

# Social work interventions on intimate partner violence against women in China

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## Abstract

- *Summary:* Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) affects approximately one-fifth of women during their lifetime in China. However, limited studies have been conducted in China among women and service providers on IPV. The study reported in this article used an Ecological Model and the Capabilities Perspective integrated with the Advocacy Intervention Model as the theoretical framework for guiding the research and data analysis. This study was part of a participatory project to develop appropriate social work interventions in Guangzhou, China.
- *Findings:* Twenty-one women who experienced IPV and 30 service providers were interviewed for their views on barriers to help-seeking processes, needs and concerns of this population, and recommendations for any changes. The results of this study

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clearly suggest that gender inequality is the root cause of IPV against women and prevents women from leaving a violent relationship.

- *Applications:* The results suggest a number of needed changes at micro, meso, exo, and macro levels and the ways in which social workers can act as advocates for the changes in the context of Guangzhou.

### **Keywords**

Social work, advocacy, China, ecological, intimate partner violence

## **Introduction**

In this article Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) refers to male violence against women in intimate relationships, including violence committed by a husband, a common-law partner, an ex-husband, an ex-common-law partner, or a boyfriend. It includes any acts or threats of such acts that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women (United Nations, 1993). Over the past three decades, China has achieved impressive economic growth. In 2013, its gross domestic product (GDP) was US\$5,450, up from less than US\$500 in the 1970s (Chan, Ngok, & Phillips, 2008; *The Economist*, 2014). Nonetheless, the rapid economic development has also created social problems including the degree of gender inequity in wages and the increased numbers of urban poor among women (Gustafsson & Ding, 2011; Hester, 2005; Li & Song, 2011). These social problems put more women at risk of being exploited by men and experiencing IPV. Research has documented that there are increasing numbers of financially better-off married men involved in extramarital affairs that trigger different forms of IPV against women (All China Women's Federation, 2013; L. Chen, 2009). Research has also shown that women from rural areas migrating to cities for work face economic and sexual exploitations (Jiang, 2009; Woo, 2006) and women experiencing IPV are more susceptible to poverty and encounter many challenges when leaving a violent relationship (Dollar, 2007; WHO, 2005b).

This study was part of a larger project conducted in Guangzhou, China that included participatory action research with women who experienced IPV and with social service providers who were committed to working with this population. The aims of the study were to examine the challenges faced by women in abusive relationships and to discuss the ways in which social workers could advocate for policy changes and provision of adequate services for preventing violence against women in the Guangzhou context.

## **Local context**

Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong province and the largest city in Southern China, has had one of the fastest growing economies in China since the Economic Reform began in 1978 (Cai & Wu, 2007; WHO, 2005a; Zhao, 2007).

The city has a population of 15 million of which approximately 4.7 million are migrant workers (World Population Review, 2014). These migrant workers were born in rural or remote regions where they hold residence status and are, therefore, entitled to social benefits. However, once they move to work in the urban regions such as Guangzhou, they are considered non-registered residents and do not enjoy the same social benefits as registered residents. For example, migrant workers have to pay higher rates for medical care than the local residents. The ineligibility of social and medical benefits for non-registered residents would make female migrant workers reluctant to seek, or not even able to afford, medical treatments when they have experienced IPV (H. Liu, 2011).

An emerging social issue under rapid economic growth is the number of urban poor women (Cai, Zhang, Wang, & Wang, 2003; Dollar, 2007). The Minimum Standard of Living (MLS) policy was first introduced in 1999, but only 28–51% of eligible families have actually received the MLS in the late 2000s (Gao, Zhai, & Garfinkel, 2010). Moreover, the health care system has shifted significantly in urban China such that only a small proportion of workers now enjoy public health insurance with the remainder paying for medical expenses themselves (WHO, 2005a; Zhao & Xue, 2006). Additionally, economic development in China has escalated the degree of gender inequity in the form of higher unemployment among women (Chan et al., 2008; Fincher, 2014; Hester, 2005). This has serious implications for women who are experiencing IPV. Financial constraint is one of the major obstacles for many women who experience IPV when it comes to making a decision about whether they are staying in or leaving a violent relationship (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002; Tam, 2004; WHO, 2002). Women with limited financial resources, for instance, have to consider whether they should get medical treatment and/or injury assessment at hospitals or save the money for basic needs such as food, housing, and clothing for their children (Papadakaki, Kastrinaki, Drakaki, & Chliaoutakis, 2012; Pyles, 2006; Tam, Kwok, Wu, Law, & Chan, 2009; WHO, 2005b).

