

Research on Risk Factors and Help-seeking for Intimate Partner Violence among Women in China's Rural and Urban Area

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ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects 30% of females around China and it has brought increasing public attention in the past several years. A growing amount of research about IPV prevalence and its risk factors has been done in different regions of China such as Hongkong, Hunan, Henan, and Anhui. However, the research has shown contradicting results regarding IPV prevalence and its risk factors between urban and rural areas. Thus, this article compares the risk factors addressed between the urban and rural areas in China, suggesting that there are common risk factors including alcohol and drug abuse, relationship influences, and cultural and societal beliefs. Some demographic factors such as age and social economic status are differential factors that influence urban and rural women in distinct ways in terms of experiencing IPV. Moreover, barriers to help-seeking for IPV survivors such as cultural beliefs, societal unawareness, and flawed legal system are discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research and policy related to women's experience of IPV in disparate geographic areas have been provided.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence, Women, Urban, Rural, Risk factors

1. INTRODUCTION

IPV (Intimate Partner Violence) is defined as physical, sexual, and psychological harm inflicted by a current or former partner [1]. It is a global health concern [11] and has received attention from Chinese and the government of China more than ever in the past several years. Meanwhile, a growing amount of research has examined the prevalence rates and associated risk factors of IPV against women nationwide. However, little research investigates a comparative analysis on IPV among women in urban and rural settings.

This paper first reviews some common risk factors related to IPV against women across urban and rural areas and how those factors differently contribute to women's unique IPV experience in urban and rural areas. It also discusses the potential reasons why women suffering from IPV cannot get instant and appropriate help. Lastly, this paper additionally provides implications for future research and the policy regarding residential environment that is associated with one's sociology-demographic characteristics and IPV experience. Analyzing the commonalities and differences in risk factors between urban and rural areas,

as well as the similarities and differences in the barriers to seek help for women in urban and rural areas after experiencing intimate relationship violence can allow us to take a more comprehensive view of the different consequences that rural and urban women may suffer after IPV. After the differences in economic development and cultural background between urban and rural areas are taken into account, regulations for the protection of survivors of intimate relationship violence that are suitable for regions with different developments can be developed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A study based on 32,720 people in urban, rural and industrial areas of Hunan Province reported that the rates of IPV were 17.3%, 5.8%, and 25.0% respectively [11]. However, several other studies [7] [8] [9] reported much higher rates of IPV among women in rural areas. It is unknown whether such gap truly reflects the differences in residential contexts, for measurements or other factors might also influence the effective evaluations of prevalence rates of IPV.

In addition to the prevalence rates of IPV in different regions, some common risk factors of IPV among rural and urban Chinese women addressed in studies include young age, unemployment, and low income, which is aligned with western research [2] [3] [26]. With regard to relationship and family influences, marital status [15] [23], marital dissatisfaction and frequent conflicts [23] [24] [27], infidelity [23] [27], and the exposure to violence between parents [4] are considered significant risk factors of IPV victimization among Chinese women. In terms of cultural and societal factors, women who have acceptance of male dominance and violence in relationships have a higher risk of experiencing IPV [10] [23] [24]. Compared to studies in urban settings, there is much less research conducted in rural areas.

China is the fourth largest country in the world with 56 nationalities, which means that different geographic settings have various cultural beliefs that could contribute to women's unique IPV experience. One study shows that women in rural areas of China are more vulnerable to IPV than women in cities [6], which is inconsistent with the study conducted by Manyema et al (2018) in South Africa; the study showed that urban regions seemingly have more IPV and mental health difficulties than rural areas. However, Manyema et al (2018) also pointed out that such result could vary readily in function to cultural and socio-economic factors at individual, regional, and national level. Then, discovering which factors regarding IPV occurrence are comparatively universal, and which other factors are region- or nation-specific related still seems to need a broad range of further research considering the complexities of factors that IPV has. In light of regional differences that carry along the differences in cultural beliefs and socioeconomic status, there is a need for comparing rural women and urban women who experience IPV and exploring how those distinct factors affect their experience.

