marked by sexual deviance, according to their daughter.

Suzanne was promiscuous, and her husband abided the behavior. The daughter recalled waiting with her father in a bedroom or on the porch while Mommy finished grunting and groaning with her many special friends. (Krajicek, 2004, p. 45)

“Basically, she came into the store looking real nice and sexy ... low-cut tops and short skirts” Higgins said. “She was flirting and rubbing against me.” (Baldwin, 2002, p. 1)

The women coded under this subtheme were disparaged, vilified, and ultimately painted as bad women. However, throughout this subtheme they retained their femininity, albeit

through serving as the example of what it meant to violate emphasized femininity. This was not the case for the final subtheme.

### ***Villainous***

In the last subtheme that emerged under the violating feminine norms them, the women were completely stripped of their femininity and in some cases their humanity. A little less than one quarter of the articles reviewed were coded under this subtheme (21.7%). Narratives described the women as behaving in a way so out of line with feminine norms that they were no longer discussed as women. Rather, newspapers focused on how the women embodied masculine norms and portrayed these women as lacking humanity altogether.

Women portrayed as villainous were beyond being described as immoral women. They were painted as vile individuals that decent people did not want to be around. This comparison of women who do not adhere to feminine norms with unsavory individuals who others do not want to be around served to reinforce the notion that to be accepted within society, a woman must be feminine. One way that newspapers achieved this message was in repeated reference to these women as frightening or bullies to those around them, as exemplified in the excerpts below.

Eubanks was convicted last week of four counts of first-degree murder. Coworkers said Thursday during the trial's penalty phase that she frequently lashed out at supervisors and colleagues at the hospital where she was an operating room assistant. "I know there were a lot of coworkers that were extremely frightened of her," said Dorothy Adams, a registered nurse at the Palomar Medical Center in Escondido. (1999, p. 2)

But their lives were ended, Temple argued, by a "short-tempered bully." She outlined eight alleged violent acts committed by Caro during 11 years before the 1999 murders, contending that the killings were not an aberration in Caro's life but "a logical extension of who she is." Those incidents were fleshed out in testimony Tuesday (Chawkins, 2001, p. 225)

As illustrated in these excerpts, the women were described as aggressors, which made them unlikeable. These descriptions also painted their crime in-line with their characters. This stood in stark contrast to the good woman pushed subtheme, where women were described as primarily good, and their crimes viewed as out of character. The women described as villainous were depicted in a manner that named them a danger to society and alluded to their risk of reoffending, thereby calling for a severe sentence.

Another way that newspapers constructed these women as fundamentally flawed was by painting them as monsters, both explicitly and implicitly. The women were described in a way that removed them from what it means to be a woman and instead were described as merciless villains. They were often referred to as "cold-blooded, vicious, deliberate murderer(s)" (Woestendiek, 1984, p. 1). The following excerpts highlight the overall tone of these descriptions. The first example shows how newspapers explicitly referred to the women as monsters, whereas the second illustrates how newspapers did this implicitly, through descriptors.

The calculating and brutal nature of her crimes shows that Montgomery knew exactly what she was doing, Strong said. "This was the act of a monster," he said. "She needs to be put to death." (Hrenchir, 2021, p. 1)



But Deputy Dist. Atty. Katherine Mader on Thursday called McDermott a “mutation of a human being.” Mader asked jurors to recommend a sentence of death in the gas chamber, saying McDermott might someday plot to kill a fellow prison inmate or official. “Nobody with a heart or a soul could possibly have done what Maureen McDermott did in this case,” Mader told the jury... (Associated Press, 1992, p. 20)

In both excerpts, the women are completely stripped of their humanity, with the second going so far as to call the woman soulless. These descriptions were used because these women had deviated so far from feminine norms that they were no longer seen as women at all. The newspaper articles further stripped women of their humanity by describing them in animalistic language. For example, one woman who had killed her spouse and child was repeatedly called a “black widow”<sup>4</sup> and another who was found guilty of leading a group to kill was referenced as the “head of the serpent.”<sup>5</sup> The excerpts below further demonstrate how newspapers painted women in animalistic, predatory terms.

But prosecutors describe Allen, 41, as "a hunter" who would kill again and thus is a suitable candidate to become the first woman to be executed by the State of Oklahoma. (Jenkins, 2000, p. 1)

She was, for all intents and purposes, an animal driven by impulse rather than conscience. (Snow, 1998, p. 4).

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<sup>4</sup> *See for example* (Harakas, 1990, p. 63)

<sup>5</sup> *See for example* (Green, 2010, p. A1)

Referring to these women as animals and predators further removed them from the chivalrous treatment often reserved for female offenders. Rather than painting these women as individuals in need of help or as individuals who do not pose a future risk to society, women described as villainous were described as uncontrollable animals, monsters, or as masculine individuals that lacked their humanity. This characterization often led to the conclusion that the death sentence was appropriate under the circumstances.

Newspaper articles often quoted court actors as stating the need for the death penalty in the woman's case, referencing the future threat she posed. One attorney was quoted as saying, "There will always be that dark side waiting to come out" (Rankin, 2019, p. 1A). Another newspaper cited the district attorney as stating, "I'm telling you, that woman is a cold-blooded killer, and if she gets out, she'd kill again" (Barfield\_1). Through these references, newspaper articles highlighted the threat to society that the women posed, portraying them as irredeemable. This language signaled that the women were not capable of rehabilitation, which diverges from how female offenders are typically viewed.

### **Racial Stereotypes**

The last deductive theme, racial stereotypes, stemmed from the literature on controlling images (Collins, 2000; Miller 2008). As shown in Table 5.4, women were coded under this theme if they were described in ways that aligned with how the previous literature defines common controlling images related to white, Black, Latina, and Asian women, such as the Madonna/Whore dichotomy (Baraket et al., 2018) and the Sapphire (Fontaine, 2011). As Table 5.1 indicates, very few articles (3.3%) discussed the women

under these tropes. Therefore, no emergent subthemes could be identified within this larger theme.

Table 5.4 Definition and Example Quotes for Racial Stereotypes Category

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Quotes</b>
Racial stereotypes	Woman described in ways that point out her status within a marginalized group and/or utilize controlling images, i.e., Madonna/Whore, Mammy, or Jezebel	<p>“She whored to support the habit, but turned straight sometimes.” (Taylor, 2000, p. 22)</p> <p>“The shooting stemmed from a domestic dispute between two gay black women.” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 1)</p>

### **Differences Across Race/Ethnicity**

Although racial stereotypes were not readily apparent in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death, several differences across race/ethnicity were uncovered across the themes and subthemes. Table 5.5 presents the themes and subthemes within the articles disaggregated by race/ethnicity of the women sentenced, with percentages reflecting how many of the articles written about each group were coded under each theme and subtheme. The findings are detailed further within the next section.

