

Exploring Male Victimization: A Review of Features of Cis-gendered Men's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence and Help-seeking Challenges in Mainland, China

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Abstract: In recent years, as the experiences of female victims of intimate partner violence have been extensively studied, an increasing number of Western researchers have begun to focus on male victims and conduct related studies. However, due to reporting gaps and help-seeking difficulties, male victims of intimate partner violence in China still receive relatively little attention, and there remains a significant gap in research in this area. Therefore, this review, based on a qualitative analysis of 23 articles, summarizes some of the common forms and consequences of trauma shared by male victims of intimate partner violence. It also examines the subjective and objective reasons behind the difficulties male victims face in seeking help, considering China's unique context. These reasons include the changes in gender ideology in China after the reform and opening-up, traditional masculinity emphasized by Chinese cultural norms, and the lack of attention and professionalism in Chinese social work organizations and other social service providers regarding male victims of intimate partner violence.

Keywords: Intimate partner violence, Male victimization, Reporting gap, Chinese context

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese government has placed increasing emphasis on the health of its people. In the latest National Health Commission's 2025 work plan, the government highlights that at least one hospital in each city should offer psychological and sleep clinics, and it aims to promote the nationwide application of the unified psychological support hotline 12356. This demonstrates that China has placed greater importance on the mental health of its people compared to previous years. World Health Organization has defined Intimate partner violence (IPV) as any behavior by a current or former intimate partner that causes physical, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors, including financial abuse [1]. The victimization of men in intimate partner violence has long been overlooked by society, and the corresponding social support is also limited [2]. When men experience intimate partner violence, in addition to physical injuries, their mental health can be severely impacted. This is reflected in emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear, and low self-esteem, as well as symptoms like insomnia [3]. In China, in cases of intimate partner violence, the frequency of reported psychological abuse by male partners is significantly higher than that reported by female partners [4]. Therefore, studying male victims of intimate partner violence helps broaden our understanding of the sources of Chinese men's psychological issues, allowing us to explore the causes

of mental health problems in men from perspectives different from everyday stress, work anxiety, and so on. This will further lay the foundation for research into Chinese men's mental health.

Intimate partner violence is a health issue that affects everyone, regardless of gender, age, or sexual orientation [5]. Over the years, since intimate partner violence entered the attention of feminist and gender scholars, in most cases, men are always perceived as the perpetrators of intimate partner violence [6]. Thus, heteronormative intimate partner violence experienced by cis-gendered women has been extensively studied. Previous research and surveys have largely focused on the physical injuries suffered by victims of intimate partner violence, such as being slapped, pushed, or shove [7]. In recent years, with the development of psychology and the growing attention to mental health, researchers have gradually shifted their focus to the negative impact of intimate partner violence on mental health. It is researched that women who experience long-term intimate partner violence are likely to exhibit feelings of fear, low self-esteem, and self-doubt, which can also affect their interpersonal functioning to varying degrees [3]. Research on intimate partner violence in China began relatively late. It wasn't until the 1990s that China started conducting initial studies on violence against women. However, research on male victims of intimate partner violence in China is even more limited, with related studies only emerging in the past decade. In addition to the societal attention towards male victims being significantly lower than that towards female victims, the subjective and objective barriers that male victims face when seeking help also contribute to this research gap. Therefore, this study aims to explore the underlying causes of these barriers through the lens of China's unique gender ideology and patriarchal societal framework, which emphasize traditional notions of masculinity.

Based on the above background, this study aims to address the following three questions: First, what physical and psychological harm do men experience in intimate partner violence? Second, what negative impacts does intimate partner violence have on the physical and mental health of men? Third, why do Chinese men face numerous difficulties when reporting intimate partner violence or seeking help? Aligning with national policies on public mental health, this study aims to enhance attention in academic fields, government, and society toward male victims of intimate partner violence and their mental health. It seeks to promote the implementation of relevant public policies and social support, ultimately improving the well-being of the general population.