3. COMMON RISK FACTORS

3.1 Alcohol and drug use

Although inconsistent results regarding risk factors are manifested in urban and rural settings, alcohol and drug use [3] [16] [21] [23] [27], extramarital affairs [23] [27] and acceptance and poor understanding of IPV [16] [17] [21] [27] are common factors across rural and urban areas. In terms of alcohol and drug use, even if many consistent studies have reported the relationship between IPV and alcohol and illicit drug use, it is unknown whether such relationship can be best understood by a linear relationship or threshold effect or both [19]. It is also not sure whether there are differences regarding the underlying mechanism of such relationship between urban and rural settings.

3.2 Relationship influences

Extramarital affairs are associated with IPV among women across urban and rural areas. One study conducted in the outpatient gynecological clinic including rural and urban women noted that extramarital affairs were a strong predictor of IPV against women [27]. The other earlier study based on populations in central rural China indicated extramarital affairs were related to IPV against women [13]. Even if the extramarital affair is a general risk factor, there are differences in the ways of perpetrating IPV between urban and rural men. Various research showed that educated and wealthy men in cities are more likely to use psychological violence, also called cold violence, in order to ensure their partners/ wives be acquiescent to the third person [20] [25] [30]. The usual type of psychological violence includes withdrawal of any emotional and physical contact – the abused women expressed their feelings as if they were invisible to their husbands/partners [28]. However, rural men tended to perform physical violence such as pushing, slapping and throwing things [13]. Such a difference might be explained by the different levels of acceptance of physical violence and psychological violence in urban and rural settings, respectively.

3.3 Cultural and societal beliefs

Chinese patriarchal ideology's influence on male-on-female IPV has been examined in rural and urban settings. There are many ways to measure the impacts of patriarchal ideology on women's IPV experience. The regular questions to measure this dimension include "men should lead in sex and women should follow" [21], "men have good reasons to beat wives and women have obligation to have intercourse with husbands" [27]. Lin and other researchers investigated the influences of patriarchal ideology on female IPV experience in a big city from four dimensions including the justification of IPV, and the ideas about gender equality, family privacy and acceptance of male dominance [16]. It turned out that IPV justification stood out becoming strongly associated with all types of violence including physical and psychological violence, controlling behavior and sexual abuse. This is consistent with the other studies in which the relationship between IPV justification and IPV experience among dating adolescents was examined. However, one thing that is worth to be noted is that the acceptance of male dominance is weakly related to IPV among urban women [16] whereas other studies on rural areas indicated that the acceptance of male dominance has a strong connection with male-on-female IPV [9] [29]. This might be because urban women are more exposed to the modern culture that emphasizes women's equal rights, thereby undermining the influence of the factor. Nevertheless, rural women tend to have a stronger acceptance of male dominance because of their poor

understanding of IPV. One study reported 29.5 % of interviewed rural women had never heard of domestic violence and less than 50% of them regarded “no communication with wives” as IPV [29].

4. DIFFERENTIAL RISK FACTORS

4.1 Age

Despite the young age being regarded as a risk factor among urban women [3], elder women in rural areas are more vulnerable to IPV [29]. Specifically, rural women who were over 30 experienced higher prevalence rates of physical and psychosocial abuse [29]. It has been unknown whether such difference reflects the true regional differences or differences in proportional of different age groups among participants. Since lots of samples are based on married couples, one might speculate that marriage duration could be a confounding factor. Women in rural areas tend to get married earlier than women in cities. Therefore, their honeymoon period could be finished at an earlier age than women in cities. For example, when average rural women have a 5-year marriage, women in cities often just enter into marriage.

4.2 Social economic status

Although the bulk of studies documented that low family income and low socioeconomic of male partners [9] [21] lead to a higher risk of male-on-female violent behaviors among rural women, recent studies conducted in urbanized cities found that low family income and unemployment of male partners are not associated with male-on-female violent acts, but related to the controlling behavior [3] [31]. However, it is not sure the specific types of controlling behavior because they were not clarified in the study [31]. Besides, Chan’s study (2008) suggested that the couples in urban areas who were employed, thus had higher income, were at a higher risk of male-on-female IPV. One of the explanations for that could be frequent conflicts happening in terms of financial issues since couples both have contributions to family income. In that case, men tend to solve those conflicts by perpetrating IPV while women ask for more autonomy in financial management. However, it is unknown whether such IPV is bidirectional because the male respondents did not include in the study [3]. On the other hand, rural women have a comparatively lower contribution to family income since men are the main labor power of agricultural work. Studies showed that women’s contribution to family income was considered as a more significant risk factor of IPV than family income status [3] [8] [23]. In other words, women are more likely to face increasing IPV if they financially depend on their male partners. More research has to be done in Chinese rural areas to explore whether low income status and low socioeconomic of male partners

would remain significant risk factors after controlling women’s contribution to family income.