Unexpectedly, in looking at differences across race/ethnicity, the findings indicate that WOC were treated more favorably within the newspaper narratives than white women. In comparison to articles written by white women, a higher proportion of articles written about WOC described them as adhering to feminine norms (82.3% versus 69.5%) and as good women pushed (25.3% versus 17.7%). Also, a higher proportion of the articles written about white women described them as violating feminine norms (60.7%

versus 46.2%), violating sexual norms (32.0% versus 3.8%), and as villainous (22.8% versus 15.8%). It is possible that white women are expected to adhere more closely to gender stereotypes, and thus, when they break the law, they were viewed as “doubly deviant” to a higher degree than WOC, resulting in a harsher narrative.

Table 5.5 Frequency of Themes and Subthemes Disaggregated by Race/Ethnicity

<b>Theme/Subtheme</b>	<b>White Women</b>	<b>WOC</b>
In-line with Feminine Norms	580 (69.5%)	130 (82.3%)
Victim as Offender	161 (19.2%)	25 (15.8%)
Good Woman Pushed	148 (17.7%)	40 (25.3%)
Violating Feminine Norms	507 (60.7%)	73 (46.2%)
Violating Sexual Norms	267 (32.0%)	6 (3.8%)
Villainous	190 (22.8%)	25 (15.8%)
Racial Stereotypes	26 (3.1%)	7 (4.4%)

*Note:* A total of 835 articles talked about white women, while a total of 158 articles talked about WOC. These numbers were used as denominators to calculate the percentages shown. Because categories and themes were not mutually exclusive, columns do not add up to 100%

### Summary of Findings

The newspaper articles were initially coded deductively into three themes: (1) in-line with feminine norms, (2) violating feminine norms, and (3) racial stereotypes. Within the first two three, four subthemes emerged: (1) victim as offender, (2) good woman pushed, (3) violating sexual norms, and (4) villainous. These themes and subthemes confirmed a narrative that reinforced gender stereotypes but did not ultimately reveal many racial stereotypes. Women who more closely adhered to emphasized feminine standards were described as victims or good women pushed. This placed them in a privileged position where their crimes were not viewed as extensions of their characters, and therefore, they were viewed as sympathetic figures in need of chivalrous treatment.

These women were portrayed as good women who either were dealt a bad hand in life and were subsequently not fully in control of their actions, or whose crime was simply an anomaly to their otherwise feminine behavior. Under both subthemes, the women were arguably good women who did not pose a future risk to society.

Alternatively, those article under the subthemes of violating sexual norms and villainous painted the women as fundamentally flawed individuals who did pose a continued risk of reoffending. Women described under these two subthemes violated emphasized feminine norms to the extent that they were stripped of the privileges typically afforded to women by the criminal justice system, including arguments for lenient sentences. Women who violated sexual norms were viewed as bad women. They were sexually deviant, immoral women whose character aligned with their crime. These women retained their femininity in that their sexuality was the focus of their transgression and were punished in a way that society reserves for women—through shaming their sexual activity. This theme was almost exclusively used in reference to white women, which points to the importance that society places on white women’s virtuousness. When a white woman transgresses expectations surrounding her sexuality, newspapers respond more harshly than when a woman of color makes a similar transgression. This finding is discussed further in the next chapter.

The final subtheme—villainous—painted women in a way that completely ignored their femininity and instead focused on their perceived lack of humanity. Women under this theme had deviated so far from emphasized feminine norms that they were viewed as soulless monsters. Unlike the first two subthemes, in the last two subthemes, newspaper articles did not grapple with explaining how a woman could have committed

such a violent act. Instead, no explanation was given because the women were removed enough from emphasized feminine norms that their behavior could be explained as a reflection of their rejection of gender norms.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

This is the first study to examine how gender and racial stereotypes are used in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death in the United States. Informed by literature focused on crime and the media, as well as gender and the criminal justice system, this dissertation relied on the cultural criminality framework and a feminine lens to further understand these narratives. Through the use of qualitative content analysis, this dissertation sought to first answer how gender and racial stereotypes are used in the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death in the US between 1976 and 2020. Through a two-part coding process, the findings revealed that newspapers perpetuated gender stereotypes while largely ignoring racial stereotypes. Most of the articles applied narratives that described the women as either in-line or violating feminine norms, while less than 4 percent of the articles used racial stereotypes or controlling images. The study then sought to understand how the narratives differed across race/ethnicity and found that WOC were actually discussed more favorably than their white counterparts. A greater proportion of articles written about WOC described them as aligning with feminine norms and good women who were pushed to do a bad thing. Alternatively, a greater proportion of the articles written about white women described them as violating feminine norms, violating sexual norms, and villainous.

When considering the gender narratives, four subthemes emerged within the articles: (1) victim as offender, (2) good woman pushed, (3) violating sexual norms, and (4) villainous. The subtheme of victim as offender pointed to the abuses the condemned women suffered throughout their lives as the predominant factor in why they offended. This depiction served to reinforce both the mad-sad/bad dichotomy (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009), as well as chivalry theory (Salvucci, 2011)—imagery that has been found in reference to violent women but has never before been tied to the narratives surrounding women sentenced to death. The newspaper articles discussed these women as having acted out of duress to escape the abuse they were currently suffering from or painted them as childlike in that they were unable to rationally respond to negative situations due to abuses suffered in their childhoods.

This subtheme aligned with the mad-sad imagery that often is used in the narratives surrounding women who offend, which argues that women only act violently when they have lost control or are suffering from mental illness (Weare, 2013). Often women under this subtheme were cited as suffering from Battered Women's Syndrome, a sub-category of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Walker, 1992), which has perpetuated the medicalization of female crime and influenced the treatment of female offenders (Allen, 1998; Auerhahn & Leonard, 1999). As evidenced by Auerhahn and Leonard (1999) in their interviews of California inmates, the female inmate population is generally treated in ways that resemble medical treatments, including the repeated use of chemical restraints while in custody. These chemical interventions are utilized under the notion that female inmates are sick but can be cured through medical intervention, linking



their criminality to their biology and removing all notions that they rationally chose to offend.