## **IPV in China**

China has made progress in addressing women's equality and IPV since the Fourth UN World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995. After the Conference, China established legal aid centers across the country, delivered public education on gender equality, and enforced prosecution of work-related sexual harassment (All China Women's Federation, 2013; Hon, 2006; B. H. Liu, n.d.). Notwithstanding these measures, the justice and community responses have not focused on prevention of IPV or helping women overcome the long-term psycho-social and health consequences of IPV. Nor have those measures addressed the issue of services for children who have witnessed the violence (Henderson & Jackson, 2004; Humphreys, Mullender, Thiara, & Skamballis, 2006; Øverlien, 2010; Tam, Dawson, Jackson, Kwok, & Thurston, 2012, 2013).

Systematically collected official data on the prevalence of IPV against women is currently unavailable in China (UNFPA China, 2010). Tang and Lai (2008) studied the prevalence of male-on-female IPV by reviewing 19 empirical studies with a total of 49,201 adult respondents on violence against women in China between 1987 and 2006. They reported that the lifetime average male-on-female violence was 19.7% and the prevalence of past year violence was 16.8%. Moreover, psychological violence was most common among various forms of violence against women (Foshan Shi Fu Lian, 2007; Tang & Lai, 2008).

Violence against women happens to women across the socio-economic spectrum. These women are confronting, not only physical injuries as a result of the violence, but also the long-term psychological impacts such as feelings of fear, shame, guilt, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Romito, Turan, & De Marchi, 2005; United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2002, 2013). Women living on low wages or who are unemployed are more likely to be stuck in a violent relationship and are more susceptible to poverty and, thus, they are lacking the resources to sustain a safe home and remain self-sufficient (Fisher, Hunt, Adamsam, & Thurston, 2007; Pyles, 2012).

## **Theoretical framework**

An integrated ecological model that includes core values of respecting women's capabilities when developing an advocacy intervention was developed for this study. Ecological models have been useful to explain the interplay of personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors that influence how an individual is affected in their respective context (Heise, 1998; Johnson & Dawson, 2011; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008b; Thurston & Vissandjée, 2005), whereas the capabilities perspective suggests that individuals have competencies and knowledge that allow them to be resilient and thrive in challenging situations (Nussbaum, 1999; Pyles, 2012). The advocacy intervention derived from the capabilities perspective aims at prompting the development of individual women's internal self-functioning and effecting change on the social environment for maximizing individuals' well-being (Bybee & Sullivan, 2005; Hays, Green, Orr, & Flowers, 2007; Jansson, 2010; P. M. Morris, 2002). This integrated model was used to provide a more holistic picture of experiences and to allow for the development of interventions and prevention programs which take into account all influencing factors at the micro (i.e., the individual level relationships of the woman), meso (i.e., the inter-relationships between personal networks), exo (i.e., the neighborhoods, communities or networks that surround the woman), and macro systems (i.e., the socio-cultural, economic and political institutions) that shape our expectations of behaviors (Heise, 1998; Neal & Neal, 2013; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008b; Thurston, Tam, Dawson, Jackson, & Kwok, 2014; Thurston & Vissandjée, 2005).