5. BARRIERS TO HELP-SEEKING AMONG FEMALE IPV SURVIVORS

5.1 Cultural belief and Societal unawareness

The common dilemma rural and urban women who suffer from IPV face is that they are blocked from seeking help. Firstly, because the public often have the concept of “family ugliness should not be publicized” and “pitiful people must be somewhat hateful”, intimate partner violence is misinterpreted as a shame for women, which makes them become unwilling and afraid to ask for help; according to statistics from the All-China Women's Federation, as of the end of 2019, 30% of married women in 270 million households across the country had suffered domestic violence; in the face of violence, women had been abused an average of 35 times before choosing to report to the police. Secondly, women who experience IPV often have no way to seek help or fail repeatedly, resulting in learned helplessness in society. In the chapter of the social ecology of domestic violence in “China Studies”, the author expounds the obstacles faced by survivors of domestic violence when they seek help in different dimensions: 1) Maybe due to the lack of awareness and knowledge of gender power and domestic violence, survivors’ divorce application is usually rejected by the judge. 2) Lawyers have professional knowledge in evidence collection, but they lack the information about referral and asylum information for survivors. 3) The hospital only treats the disease, and has no awareness of referral for survivors of IPV. Since survivors of IPV cannot receive appropriate services from various resources, they become desperate about their situations, even resorting to suicide. According to statistics from the All-China Women's Federation, nearly 100,000 women in China commit suicide every year, of which 60% are due to domestic violence.

5.2 Flawed legal system

The “Anti-Domestic Violence Law of the People's Republic of China” was officially implemented in March 2016, which marked the first time that China has established a personal safety protection order system in the form of national legislation. For “the parties concerned have suffered domestic violence or faced the real danger of domestic violence, and have filed a complaint with the people's court, courts should accept applications for personal safety protection orders.” However, the existing system still constitutes barriers for female IPV survivors to seek help. 1) China's national violence law only punishes the perpetrator's behavior, and does not strive to punish their verbal and emotional violence, which makes it impossible for a partner who is

only threatened by language to be protected by the law. 2) The Anti-Domestic Violence Law only targets heterosexual and cohabiting groups, and does not apply to non-cohabiting couples or sexual minorities, which makes couples who are in an intimate relationship but not living together or sexual minority couples unable to obtain legal protection. 3) The Anti-Domestic Violence Law does not clearly stipulate evidence required for issuing a protection order, and there is no specific and clear requirement on the responsibilities of the public security and the court in the process of supervising the implementation of the security order, so that the grassroots courts do not know how to supervise the implementation of the safety order. In order to avoid the subsequent unknown responsibility, the standard will be set too high by the courts when the protection order is actually issued. Sometimes the evidence required by the court needs to meet the standard of a divorce case, consequently, female IPV survivors without sufficient domestic violence evidence collected cannot be protected by the law.

5.3 Rural-urban divide

In addition to the shortcomings of the current system for protecting IPV female survivors, the differences in economic development between rural and urban areas also cause different aspects and different degrees of obstacles for female IPV survivors in different regions to seek help. A meta analysis has been conducted on 63 articles about the similarities and differences in IPV in rural areas and urban areas [5]. It is mentioned in the article that rural women might suffer from worse physical and mental health because of “the lack of availability, accessibility, and quality of IPV services.” Besides, IPV female survivors in rural areas expect less government intervention in violent acts. To my best knowledge, there is no article addressing urban-rural comparison of how IPV female survivors seek help after intimate partner violence in China. But many articles noted that the lack of knowledge of intimate partner violence among rural women and the high acceptance of male dominance will deepen their belief that IPV is a family matter; and the belief might prevent them from seeking help outside. Although urban women might be more likely to be equipped with IPV knowledge, they still face a flawed system of law practice regarding IPV protection and cannot get their rights guaranteed in a timely manner.