This notion was further demonstrated by newspaper articles that repeatedly noted these women never had the ability to make rational decisions due to their abusive and neglectful childhoods. The women were described as incapable of controlling their actions—an argument that stripped them of their agency. Women described under the victim as offender subtheme were portrayed as victims of their circumstances, having not received the necessary guidance or supervision in their childhoods to have formed into rational adults. This image painted the women as immature, which reinforced gender stereotypes that typecast women as submissive, weak, and childlike. This finding aligned with chivalry theory, which states that female offenders should be protected rather than punished (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Stolzenberg & D'Alessio, 2004), and served to reinforce paternalistic views of women and maintain patriarchal structures. Thus, newspaper articles were able to grapple with the women having committed such a masculine crime by explaining their actions away as a product of the abuses they had suffered. The narratives maintained the women's femininity through the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, rendering the women as childlike and incapable of making rational decisions.

Chivalry theory and gender stereotypes were also reinforced in the good woman pushed subtheme. Here, the women clearly embodied emphasized femininity and their crime was argued to have been completely out of character—an anomaly that allowed the women to maintain their femininity while still being found guilty of a violent offense. The newspaper articles continually quoted people who knew the women, describing the

women in terms that closely aligned with feminine norms, as well as stating how out of character the violence was for the woman. Additionally, the newspaper articles' focus on the women's femininity under this subtheme reinforced gender stereotypes. Whereas men are expected to be assertive and aggressive, feminine norms paint women as docile and passive (Gupta et al., 2013). The newspaper articles could not affiliate the women with the violent act they committed, because the women adhered so closely to feminine norms. To grapple with this issue, the newspaper articles described the violent act as out of character for the women, allowing them to maintain their femininity and, more generally, reinforcing gender stereotypes which dictate that women are inherently demure and nonviolent. This occurrence allowed gender stereotypes to be perpetuated through the narratives, while newspaper articles described the masculine acts committed by these women.

In the third subtheme, violating sexual norms, the narratives maintained the femininity of the women, however it vilified them in a way society reserves for women—by focusing on their perceived sexually deviant behavior. This depiction was similar to a common controlling image used against women—the Madonna-whore dichotomy (MWD) (Bareket et al., 2018; Kahalon et al., 2019). Women under this theme were described as behaving in ways that stood in stark contrast to the expectation that women are moral and virtuous. The women's worth was inextricably tied to their sexuality, and because they behaved in sexually deviant ways, such as by seeking divorces, engaging in extramarital affairs, and wearing “sexy” (*see* Baldwin, 2002, p.1) clothing, these women were automatically marked as bad women.

It was under this subtheme that racial/ethnic disparity was most apparent. The fact that white women were almost solely discussed under this theme points to the expectations society holds surrounding the morality of white women. Although this trope was used almost exclusively against white women, the expectations surrounding the virtuousness of white women is detrimental to all women, particularly WOC (Collins, 2000). The fact that only white women were vilified when they behaved in a way perceived as sexually deviant points to the notion that only white women have the opportunity to be viewed as the good, virtuous, Madonna-like figures, whereas WOC are only ever expected to behave in a way that aligns with the bad, promiscuous, whore image. Previous literature on the common controlling images of Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire that are used in relation to Black women, as well as the imagery of the conniving “anchor baby” Latina mother, or the sexually available Asian woman, lend credence to this argument (Fontaine, 2011; Foster, 2017; Nemoto, 2006). None of these images allow WOC the opportunity to ever be depicted in a positive light, and as scholars have pointed out, WOC are automatically presumed to be immoral (Cooper, 2008; Sharma, 2003).

In the last subtheme, villainous, the women were described as deviating so far from feminine norms that they were no longer discussed as women. Instead, the women were described in masculine terms or were stripped of their humanity altogether, instead being described as monsters or animals. This reinforced the “bad” imagery often used to describe female offenders. When female offenders are described under this imagery, they are completely divorced from traditional feminine ideals and are demonized and masculinized (Brennan & Vandenberg, 2009). The women depicted as villainous were

described as inherently bad, and the death penalty was viewed as warranted in their cases, because they were argued to pose a significant future risk of violence. This idea was in stark contrast to the good woman pushed theme and indicates the importance that femininity plays in arguments for and against the death penalty. When a woman adheres to feminine norms, leniency is expected. However, when she is completely divorced from femininity, death is reasonable. This finding reinforces Bartky's (2020) argument that women are expected to strive for femininity, and when they are either unable or unwilling to submit to these standards, and instead embody masculine qualities, they are punished through societal forces. In the case of women sentenced to death who failed to conform to emphasized feminine standards, they were punished by being stripped of both their femininity and humanity in the news media.

Ultimately, this study found evidence that reinforces previous literature's findings on the mad-sad/bad dichotomy (Weare, 2013) within the victim as offender and villainous subthemes. However, this dissertation adds to the extant literature by being the first study to link these themes to the media's framing of capital women. This dissertation found that the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death perpetuates the use of the overarching labels of mad, sad, or bad that have been commonly used in the media when discussing female offenders. In accordance with previous literature, this dissertation found that newspapers maintain this imagery through arguing the woman's crime was a product of either heightened emotionality, mental illness, or a lack of femininity (i.e. they are fundamentally bad).

Additionally, this dissertation reinforced the literature on controlling images (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016), however to a lesser extent. The narratives surrounding the

good woman pushed and violating sexual norms themes indicate that women continue to be polarized as either good and chaste or bad and immoral. Women who adhere to emphasized feminine standards are painted as virtuous, while those who behave in ways that go against the sexual standards of womanhood are rendered wicked. However, this dissertation did not find evidence that the newspaper narratives surrounding WOC perpetuated controlling images specific to these women. Instead, the newspaper narratives placed white women as the sexual standard by primarily vilifying white female offenders when sexual deviance was perceived. However, a lack of evidence to support previous literature on controlling images of WOC could be due to such a small number of WOC being in the sample. Also, as stated earlier, WOCWOC may be expected to behave immorally, which could lead to newspapers not deeming their promiscuous behavior as newsworthy.