## Methods

A participatory action research study (Maguire, 2001; M. Morris, 2002) was conducted in Guangzhou, China between July 2007 and February 2009. Semi-structured interviews with participants examined their experiences of IPV; their experiences with the existing formal support systems; the barriers that prevented abused women from accessing support and helps; and suggestions for service provision and policy changes. Research participants were recruited through promotional flyers distributed to local social service agencies and snowball sampling methods. Individuals who were interested in the interview were asked to contact the local project coordinators directly for further information and interview arrangements. In the first six months, the recruitment process for the women experiencing IPV was much slower than anticipated. In order to raise awareness about IPV and to promote the project, members of the research team offered several training workshops to social work students in Guangzhou at both undergraduate and graduate levels about the concepts of IPV and impacts of IPV on individuals and families. The recruitment process benefitted from these promotion efforts.

## Sample

Twenty-one women who had experienced IPV participated in this study. These women ranged in age from their early 20s to late 40s. Twelve were working full-time at the time of the study, five worked part-time or were self-employed, and the other four were staying at home. Twelve women had a college diploma or university education, six completed high school, two had some years of junior high or elementary education, and one did not report her education level. Nine women were married at the time of the study, eight had divorced, and four remained single after separation from their former common-law husband. Eleven women had at least one child under the age of 18, one woman was pregnant, two had adult children, and seven women had no children.

Thirty service providers from social service, health care, educational, and judicial sectors participated and came from relatively diverse backgrounds including 17 females and 13 males with years of work experience ranging from less than one year to 11 years specifically related to IPV against women. Among these service providers 20 of them were working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or for-profit organizations, and the other 10 worked in government units such as hospitals, schools, or legal aid centers. Their professions included nine lawyers or legal aid volunteers, six social workers or community service workers, six counseling psychologists, four physicians, three local magazine or newspaper columnists who specialized in family issues, and two teachers.

To preserve confidentiality, when quotes from the interviews are used in this paper, the participants are identified by the word 'Woman' and an individual letter

for those who experienced IPV and the word 'Worker' and an individual letter for the service providers.

## **Results**

Findings of the interviews were consistent with previous literature which documented that women who experienced IPV suffered from both physical and psychological health problems; reported negative impacts on their children as a result of witnessing the violence; encountered legal, socio-cultural, and economical barriers; and experienced inadequate and ineffective formal support systems (Carlson et al., 2002; Lee & Au, 2007; WHO, 2013). In addition, these women hoped for major changes in the criminal justice and community responses to IPV against women (United Nations, 2006; Ursel, Tutty, & LeMaistre, 2008; WHO, 2002). The following sections are organized around what the research participants suggested should be changed for ending IPV against women, following the ecological framework, at the micro, meso, exo, and macro levels.

### *Micro level*

Micro level refers to the individual relationships of the women (Heise, 1998; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008b). Personal upbringing such as preferred traditional two-parent family and expectation towards virginity at marriage for women, but not men, affected some women's perceptions of IPV and how they coped with a violent relationship. These women experienced a sense of guilt and hopelessness which made them hesitate to leave an abusive relationship:

My mother could not look after me. I was raised by my father and was always teased by others... I did not feel warmth [from my family]... I envied other children with both parents and felt that my life was hopeless. I did not have warmth in my childhood, so I wanted to get married and have the warmth... Because my childhood was like this, I don't like to argue or fight for some things. I feel like I can tolerate that, and then I would just tolerate that. (Woman J)

After we had come here and really lived together I found out the problem was very serious... I realize that he thought it was not worthwhile for him because his wife was not his first [a virgin]. (Woman N)

In addition to physical abuse, women in this study were suffering from different forms of psychological abuse including threats, offensive language, and denigration. Among all, verbal abuse was most common in the relationships described by these women:

For example when we go somewhere, we need to take a bus. If I did not listen to him and get on the bus he wanted, he would blame me, and all of a sudden he became a

different person. He would yell at me all the way, blame me along the way, for a whole hour on the bus; I would stay in the seat and not say anything. (Woman H)

They [the patients] told us that their husbands' language was very offensive whenever they started swearing and cursing. They would be as abusive as possible. Their language was so offensive to the extent that one would never have it before in one's whole life. These women could hardly imagine that their other halves, their husbands, could use such words against them. (Worker H, a counselor)