6. SUGGESTIONS

In view of the above-mentioned barriers for IPV female survivors to seek help, the following measures are worth considering:

1) The Supreme People's Court should establish a unified procedure for the enforcement of personal safety

orders. Today, different provinces in China do not have a unified procedure for the implementation of personal safety orders, which can easily lead to unclear responsibilities of different functional departments; this will cause confusion for police and court in the implementation of safety orders in local cities, which not only greatly reduces the completion of personal safety orders, but also puts survivors of IPV in danger again. In terms of responsibilities, the public security, as the front-line of defense against IPV, should have knowledge and awareness of referring and tracking IPV survivors and make sure their safety when they get calls from those endangered IPV female survivors. Now IPV incidents can only be intervened by police officers that belong to the districts where those IPV incidents occur. So if IPV survivors call from different areas, the police officer probably would not manage the calls. This will make survivors who have the courage to try to ask for help give up after being rejected by the authorities.

2) Central government can incorporate local IPV interventions into performance appraisals to form an incentive mechanism; let local officials pay attention to the thoroughness of the implementation of IPV interventions rather than just shouting slogans. Meanwhile, it can be considered to document IPV incidents into the abuser's credit information system. After being included in the credit information system, it will hinder the abuser's future job search and other businesses, and the real cost will make potential abusers be aware of the consequences of IPV.

3) Specific regulations against IPV should be issued at the local level. Since the definition of domestic violence in the national anti-domestic violence law and the issuance process of protection order are not clearly stipulated so far, policy and penalty regarding IPV are refined and specified corresponding to local policy based on the national anti-domestic violence law in 13 cities in China. In Inner Mongolia, for example, ex-spouse and partnership without cohabiting status are covered by anti-domestic violence policy whereas the national anti-domestic violence law does not mention those relationships. More cities should clarify the vague contents of the national anti-domestic violence law according to their own situations.

4) It is necessary for China to learn from foreign advanced systems against IPV. The measures for compulsory correction of perpetrators have not been clearly stipulated in Chinese anti-domestic violence laws. However, the compulsory correction of perpetrators in Western countries has already been practiced for years and their policies and penalties against IPV are worth referring to for China. In Seattle, perpetrators of IPV need to complete a 12-month compulsory psychological correction program at their own expense. The standards of the correction program are set according to the government regulations and

certified by a special organization. The purpose is to help perpetrators to stop their violent behaviors and ensure the safety of survivors. If the perpetrator refuses or discontinues the program, he may face detention, imprisonment, etc.

7. CONCLUSION

The article mainly discusses the differences and similarities of risk factors of IPV survivors between urban and rural areas, and finds that alcohol and substance abuse, extramarital affairs and cultural beliefs are risk factors in both rural and urban areas. However, in terms of IPV related to extramarital affairs, urban and rural perpetrators have different forms of violence. Urban perpetrators are more likely to perpetrate emotional violence while rural perpetrators use behavioral violence such as pushing. In terms of cultural beliefs, the justification of IPV is a strong risk factor in both rural and urban locals, but male dominance is more closely related to IPV in rural areas. In addition, age and low-income households and low socioeconomic of the male partner, as risk factors, also have different performances in urban and rural areas. In rural areas, older people are more likely to suffer from IPV, while in cities the opposite is true. This may be because rural women get married at a relatively young age, so marriage can be a protective factor in the early honeymoon period. Finally, low-income families are considered as a risk factor for IPV in rural areas, but not in cities. This result may be related to the contribution of women to household income in both urban and rural areas. Rural women are more reliant on men as breadwinners in the family while urban women are not, so there is a need for future researchers to explore whether low-income families can still be statistically and significantly associated with IPV after involving women's contribution to family income as a variable.

In addition to analyzing the differences in risk factors of IPV between urban and rural areas, this paper also points out the barriers that Chinese women who suffer from IPV may face while seeking help under the current legal system, as well as the differences in barriers between urban and rural areas. Finally, some solutions are proposed to solve the obstacles. In order to better improve the policies of anti-domestic violence laws in various regions, and help improve the availability and the accessibility of IPV services to rural women, and the quality of services received by urban women, more research is needed to explore empirical studies on the differences in risk factors of IPV between urban and rural areas, and the differences in barriers that women in different regions encounter when they seek help after experiencing IPV.

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