Although the findings reinforced previous literature on the mad-sad/bad dichotomy and controlling images, this study uncovered a more nuanced narrative that surrounded women sentenced to death than previous literature on female offenders describes. The findings indicated that the narratives surrounding women sentenced to death did not adhere to one trope, but rather multiple narratives were utilized by newspapers while others were ignored. For example, although literature on the mad/sad-bad dichotomy was supported, there was less evidence on the medicalization of female offenders, apart from the few newspaper articles that cited some of the women as suffering from Battered Women's Syndrome. Previous literature has indicated that the media often refers to women as suffering from hormonal issues at the time of their crime, such as post-partum depression (Weare, 2013), however no evidence of that was found in

reference to women sentenced to death. The medicalization of female offenders often leads to lesser sentences (Morrissey, 2003), and as this dissertation focused on a population viewed as the worst of the worst, none of the women on death row were discussed in this way. Interestingly, although all women in this study's sample received the nation's harshest punishment, not all were labeled "bad" women, although previous literature would suggest they should have been labeled as such. In fact, the narratives surrounding women in the victim as offender theme, as well as the good woman pushed theme, never came close to describing these women as "bad" and instead described them in stereotypically feminine ways.

### **Implications**

This dissertation found some support for chivalry theory in that women were characterized as immature and childlike and were framed as in need of male protection. Still, questions as to the viability of chivalry theory arise. Chivalry theory argues that women who are viewed in a paternalistic manner are afforded more lenient sentences by criminal justice actors. However, this study found these types of sentiments within the newspaper narratives even though these women were already given the harshest penalty. This finding raises the question as to whether the evidence of women generally receiving more lenient sentences is actually indicative of chivalrous attitudes toward these women, or if there is something else driving the decision-making when it comes to female capital offenders. In general, there may be more chivalrous behavior applied toward females, but it seems as though this notion alone did not remove death as an option for the women studied.

Although this dissertation found no evidence of the perpetuation of controlling images related to WOC within the newspaper narratives surrounding women sentenced to death, controlling images were deployed against white women. Controlling images are “socially constructed symbols that have come to represent marginalized groups” (Handau & Simien, 2019, p. 487). They serve to pigeonhole women into predetermined roles using surface-level markers including race, sex, and class. These stereotypes perpetuate racial, class, and gender inequality, because the expectations surrounding the individuals assigned to them serve to keep them in their marginalized status (Feagin, 2000; Vasquez-Tokos & Norton-Smith, 2017). Repeated exposure to controlling images influence perceptions of who and what we each are, holding people in their place and resisting social change (Miller, 2008).

Scholars have pointed out that the image of the “true woman” is a controlling image, because it serves to reinforce gendered oppression and racial privilege (Handau & Simien, 2019; Welter, 1966). The “true woman” can be equated with emphasized femininity, as the imagery surrounding the controlling image includes whiteness, submissiveness, and virtuousness. This imagery is entangled with the MWD, with women who adhere to these standards being stereotyped as Madonnas, but those that do not being branded whores. White women are led to believe that they must adhere to patriarchal ideals of emphasized femininity or be labeled a “bad woman” or a “whore” (Bareket et al., 2018). The only controlling image found to be reinforced within the narratives surrounding women sentenced to death was that of the MWD, which has traditionally been applied to white women. This finding reinforces Welter’s (1966) imagery surrounding the cult of true womanhood and implies that white women are held to a

higher standard in conforming to gender stereotypes, and thus when they commit a crime they are painted as “doubly deviant” to a higher degree compared to similarly situated WOC. The implications of this finding regarding criminal justice outcomes requires additional exploration and theorizing. More research should look for evidence of the cult of true womanhood within the narrative surrounding women who commit crimes, as well as women more generally. Although the concept is dated, it appears to hold credence still today.

Research on sentencing outcomes has found evidence that when white women commit crime they are viewed as more deviant than WOC. For example, Bickle and Peterson (1991), in their examination of the impact of gender-based family roles on the sentencing outcomes of female and male defendants convicted of forgery, found that white women did not gain a measure of leniency when they were fulfilling the role of significant caregiver for dependents. However, as the researcher found, Black women did benefit from performing this role, as well as received lesser sentences when they were married versus married white women. The researchers speculate that these discrepancies could be tied to a heightened expectation of white women to promote white male hegemony, i.e. fulfilling the traditional roles of wife and mother (1991, p. 391). Thus, when white women went against emphasized feminine standards, their likelihood of imprisonment increased, however the same situation had no effects on the likelihood of imprisonment of Black women.

Other researchers have found similar findings, indicating that white women do not benefit from their femininity in sentencing decisions, whereas WOC do. Scholars have pointed to the long-established race-sentencing gap as evidence. It is established that



white men receive lesser sentences than their Black and Hispanic counterparts, however several empirical studies have shown that there are not statistically significant differences in the sentencing outcomes of white women and WOC (Metcalfe & Chiricos, 2018; Freiburger, 2010). Steffensmeier and Demuth (2006) found that, all else equal, “it appears black and Hispanic female defendants actually benefit more from their “female” status” (2006, p. 257). This finding, again, points to a bias against white women on the part of sentencing officials that indicates a stronger belief in the importance of white women’s conformity to hegemonic norms above any other racial/ethnic group. Alternatively, WOC may not be expected to adhere to emphasized feminine norms, which means when they offend, they are viewed as less doubly deviant than their white counterparts.

There are further implications of the study regarding the continued perpetuation of the bad, mad/sad dichotomy, which denies women’s agency in various ways. When women’s criminality was focused on under the ‘mad/sad’ label, as was done under the victim as offender subtheme in relation to the condemned women in this study, the women were described as reacting to abuses at the time of their crime, both retroactively and in the moment. Female offenders are often depicted as victims of their circumstances or as having acted out of an explosion of emotion, being unable to make decisions with regards to their behavior (Morris & Wilczynski, 1993; Weare, 2014/2017). These narratives are constructed around gender stereotyping, ensuring that emphasized feminine norms remain firmly entrenched and depict all women as inherently emotional and irrational (Allen, 1988).

The 'bad' label, which was perpetuated under the villainous theme, not only denies women's agency as females, but it also denies their *human* agency. As Weare (2017) points out, women under the 'bad' narrative are so far removed from feminine norms that they are "so non-feminine that she is non-woman, non-human, and thus discursively constructed as a monster" (p. 205). Under the 'bad' label, the agent behind the crime is not the woman herself but rather the non-human monster that is construed as her dominant identity (Morrissey, 2003). This again perpetuates the notion that women are incapable of making their own choices, even when they are so far removed from womanhood as to be viewed as monstrous non-humans.