2. Literature Survey

Figure 1 illustrates the annual number of papers retrieved using the search terms “Male Victims of Intimate Partner Violence” and “Help-seeking Challenges” on Google Scholar. The total number of relevant literatures has risen from 941 in 2015 to 2770 in 2024, showing a steady growth trend. However, if the restriction “Chinese” is added, the number of publications would be significantly reduced. There is a significant lack of literature specifically addressing male victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) in China, as found on Google Scholar. Most relevant studies focus on surveys and research conducted in the Hong Kong region, while literature concerning mainland Chinese men is nearly nonexistent. A search on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) using keywords such as “male victims” and “intimate partner violence” yields only one relevant paper. This highlights a substantial research gap in the field of male victims of IPV in China.

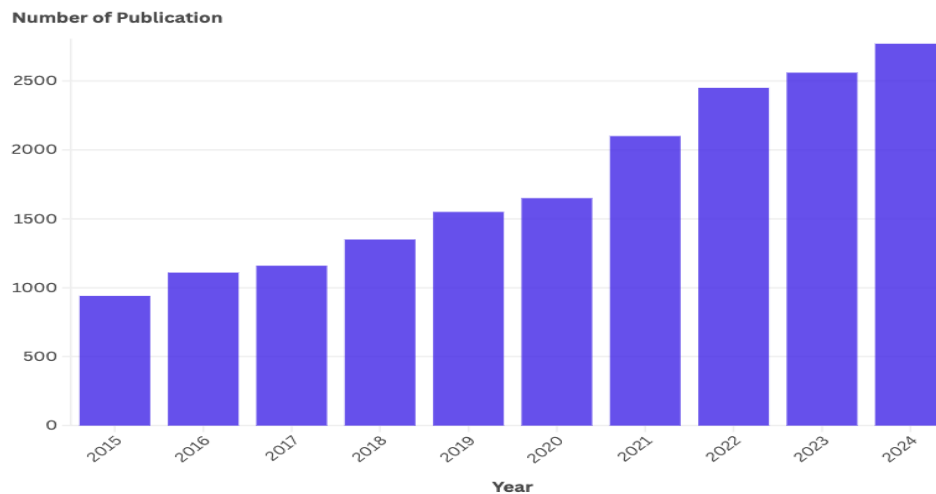


Figure 1: The number of papers searched using “Male Victims of Intimate Partner Violence” and “Help-seeking Challenges” per year

3. Cis-gendered Men’s Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

3.1. Forms of harm

Intimate partner violence experienced by men includes four types of violent behavior: (a) physical abuse; (b) sexual abuse; (c) threats of physical or sexual abuse; and (d) emotional abuse [8]. The two most reported types of harm by male victims are physical harm and emotional harm [9]. Carmo et al. concluded 11 types of physical harm: scratching, punching, blunt instrument, slapping, kicking, biting, pushing, grabbing, other instrument, sharp instrument and others [6]. Follingstad et al. defined six types of emotional abuse: (a) verbal attacks; (b) isolation; (c) jealousy/possessiveness; (d) verbal threats of harm, abuse or torture; (e) threats to divorce, abandon, or have an affair; (f) damage to or destruction of personal property [10]. Sometimes, emotional abuse towards men can occur alongside physical harm, while at other times, emotional abuse exists on its own. In some cases, the harm caused by emotional abuse is greater than that caused by physical violence [11]. For a long time, due to the differences in physical size and strength between men and women, and within the gender ideological framework that views men as the sexual subjects, the scope of sexual abuse has been limited to "rape" or “forced sex” where men are seen as perpetrators and women as victims. However, research by Scott-Storey et al. indicates that men can also experience sexual violence from women in intimate relationships. For instance, male victims have shared experiences of being manipulated or pressured by their partners into participating in unwanted sexual acts or unprotected sex, often through threats, manipulation, coercion, and false assurances [12].

3.2. Trauma outcomes and impacts on mental health

Intimate partner violence can result in both physical and psychological trauma for men. From a physical perspective, male victims may suffer from physical injuries, and some may even die as a result. The trauma caused by physical injuries primarily includes axe injuries, burns, injuries from fireplace pokers and bricks, and gunshot wounds [13]. Cascardi et al. found that 2% of men who reported experiencing either minor or severe intimate partner violence also mentioned sustaining broken bones, broken teeth, and/or injuries to a sensory organ [14]. From a psychological perspective, male victims of intimate partner violence often experience feelings of anger, emotional pain, shame, and fear [15]. Furthermore, they tend to show greater levels of depression, stress, psychological

distress, and psychosomatic symptoms compared to men who have not experienced intimate partner violence [16]. Additionally, men who have endured sexual abuse in intimate relationships may struggle with lasting emotional turmoil due to these experiences [13].