Another common type of psychological abuse was being ignored or being subject to indifference, which is uniquely called 'cold violence' in China (M. Chen, 2007; Rong, 2006). In the interviews with both women and service providers, 'cold violence' was common, but was not classified as IPV and could not be used as grounds for applying for divorce under the current marriage law in China:

Physical assaults against me happened all the time, like the day I did not answer his call. In addition to the physical abuse, he tortured me mentally, like using 'cold violence'. He just ignored me and did not talk to me at home all day. He seems to be happy to torture me mentally and see how painful I am and how long I could put up with this. (Woman A)

IPV not only affects the women, but also impacts the well-being of their children; therefore, one could assume that services should be developed for children who have witnessed or been affected by IPV. Findings from this study showed the importance of support services for other family members:

My daughter once said that 'I don't care about you both, if you both like to fight, then fight till death... She became very socially withdrawn and is very suspicious toward relationships because her parents distrust each other. (Woman B)

Many of the cases are related because initially it was a problem between husband and wife, then it developed into a problem with the children... The proportion of such cases is relatively high in our counseling service. (Worker H, a counselor)

To understand IPV in China at the micro level alone is inadequate, therefore, the following sections examine the intersectionality of IPV at meso, exo, and macro systems.

### *Meso-level intervention*

Meso level describes inter-relationships between personal networks (Heise, 1998; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008b). Almost all women and service providers who participated in this study expressed that existing formal support systems were inadequate

and ineffective. For instance, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the All China Women's Federation (hereafter called the Women's Federation) are primary formal support systems responsible for the prevention and intervention on IPV against women. However, the accessibility and availability of these formal supports were not meeting the needs of women in violent relationships:

I have asked my friend to search its [the Women's Federation] contact information for me on the internet because I did not know how. She got me something like the address and a phone number. I called for almost half a day. That number did not work anyway. (Woman D)

The Neighborhood Committee [under the administration of the Ministry of Civil Affairs] usually comes to get you when it is time to strictly enforce the one-child policy. For other things, they would not come contacting you. You may be fighting like crazy, until you hit each other and are sent to the hospital; otherwise, they would not care about that. (Woman J)

The husband has many connections with the police and the wife has no income . . . the police would lean towards the husband by saying to the woman things like that you should talk to your husband to solve the problem, and [the police] won't get involved. (Worker F, a legal aid volunteer)

The interviews showed that officials from these formal support systems were not oriented towards protecting women and their children experiencing IPV or constraining the perpetrator's behavior. It was evident to participants that procedures and protocols of formal support systems needed to be revised and more effective responses to reports on IPV needed to be developed.

### *Exo level*

Exo level encompasses the neighborhood, communities, or networks that surround the woman (Heise, 1998; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008b). When women sought assistance, the majority of the criminal justice and health care providers lacked knowledge on the negative impacts of IPV on women. The training to these service providers was reported to be inadequate to address the women's needs and proper training for those working in these helping professions was expressed as necessary:

We seldom talk about this [IPV against women], and have limited exposure to this. There was one course, in the medical school, a psychology course, which taught something relevant to this. Other than that, I rarely heard of it. (Worker K, a physician)

If at the very beginning there were some well-trusted agencies, which have trained professionals to provide assistance and advise how to problem solve when things



happened that would be better and prevent things going downhill. With some trained professionals to assist particularly on the psychological matters that would help a lot. (Woman E)

Cultural norms and beliefs also play a role in hindering women survivors to ask for counseling services. These norms and beliefs are shaped in part by the exo-level interactions. To address the problem, education on proper gender roles and equality between genders in intimate relationships should be delivered to children and youth in early years:

On one hand, people cannot financially afford counseling. On the other hand, there is a lack of awareness concerning psychological therapy. Many have not heard about it before. What is the use of psychological counseling? They charged you several hundred dollars, but just chatted with you [Laugh]. They think that it is not worth the money. (Worker H, a counselor)

There should be some proper education at junior high school on proper family relationships. This is because good family relationships would have an impact on the development of their children and their children's future marital relationships. (Woman B)