Rapaport (2005) discusses these issues specifically as they relate to women who commit infanticide. She explains that every trial and decision related to prosecution centers around the question "Is she mad or bad?" (2005, p. 128). Trial lawyers seeking lenient treatment by the court will pursue the "Good Mother Defense," seeking to have their client viewed as mad. This defense contains an explanation of the crime that is more palatable to jurors, because it maintains that a woman's nature is maternal and that the woman before them is virtuous. Instead, she was just suffering from mental health issues when she committed infanticide. However, if there are enough "bad facts" about the woman's character, the jury is more likely to see the defendant not only as a bad woman but a bad mother (Rapaport, 2005, p. 140).

The narratives of mad/sad and bad suggest that every woman is incapable of making their own choices. The explanations surrounding the actions of female offenders reinforce gender stereotypes, denying that women have the level of agency that men do. Kabeer (2008) describes agency as follows:

Agency operationalizes the concept of choice. It refers to the capacity to define one's goals and act on them. It goes beyond the observable behavior to encompass the meaning, motivations, skills and purpose that people bring to their action, "their sense of agency." (p. 20)

This denial of agency strips women of their ability to control their own lives and make their own decisions and has negative consequences in all spheres of women's lives (Begum & Sen, 2009). Women's agency has been shown to be an important factor in women's overall health, affecting the proportion of well-nourished women as well as child mortality rates. (Begum & Sen, 2009). Agency has also been proven as critical to women's empowerment, affecting the educational attainment and economic growth of women internationally (Hamner & Klugman, 2016; Kabeer, 2008).

Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) discuss this issue in length in their examination of the narrative surrounding women who engage in violence in a variety of contexts, including as military officers who committed torture in Abu Ghraib, suicide bombings in Chechnya and Palestine, and genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda. The scholars argue that the violence committed by these women were understood under three non-exclusive labels of 'mothers', 'monsters', and 'whores', and that these labels rendered the women's agency invisible. These labels characterize women involved in violence as "less of a human being and less of a woman" (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2008, p. 10). In this way, gender stereotypes are not challenged and women's involvement in the historically male-dominated field of political struggles and war does not transform the field or open the public sphere up for more women's involvement.

Still, the current study's findings of the perpetuation of the bad, mad/sad dichotomy in the news narratives surrounding women sentenced to death presents a paradox. Women described under these tropes were denied their agency and portrayed as needing protection but they were still condemned to death. Agency is reflective of culpability, and although these articles described the women in terms that related to them not being fully culpable in their offense, the articles did not attempt to grapple with why these women ended up being sentenced to death anyway. Rather than attempting to paint these women as actors wholly capable of choosing to commit a death-eligible offense, the newspapers chose to perpetuate controlling images, gender stereotypes, and gloss over the paradox they presented. As was referenced in the discussion of chivalry theory, factors clearly beyond culpability (and chivalry) were considered in sentencing these women to death. Future research comparing women sentenced to death with women not sentenced to death might begin to uncover what these additional factors may be that are driving decision-making in death penalty cases involving women.

This study found that the news media narratives surrounding women sentenced to death perpetuate gender and racial stereotypes, and even do so in a way that seems to vilify white women more so than WOC. This finding seemingly contradicts racial threat theory, which proposes that white individuals use their position of power to implement state-control measures over WOC in the face of growing minority populations (Blalock, 1967; Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018; Rafu, 2020). For instance, studies have largely indicated that increases in minority population size are positively associated with support for the death penalty (Baumer et al., 2003; Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018). In this dissertation, though, white women were at a disadvantage in how the media portrayed

them versus WOC, which seems counter to racial threat theory. However, as previously noted, it is possible that these portrayals were done to justify the horrible and unexpected acts of the white women in the sample, whereas this behavior was anticipated of WOC, thus reinforcing stereotypes of WOC as assumed to be villainous.

Finally, there are policy implications regarding this study's findings. Scholars have recognized the power of the media in shaping and manipulating public sentiments regarding punishment (Feldmeyer & Cochran, 2018; Rafu, 2020). Rafu (2020) points out that "it could even be argued that the media has contributed far more to the strained race relations...than the police" (2020, p. 130), which coalesces with the differences in narratives found across race. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the media influences the likelihood of receiving a death sentence (Farr, 2000; Gado, 2008), whether or not it should, in that the narratives surrounding capital offenders can contribute to extralegal factors playing a role in capital sentencing decisions. It is important for media outlets to understand how their portrayals of these women can sway public opinion and decision-making and how this can contribute to disparities in the way women offenders are treated.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. First, using available newspaper articles versus other news outlets limited the sample. There is inherent selection bias in news story collection and publication. News stories go through a number of steps from time of the event to dissemination to the public. This process includes editors and journalists operating within a male-dominated industry deciding what stories are the most 'newsworthy' (Galeste et al., 2012). The criteria for newsworthiness used by newspapers

are not well-understood and “frequently unspoken criteria [often include] commonsense understandings grounded in race and gender stereotypes and typifications” (Lundman, 2003, p. 359). However, as this study focused on how newspapers have framed the narratives around condemned women, as well as the fact that this study looked at every newspaper article published about these women, the sample is reflective of the phenomenon being studied. Still, future studies would do well to include other sources of news media, particularly online publications including social media and podcasts, as these are the most used sources of news today (Shearer, 2021). Expanding article collection to different, technology-based sources could capture an entirely different narratives surrounding condemned women, as the target audience is different from print media (Shearer, 2021).

Demographic information on newspaper readers was not considered in this study, which serves as a limitation. This study implicates the ideas of hegemony, but only the narrative provided by newspapers is presented. It is likely that if other types of news sources had been utilized, different narratives would have emerged because of different sources having different target audiences. Additionally, a search through different sources could have led to different articles, possibly including articles on the two white women who had to be dropped from the study. It remains unclear why these two women had no stories attached to their cases, and the possibility remains that their cases were reported on in different mediums.

Another limitation of the study was the relatively homogenous population of condemned women, which served to limit any longitudinal or intersectional analysis of the data. The sample of WOC was too small to be disaggregated further and still have

meaningful results, so no conclusions could be drawn regarding the difference in the narratives across racial or class lines. Although previous research has examined news depictions of violent women and girls (Andersen et al., 2018; Eastal et al., 2015), as well as the differences in the narratives surrounding white versus Black offenders (Pollock et al., 2021), none have compared representations of the various subsections of WOC violent offenders in the United States. Future research would do well to fill this gap in the literature, focusing on all women convicted of first-degree murder, regardless of their sentence.

Additionally, the small sample of women made it impossible to draw meaningful results over time. The distribution of the years in which women were sentenced to death was uneven, with some periods having as little as two women and others having as many as 14. Time, however, is an important consideration, as it is almost certain that the way the articles were written and the language that was used changed over time. Future research that considers women sentenced to death before 1976 may aid in mitigating this limitation.

The small sample size also makes it difficult to generalize findings with respect to whether these typifications and gendered notions extend to institutions beyond the media, such as education, industry, sports, and politics. However, a look at the literature in these areas indicates that gender stereotypes permeate all areas of life. Scholars have found that schools perpetuate gender differences in various ways, including teachers advising boys to study mathematical and technological subjects while suggesting girls pursue careers in education and languages (Heller et al., 2010), as well as textbooks implicitly perpetuating gender stereotypes within their pictures (Finsterwald & Ziegler, 2007). Although few

studies examine the mad-sad/bad dichotomy when focusing on delinquency<sup>6</sup>, scholars have uncovered similar findings related to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes various other segments of the media around the world. This includes advertising in India (Heathy, 2020), Spanish sports coverage over social media (Sainz-de-Baranda et al., 2020), U.S. political media discourse (Lay et al., 2021). The similarities in these findings affirm the generalizability of the current study's findings: Gender stereotypes are prominent and continue to be disseminated through multiple vehicles on an international scale.

Lastly, as this is a qualitative study, research effects and efforts to ensure scientific rigor should be noted. Qualitative content analysis largely relies on individual interpretations of the data, and this study had the additional challenge to validity of only having one coder (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mikell, 2020; Schreier, 2012). Although every effort was taken to maximize the validity of the findings, it cannot be ruled out that another researcher would reach rival explanations (Patton, 1999). This possibility is particularly salient considering my positionality as a white feminist criminologist. Similarities of the themes uncovered within this study when compared across other similar works does lend to the credibility of the findings, and the detailed outline of the methodology, as well as the tables that define each category, theme, and subtheme, optimizes trustworthiness and replicability. However, even with all of these precautions, it cannot be guaranteed that a different researcher would reach different conclusions.

There are several additional opportunities for future research that should be noted. The first includes adding demographic information about the authors of the news articles to the analysis. Examining possible differences in the narratives used across journalist

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<sup>6</sup> Some exceptions are Snelgrove (2005), who looks at the labels in relation to the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities and Jackson & Wilson (1993) who examine the personality of bikers



race and gender, for example, would likely produce noteworthy results. News articles are written by journalists with different backgrounds and biases, and it is undisputed that partiality exists within the news (Groeling, 2013). The way the media frames crime and criminals affects the public's perception of these issues, and journalists compile information to disseminate based off of their own individual frames (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Hall, 1980). Thus, considering the background of the journalists and its effect on the narratives produced is important area of research that needs to be explored further.

Another area ripe for exploration are comparative studies with both men and women sentenced to death in the United States. Although previous studies have looked at the discourse surrounding the death penalty (Bandes, 2003; Haney & Green, 2004), as well as the difference in how violent Black males versus white males are depicted (Dixon & Williams; 2015; Dixon 2017; Goff et al., 2008; Russell-Brown, 2022), no study to date has examined how condemned men have been depicted in the news or the difference between how condemned men and women are discussed.

Also, the present study focused on females sentenced to death since 1976. Future studies should examine the narratives surrounding condemned women who were sentenced to death before 1976 and compare findings to the current study. This would uncover possible cultural shifts in the narratives over time. Hanging and the gas chamber were also more commonly used in the period preceding 1976, and these different execution methods could add an interesting element to the narratives surrounding these women.

Additionally, differences in the narratives surrounding women who were later executed versus those that remain on death row were not analyzed in this study. Perhaps

women who were executed were vilified more in the media than those who remained on death row through clemency petitions or possible sentencing changes. Additionally, differences in the length of articles written about each woman could relate to whether they were executed or not, as well as other factors, such as their perceived adherence to gender norms. Women could have received more attention in the media or could have been viewed as more noteworthy based off a variety of factors. Although the average number of articles written about each demographic of woman was considered in this study, future studies should take a more nuanced look at this, including word count in their analyses. These both remain areas for future exploration.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to examine the how journalists have framed the gender and racial narratives around women sentenced to death. Generally, condemned women were depicted within narratives that address their perceived adherence to emphasized femininity, alignment with gender stereotypes, as well as the level of their culpability in the crime. These findings align, to some extent, with analyses of the media discourse around female criminality (Noh et al., 2010; Wear, 2017), although differences in the findings from these studies were also noted. The study represents the first systematic analysis of media portrayals of women sentenced to death. The narratives surrounding women sentenced to death is raced and gendered, perpetuating gendered expectations of women as well as controlling images of white women.

The media serve an important role, shaping how the public view issues of crime and offenders, as well as more generally reinforcing stereotypes and norms that set expectations for how individuals expect themselves and others to behave (Jamieson &

Waldman, 2003). Whether explicit or implicit, these messages inform public opinion and influence public policy (Baranauskas & Drakulich, 2018; Moricarty, 2010). The messages communicated through the articles examined reinforce ideas that come from a multitude of sources, which altogether converge to form and entrench social values and worldviews (Adams, 1981; Baker, 2011). Although the media continue to strive for racial and gender equality in their ranks, that they continue to perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes in their narratives tells me that further diversification in their decision makers is necessary—although this is only one of many ways to possibly make a difference. When all are represented, presumably, all interests can be furthered, and the perpetuation of gendered messages abandoned. Only then will changes in social values and policy be reflected.

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APPENDIX A

CODEBOOK FOR SUBTHEMES

Table A.1 Codebook for Subthemes

<b>Subthemes and Child Codes</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Quotes</b>
<i>Victim as Offender</i>	Woman described as having an abusive childhood or as suffering from domestic abuse and that these previous abuses led to their offense	<p>“Allegations or abusive behavior and infidelity by Xavier Caro might evoke sympathy for a woman forced beyond the brink of rationality” (Chawkins, 2001, p. 20)</p> <p>“Chamberlin's family told her court-appointed psychologist that she had been sexually abused during her early life and emotionally abused by an alcoholic mother.” (Maute, 2006, p. 1)</p>
Bad Childhood	Woman described as suffering from a childhood marked by abuse or neglect	<p>“The argument for clemency now before Gov. Jim Hunt states that Mrs. Barfield's father beat her and sexually assaulted her when she was a child” (Woestendiek, 1984, p. 1)</p> <p>“Forde was born in 1967 to a family with a long history of incest and child molestation. By the time Forde was 5, she'd lived in seven households because her mother continually chose her boyfriend over her children” (Smith, 2011, P. A7)</p>
Domestic Abuse	Woman described as suffering from domestic abuse	<p>“But defense attorney Dan Patterson contends Wendi was a battered woman who acted in self-defense...” (Walsh, 2004, p. 88)</p> <p>“Betty Lou Beets was a victim of wife abuse. That's why death-penalty opponents are saying we should cancel Betty Lou's appointment with the needle” (Thompson, 2000, p. 7)</p>