Moreover, counseling services for children who have been affected by IPV were identified as important to provide:

For children, they first need some counseling particularly if the couple have decided to separate. Children growing up in single-parent families face more challenges. Secondly, children brought up in families with IPV would develop some psychological problem that might need some counseling service to overcome those psychological issues. (Woman S)

The interactions between exo-level issues make it difficult for women to confront IPV. Like many other women in violent relationships, women in this study encountered financial constraints and childcare burdens that prevented them from seeking services that required a fee. In particular, women earning low wages or who did not work outside of the home were not able to afford such services. For instance, inability to secure safe and affordable housing could prevent women from leaving a violent relationship:

The worker from the neighborhood committee suggested me to report him [her husband] to the Women's Federation. I was not ready to do that because if I reported him I would not be able to pay the bills. I still rely on him to support me financially even though he is a trouble to me. (Woman P)

Since the birth of my child, he did not give me any money not to mention money for medical expenses for my child. I have to support my child, pay for my child's medical bills, which cost about two-thirds of my salary. (Woman F)

The husband threatened the woman resulting that she did not call the police. Moreover he threw her out of the house after beating her up. She had nowhere to go but to us... there was no shelter she could go to... not even a place she could stay over... no such a place. (Worker F, a legal aid volunteer)

At the time of writing this article, there were four women's shelters in Guangzhou for a population of 15 million and the normal duration of a woman's stay was 15 days. There was no second stage housing available after this point (Guangdong Women's Federation, n.d; Rong, 2013). Leaving a violent relationship means that abused women need a range of coordinated support services so that they do not have to repeat their story and will not be pushed around from service to service.

### *Macro-level intervention*

Macro level entails socio-cultural, economic, and political institutions that shape the perception and responses toward IPV (Heise, 1998; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008b). Data from this study portrayed a vivid reality of systematic barriers for woman survivors to reclaim justice. These systematic barriers include patriarchal values, narrow definition of IPV under the law, burden to the victims to provide proof, stringent criteria for legal aid, and discrimination against migrant workers. Findings from these interviews corroborated the literature that societal patriarchal beliefs and myths about IPV prevent timely and proper interventions (M. Chen, 2007; WHO, 2013). Such traditional beliefs also play a part in people's apathetic responses towards IPV against women:

For Chinese people, family scandal cannot be shared with others... I rarely spoke out because the risk would be too high. If you spoke out, how would other people look at you? How would others make comments about you? For sure they would say that you have done something wrong? (Woman H)

We Chinese believe that it's better to keep family scandals in the closet. Unless they are being abused very severely, they [abused women] won't go to the Women's Federation because they feel it is so shameful to seek help from others. Normally, these women only go to the Women's Federation when the abuse is so serious and persistent that they can't take it anymore and begin thinking about a divorce. (Worker F, a legal aid volunteer)

The definition of IPV is defined narrowly under the criminal law, primarily referring to severe physical violence. Other than concerns over the legal definition of IPV under criminal law, a civil petition for a divorce or compensation puts the

burden of proof on the victims, usually women. Concerns and frustrations were expressed through the data:

Abuse, we often relate it to violent behaviors, like beating her up so bad that she has to go to the hospital...but behaviors like swearing, or a slap in the face, are not considered as abuse, this is how people see it, people would not think the husband is abusive, but has a hot temper. (Worker K, a physician)

Sometimes we felt very helpless over how to provide evidence. If a woman wants a divorce [on the grounds of IPV] and the man said I have no income and have no property. The woman has no proof to show who the property they are living in belonged to...and the man refuses to pay maintenance...there is nothing we can do...the only way for us is to advise the woman to seek help from legal aid to see if they could help. (Worker Q, a civil servant)

Moreover, for cases without a police report or an injury assessment, it is difficult for women to claim their rights to be free from violence. The data illustrate that IPV against women is not treated as a crime in China as are similar acts of violence occurring outside the home:

Domestic violence is prohibited by the law [in China]...when the act of domestic violence reaches the point of breaching the law penal sanction will come into play. However, for cases that are not so serious [meeting the narrow criteria defined in the criminal law], the law will be powerless in dealing with such situations. Society will be left to resolve such conflicts by itself. (Worker F, a legal aid volunteer)

Unless very strong evidence was produced, the Court normally would not rule the case as domestic violence [under the current Marriage Law]...the wife would have to wait for [another] half a year before she could file again for divorce...my concern is what she could do to protect herself [thereafter]...The husband who did not want the divorce might even demand to have sex with her, insisting that they are still husband and wife. For the woman, this is a sexual assault; but under the circumstance [there is no law against marital rape in China], she could do nothing about it. (Worker M, a lawyer)

Furthermore, the criminal justice response to IPV against women does not address IPV in a way that reflects the dire impacts on women. Participants in this study supported changes to macro systems and policy development:

The Women's Federation needs more manpower...whenever they have a heavier case load; they would handle the more serious ones first. For the rest of the cases, they might put them on hold or handle them at a later time...By that time, the situation might have become so serious that is completely out of hand...If you don't have a

certain level of manpower, it will become quite difficult to cope with the demand. (Worker G, a psychological counselor)

For the media, like our magazine, can be sending some promotion and preventive messages to the public other than just answering letters from readers... We can use our influence to help people place more importance [on IPV]... We are a magazine under the provincial Women's Federation, we can do more on empowering women and marginalized groups. (Worker C, an editor of a women's magazine)

In addition, eligibility for legal aid or financial assistance is so restricted that many women would not qualify for these services. For women with low-incomes, such as migrant workers, more challenges were faced. For example, Guangzhou has set its minimum wage at \$1,300 Renminbi in 2011 (The People's Government of Guangzhou Municipality, 2011); however, women with minimum wages would not even be eligible for legal aid:

We have seen cases unable to get any help because financially they do not qualify for legal aid. Are there any other ways to help those women in the 'sandwich class' [those who are not meeting the means test and have limited income]? (Worker M, a lawyer)

Legal aid is for families with financial hardship... you have to provide evidence of your financial situation and various identity documents. (Worker G, a psychological counselor)

On top of all these barriers, some government officials, supported by policies, hold indifferent attitudes toward migrant workers who come from remote or rural areas and who do not hold permanent registered residence status in the cities. Data showed that the residence registration system creates discrimination against migrant workers:

Referring to the out of province girl that I just mentioned, they [people in the Women's Federation] would think that she screwed it up herself. When they talked to her on the phone, they said she should not be living with that man... They will judge whether it is a normal relationship before judging whether violence is right or not... Outsiders [migrants] do not feel like using community resources, and the locals feel like they are being invaded. (Worker E, a social worker)

I went to the Legal Department... [because]... I did not have enough money and wanted to apply for legal aid. They turned me down in short. They said I had a permanent registered residence in another province which does not allow me to apply for legal aid here. (Woman D)

The data in this study evidenced the complexity of IPV in China and suggests that effective interventions need to attend to the intersectionality of micro, meso, exo, and macro systems.

## Limitations of the study

Before proceeding to a discussion of the implications of this study, readers are cautioned not to assume that the findings of this study apply to other parts of China for several reasons. First, this study was conducted in Guangzhou in Southern China where the socio-cultural and economic contexts are very different from other regions in China. Moreover, the majority of women survivors (76%) had completed high school education or higher. The perception of IPV and coping mechanisms adopted by these women could be very different from women from rural or remote regions where educational attainment tends to be lower overall. Furthermore, the majority of service providers (68%) were working in non-profit, non-government, or for-profit organizations. These service providers might have different orientations to and perceptions of IPV than those working in the government sectors (e.g., the police, judges, etc.).

## Discussion

Findings of this study, similar to others, confirm that gender inequality is the root cause of IPV against women in China and that it prevents adequate and effective individual and system responses to free women from violent relationships (Cai & Wu, 2007; Dichter & Gelles, 2012; Humphreys et al., 2006; Pyles, 2012; UNFPA China, 2010).