<i>Good Woman Pushed</i>	Woman described as a good Christian and/or a good woman. Her crime was viewed as totally out of character to the people who knew her before the act of violence.	<p>“But she was a real nice gal, real personable.” (Buey, 2004, p. 1)</p> <p>“Betty was an immaculate house- keeper and a great cook. She frequently left little love notes around the house for Barker, which pleased him to no end, Ms. Lennon said.” (Culver, 2000, p. 1)</p>
Christian	Woman described as a good Christian or citing scripture	<p>““I'm not afraid of what man can do to me, because my trust is in someone else." That someone else is God, she said. "He said 'Take no thought of tomorrow because we don't know what tomorrow is bringing'” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 1)</p> <p>“Friends had recommended Barfield as a good Christian woman She required time off for church Wednesday nights and twice on Sundays” (Stumbo, 1984, p. 1)</p>
Feminine Skills	Woman described as having skills and talents stereotypical of women	<p>“Candler third year student Christy Oxendine remembered visiting Gissendaner as she was knitting in prison. “[She knit] blankets, caps and booties for inmates who had their kids [in prison],” she said” (Sullivan, 2015, p. 1)</p> <p>“Montgomery often read her Bible or did things with her hands, including writing, quilting, and making placemats and bookmarks, Dorr said” (Hrenchir, 2021, p. A4)</p>
Good Person	Woman described as inherently good.	<p>“As a subtext to the courtroom battle, Waco alleges that the capital case against Nieves, whom he described as "basically a good person" with no criminal record, is politically motivated” (Wilder, 2000, p. 1)</p> <p>“A good and decent person is about to lose her life because of a system that is badly broken” (Ruff, 2003, p. A1)</p>
Quiet	Woman described as quiet, speaking in whispers, and shy.	<p>“Burk said Brenda Andrew was quiet and shy while in jail and she didn't see her talk to other inmates” (Jenkins, 2000, p. 1)</p>

Suburban	Woman described as living a conventional, suburban life.	<p>“She was the model suburban mother, pitching in at her children's Camarillo school and pouring herself into activities at church” (Chawkins, 2001, p. 116)</p> <p>“There was testimony this week about piano and voice lessons. back yard barbecues, and trips to Disneyland” (O’Neill, 1994, p. 55)</p>
Sweet	Woman described as kind, sweet, and appealing to others.	<p>“I knew the woman and she was actually very nice," Oustalet said” (Sheeley, 1995, p. 1)</p> <p>“I never expected anything like this ... Margaret seemed like a nice lady. I hadn't heard about all the details - this is crazy” (Kennerly, 2005, p. 1)</p>
Volunteer	Woman described as participating in volunteer activities at her children’s school and church.	<p>“Brenda Andrew was a Girl Scout leader and homeroom mom whom family members call incapable of violent crime” (Baldwin, 2002, p. 1)</p> <p>“Block -- former Cub Scout mom, Humane Society volunteer and Friends of the Library president may well become the last murderer to die in the Alabama electric chair” (McLeod, 2002, p. A1)</p>
<i>Violating Sexual Norms</i>	Woman described as participating in behavior or embodying roles contrary to societal expectations regarding female morality	<p>"Where is that maternal instinct that all children are precious?" he asked. "It's not in Rosie Alfaro” (Pinsky, 1992, p. A4)</p> <p>“Petrofsky testified that Chamberlin told her that after they killed Heintzelman. she and Gillett took a shower, went to bed and had sex” (Maute, 2006, p. 1)</p>
Affair	Woman described as cheating on her spouse	<p>“Brenda Andrew had an affair with a grocery store worker. Later, she brought the worker home for dinner with her children while Rob Andrew was away” (Trougakos, 2004, p. 3)</p> <p>“Investigators looking into the killing zeroed in on Owen once they learned of his affair with Kelly Gissendaner” (Harstein, 1998, p. J1)</p>
Divorce	Woman described as being divorced or seeking a divorce	<p>“She had filed for divorce and Rob Andrew had moved out of the couple's house” (Trougakos, 2004, p. 3)</p>

Estranged	Woman described as estranged from her husband	“The night before Rob Andrew was killed, Brenda Andrew repeatedly declared how she hated her estranged husband” (Baldwin, 2002, p. 1)
Femme fatale	Woman described as using her sexuality to persuade others to kill.	"She was sentenced harshly because she used sexuality and adultery to mastermind a murder plot against loved ones, and she seeks a reprieve from death because her sexuality made her a victim in uniquely female ways" (Jonsson, 2010, p. 1)  “Over a dozen years, from 1971 to 1983, this unlikely femme fatale acquired homes, luxury cars and businesses as her husband, a lover and a despised quadriplegic son conveniently and lucratively ceased breathing” (Harakas, 1990, p. 63)
Hootchie	Woman described as dressing provocatively	"The comment that was made was, Who's the hootchie?" " Ostrowe said. "Her dress was very tight, very short, with a lot of cleavage exposed." (Raymond, 2004)  “In that slaying, Coffman said, she dressed provocatively to lure the victim from his home on the pretense of engine trouble, and Marlow then shot the man” (Dizon, 1992, p. 4B)
Lover	Woman described as having a sexual relationship outside of marriage	“Pavatt, an insurance salesman, and Brenda Andrew became lovers after meeting at church” (Trougakos, 2004, p. 3)
Multiple Marriages	Woman’s multiple marriages explicitly stated	“Beets became a widow by virtue of the fact that she killed her fifth husband and probably killed her fourth” (Thompson, 2000, p. 7)  “She married five men, became involved in the Minutemen organization and turned into a braggart who made outlandish claims, Thorpe said.” (Smith, 2011, P. A7)
Out of Wedlock	Woman’s child described as born out of wedlock	“Judi Buenoano was sentenced Wednesday in Santa Rosa County Circuit Court to life in prison for the murder of Michael Goodyear, her paraplegic son born out of wedlock” (Harakas, 1990, p. 63)