### *Implications for social work practice*

Social workers, who are forming a new helping profession in China, could play much broader advocacy roles when responding to IPV matters. It should be noted that women survivors in this study did not mention much about approaching social workers for assistance or going to social service organizations for services. The concept of social work and social service organizations is fairly new in Guangzhou and in China. University education on social work only began to develop in the 2000s in Guangzhou (Li, Huang, & Han, 2012). Nevertheless, the Chinese government in 2010 became cognizant of the importance of this profession to address the concerns and needs of society and announced a policy to train 1.45 million social workers by 2020 (Z. Liu, 2012).

In December 2014, there were 155 Integrated Family Services Centers in Guangzhou with social workers who provided core services to families, youth, and seniors (W. Liu, 2014). As such, all districts in Guangzhou are basically

covered by family services offered by social workers. It is, thus, possible for social workers in Guangzhou to make a significant contribution to addressing the issue of IPV against women in new and effective ways.

### *Use of an integrated capabilities perspective and advocacy intervention*

We draw upon the capabilities perspective of social work practice to frame the potential responses of the social work profession as this perspective is consistent with the ecological model (P. M. Morris, 2002; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008a, 2008b). From the capabilities perspective, individual-level interventions should aim to promote the development of a woman's internal self-functioning as well as effecting change on her social environment to maximize her well-being. The capabilities perspective of distributive justice suggests that individuals have competencies and knowledge that allow them to be resilient and thrive in challenging situations and does not focus on a woman's deficiencies or deficits (Nussbaum, 1999; Pyles, 2012).

The core values of the capabilities perspective align closely with the advocacy intervention model – a model that has been documented as effective in the literature (Bybee & Sullivan, 2002; Jansson, 2010; Weisz, 2005; Wong et al., 2013). The capability of self-determination and the right of every person to shape their own life are crucial components in advocacy interventions as each individual defines the assistance they need. Through advocacy intervention, a woman survivor is paired with a personal advocate who is responsible for working with the woman by providing her with material, instrumental, informational, emotional, and/or social support (Bybee & Sullivan, 2005; Hays et al. 2007; Tam, 2004). Thus, an advocacy intervention emphasizes empowering individuals with their own capabilities or providing 'the resources and power to exercise self-determination to achieve well-being' (P. M. Morris, 2002, p. 368).

The need for an advocacy intervention was revealed in several ways in this study. The formal support systems are presently not very effective and many service providers are not adequately trained. In addition to providing material and emotional support (e.g., counseling) to women, social workers could act as service brokers to navigate with the woman through the different formal systems to access the resources needed. Some women, for instance, do not know to ask for a medical assessment report after an incident of physical or sexual abuse. Social workers in health care settings could inform these women of their rights and coordinate with related health care providers to make sure a medical certificate is issued. Moreover, going to the police station or some state departments (e.g., the Court, the Women's Federation, or the Neighborhood Committee) could be frustrating and even intimidating for some women, especially migrant women or women who have limited knowledge of their rights. Social workers could play an enabler and supporter role to accompany these women. If resources are lacking for social workers to have such intensive intervention with each case, alternatives, such as providing detailed information about their rights, the location of resources, and offering some role play or

peer support to empower women to navigate the systems themselves could be helpful.

Furthermore, the children and the perpetrators should not be ignored at the micro-level intervention. A variety of services for children impacted by IPV and men who have committed IPV should be developed to address short- and long-term effects on children and to help men develop more healthy relationships.

At the meso and exo levels, social workers may advocate on behalf of the service users to other service providers to develop proper interventions to victims and perpetrators. They could collaborate with other professions to create and implement well-defined protocols, to strengthen existing formal support services, such as the police, as well as workers at the neighborhood committees and the Women's Federations. Social workers could provide adequate training and coordination for formal support service providers to understand the complexity and impacts of IPV against women. In addition, to assist women leaving a violent relationship, social workers could play a leading role in the creation of new services, such as emergency shelters, second stage housing and affordable housing. Social workers trained in group work and community development skills could facilitate inter-agency collaboration between government and non-government organizations, as well as with academics, to enhance responsive and coordinated community approaches to addressing IPV. Also at the exo level, education on gender equity and making IPV against women socially unacceptable could be introduced at early stages for children and youth.

At the macro level, structural issues entail patriarchal beliefs, inadequate infrastructure, narrow definitions of IPV, burdens on women survivors to collect and provide evidence for civil petitions, and a rigid residence registration system that prevents migrant female workers from accessing needed services in China. To overcome these practical and structural obstacles to the prevention of IPV against women, social workers can play an important advocacy role. Social workers can draw on expertise to educate the public that psychological abuse including 'cold violence' is the most common among various forms of violence against women in China (Foshan Shi Fu Lian, 2007; Tang & Lai, 2008), but it is not recognized by society and the legal system (M. Chen, 2007; Tam et al., 2013). Advocating for lowering the eligibility for financial assistance and provision of free services or sliding scale fees for women not meeting the eligibility criteria could increase access to supports for women. On top of that, eligibility for legal aid should be reviewed to make legal assistance accessible to more women. Social workers could promote a gender-based analysis of IPV against women and reframe such violence as a public policy concern so as to guide the development of responsive criminal and civil legislation, viable social and health care policies, and accessible and accountable direct practices that aim at removing individual and systematic barriers.

Importantly, social workers can advocate further change on the residence registration system in China that allows migrant workers to enjoy equal citizenship. At the time of writing, there were several cities in China selected as test sites where the



residence registration system was lifted to allow rural migrants to enjoy equal status in urban areas (Melander & Pelikanova, 2013; The State Council, The People's Republic of China, 2014). The results of these experiments have yet to be released, but a report on the development of social work in China, which was published by the Social Work Research Center under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, indicated the Chinese government aims to expand the social work profession to 1.45 million in 2020 (IFSW, 2013). Being a recognized profession by the central government, social workers should embrace their advocacy role.

Women who have decided to leave abusive relationships need a variety of support services including assurance of safety, affordable accommodation, school placement for their children, and so on. A coordinated service system would prevent these women from falling into service gaps. Furthermore, employment skills training or community development initiatives such as micro-enterprise (Pyles, 2012; Smillie, 2009) could be developed to promote financial independence for women in violent relationships.

More importantly, social workers are advocates for social justice and equality so they could play a leadership role in lobbying for changes in policies such as the 'Domestic Violence Act' that was first reported at the National People's Congress in 2011. Social work academics and researchers could work more closely with other service providers and policy makers to ensure that women who have experienced IPV are heard and that policies address the problems and the needs expressed by women survivors and service providers. Social workers can speak about the limitations to the existing criminal law, the Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, and the residence registration systems. Social workers in the service and education sectors could play a leading role in reporting such limitations to related government ministries and advocating for changes.

## **Conclusion**

This study offers a unique contribution to understanding the future of social work practice regarding IPV prevention in Guangzhou and possibly throughout China. It offers insight into the problem from a socio-ecological framework that draws attention to the factors surrounding the individual victims and perpetrators and, thus, offers a much broader array of options for social work interventions. This study is one of very few studies conducting in-depth interviews with women survivors and service providers in China and provides first person experiences and desired improvements in the prevention of IPV.

Taken together, an ecological model, capability building perspective, and integrated advocacy intervention approach not only help to understand the complexity of the nature and impacts of IPV, but also provide direction to social workers who work with women survivors in the context of China. Social workers could work as a supporter, service broker, educator, facilitator, lobbyist, coordinator, counselor, and enabler to advocate changes at micro, meso, exo, and macro levels.



More importantly, social work education could incorporate core courses addressing IPV against women and advocacy skills so that new generations of social workers are ready for such roles. International collaborations among social work education programs and social service agencies could also be encouraged and developed so that social workers and social work educators in China could learn from experiences in other countries and generate culturally appropriate advocacy work to prevent and intervene on IPV in China.

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