Prostitute	Woman described as engaging in sex work	“A Kentucky prostitute wanted in connection with the slaying of an elderly Lexington woman is about to be returned here to for murder and robbery charges thanks to an observant New Orleans jail inmate” (Taylor, 2000, p. 22)
Sexual Deviant	Woman describe as engaging in sexually deviant ways	<p>“He also suggested that Coffman was drawn to Marlow because of their powerful sex drives. The correspondence was mostly obscene and sexually explicit” (Dizon, 1992, p. 4B)</p> <p>“She was an admitted pickax murderer and former teen-age prostitute, who once boasted that she had experienced sexual pleasure when she brought the pickax down on her victims” (Snow, 1998, p. 4)</p>
Single Parent	Woman described as raising her child outside the confines of traditionally marriage	“Ms. Riggs. who is single, and her children were found in their Sherwood home Nov. 5” (Lieb, 1997, p. 8)
<i>Villainous</i>	Woman describes as inherently evil; acting in a way that embodies the traditional villain role	“Though Beets later claimed she had been abused, her record was one of calculated violence” (Hawkins, 2000, p. 3)
Anger as a trait	Woman described as having anger as a personality trait	<p>“Virginia Caudill wanted to kill Steven White" Conn told the jurors "He will tell you he amid see the rage welling up in her" (Taylor, 2000, p. 22)</p> <p>“After nine years on death row, Wuornos is still boiling with anger, but she has given up her self-defense claim and now wants to die” (Word, 2002, p. 8)</p>
Calculated	Woman described as acting in a calculated manner	<p>“Temple called Caro "a calculating, very selfish woman who wanted to hurt her husband in the most horrible way imaginable."” (Chawkins, 2001, p. 116)</p> <p>“Their deaths were the result of cold, calculated planning, he said” (Word, 2002, p. 8)</p>
Cold	Woman described as having a cold disposition	“A day earlier, prosecutors painted Caro as a cold, conniving woman eager to punish her husband” (Chawkins, 2001, p. 221)
Cold-blooded	Woman described as cold-blooded	“Smith said Brenda Andrew is a "coldblooded, heartless killer."” (Baldwin, 2002, p. 4)

		<p>“Mader portrayed McDermott as a woman so cold-blooded that she cared for and comforted Eldridge after the March 21 attack, while secretly plotting the second attempt on his life” (AP, 1992, p. 12)</p>
Conspire	Woman described as methodically planning a murder	<p>“Gissendaner, 47, was convicted of murder in the February 1997 slaying of her husband. She conspired with her lover, who stabbed Douglas Gissendaner to death.” (Schneider, 2015, p. 6A)</p>
Cruel	Woman described as cruel or having a capacity for cruelty	<p>“Moss does not deserve a sentence of life with parole because she's not going to change, Porter said. "She's shown you too much of her capacity for cruelty. There will always be that dark side waiting to come out."” (Rankin, 2019, p. 1A)</p>
Dangerous	Woman described as dangerous and/or posing a threat to others	<p>“The woman is twice as dangerous as a person who pulls a gun. She is a killer who gets your trust so you invite her into your home” (Stumbo, 1984, p. 1)</p>
Enjoys killing	Woman described as enjoying killing, often explicitly saying she would kill again	<p>“She is the type of person who enjoys killing. She is a serial killer.” (Stumbo, 1984, p. 1)</p> <p>“Fifteen years before she had enthusiastically killed two people with a pickax.” (Snow, 1998, p. 4)</p>
Enjoys other’s pain	Woman described as enjoying causing the pain of others	<p>“A killer that sits there and watches them suffer and enjoys every agonizing minute of it.” (Stumbo, 1984, p. 1)</p>
Evil	Woman explicitly referred to as evil	<p>“That’s how evil this woman is,” Strong said. “She tried to throw her own brother under the bus for a crime that she committed.” (Hrenchir, 2021, p. A4)</p> <p>“But Maurizi told the jury that Samuels had been transformed from a precious little girl into an evil woman.” (O’Neill, 1994, p. 55)</p>
Hateful	Woman described as being full of hate or expressing hatred toward someone.	<p>“There is no room in our society for those full of evil and hate that systematically torture and murder a baby," Cameron County District Attorney Armando R. Villalobos said in a statement.” (Martinez, 2009)</p> <p>“Her motivation, she says, was simple hatred for human kind.” (Word, 2002, p. 8)</p>

Inhuman	Woman described as animal- or insect-like	<p>"I submit to you that Judi Buenoano, in a cold, calculated and premeditated manner, spawned her web and systematically eliminated her husband," she said." (Ritchie, 1990, p. 21)</p> <p>"Cynthia Lynn Coffman and her ex-lover were not unlike animals who capriciously attack their prey..." (Dizon, 1992, p. 4B)</p>
Kill Again	Woman described as posing a future threat for killing again	"But prosecutors describe Allen, 41, as "a hunter" who would kill again and thus is a suitable candidate to become the first woman to be executed by the State of Oklahoma." (Jenkins, 2000, p. 1)
Mastermind	Woman described as manipulating others to kill with her or as the leader of the homicide	<p>"She has been described as the mastermind behind the slayings of the 52-year-old Smith and Vo, 23, who was a student at Orange Coast College" (AP, 2005, p. 3)</p> <p>"Portraying Samuels as a selfish, manipulative predator and "the mastermind of two evil plots." (O'Neill, 1994, p. 55)</p>
Merciless	Woman describes as lacking compassion	"This is clearly a conscienceless, pitiless crime .... The medical descriptions reveal he suffered considerable pain and torture." (Harakas, 1990, p. 63)
Monstrous	Woman explicitly described as a monster	"The calculating and brutal nature of her crimes shows that Montgomery knew exactly what she was doing, Strong said. "This was the act of a monster," he said. "She needs to be put to death." (Hrenchir, 2021, p. 1)
No conscience	Woman described as lacking a conscience	"She would play people, and she would have no conscience about it," Caudle said by phone from Redding, Calif." (Smith, 2011, P. A7)
Predator	Woman described as a predator or in predatory language	<p>"She is a hunter when she kills. She hunts her victims down and then she kills them" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 1)</p> <p>"She was a very cunning predator." he added." (O'Neill, 1994, p. 55)</p>
Vicious	Woman either explicitly described as vicious or her crimes described in similar terms	"She committed one of the most heinous crimes imaginable, for one of the most despicable reasons and then blamed it on someone else," Temple said." (Chawkins, 2001, p. 225)