3.3. Reporting gap and difficulties of help-seeking faced by Chinese male victims

Male victims of intimate partner violence face two main obstacles when trying to report the harm they have experienced: subjective reluctance and objective difficulties. Subjectively, Chinese male victims are generally unwilling to seek external help. On one hand, they feel embarrassed, as being bullied by a female partner contradicts the traditional image of masculinity. On the other hand, they are heavily influenced by the Chinese cultural belief that "family shame should not be aired outside," and feel that the awkwardness of intimate partner violence should not be exposed to outsiders to avoid ridicule [9]. Objectively, when male victims confide in friends or family about the harm they have suffered, they often receive a lack of understanding and sympathy, and may even be met with doubt and ridicule [17]. When male victims seek formal help from institutions such as the police, domestic violence agencies, the legal system, healthcare, and social services, most victims believe that these resources are unhelpful. For example, when male victims approach the police or social services, their needs are often ignored, and some may even face ridicule, as traditional beliefs tend to portray men as perpetrators in intimate partner violence cases [18].

4. The Reasons behind the gap and difficulties in Chinese context

4.1. Masculinity in the Chinese gender ideology after the reform and opening-up

With the development of reform and opening-up and marketization in China, the private and public spheres gradually became separated, which promoted the widespread rise and spread of gender essentialism in China, emphasizing the biological sex differences between men and women [19]. While the roles and value of women in the workplace have been weakened, the primacy of men has been emphasized. In the family sphere, men are seen as having greater control and authority, while women are regarded as dependent on men [20]. The research conducted by Hird found that, after the reform and opening-up, China's emergence as a major economic, political, and military power, coupled with the government's push for "patriotic education," has fostered the development of nationalist masculinities that blend elements of Confucianism, Maoism, and market-driven ideals [21]. This means that masculinity in China's traditional gender ideology is emphasized by the socio-cultural environment, and men are pressured to conform to this masculinity to meet the expectations of mainstream values. As a result, when Chinese men experience violence in intimate relationships, they often choose to conceal it to avoid appearing weak or feminized, which would contradict the expectations of masculinity.

4.2. The shortage and inefficiency of formal help givers

For a long time, professional organizations providing support for victims of intimate partner violence have defined women as the victims, and as a result, the help and services they offer have been designed with women as the target. In Tsui et al.'s research, one-third of service providers reported that male survivors of intimate partner violence feel that the services are primarily aimed at women, leading them to feel isolated and overlooked by mainstream support systems [22]. Also, Female perpetrators arrested for violence against a male partner are often met with more sympathy than their male counterparts who commit similar offenses [2]. Therefore, the violence that men experience in intimate relationships is not taken seriously by professional organizations. In addition, in China, social work is primarily undertaken by the government and public sectors, with few private social

service organizations, and there is a lack of relevant policies and financial support for them. According to Article 13 of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law of the People's Republic of China, male victims can seek help from the perpetrator's workplace, residents' committees, village committees, and other organizations. Additionally, they can report the incident to the public security authorities or file a lawsuit with the people's courts according to the law. However, residents' committees and village committees are not professional organizations for handling intimate partner violence cases. Most of them can only play a mediating role and cannot provide professional help for the trauma consequences experienced by male victims. With the development of social work in China, more and more social work organizations have emerged. However, due to a lack of publicity and policy support, male victims are often unaware of the existence of these organizations, so their help-seeking is limited to lawyers and the police [23].

5. Conclusion

This study aims to provide a comprehensive review of the experiences of male victims of intimate partner violence and the reporting gaps and help-seeking difficulties faced by male victims in the Chinese context. Based on a qualitative analysis of 23 related articles, the study finds that men, too, experience various forms of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse from women in intimate relationships, with emotional abuse causing more significant and long-term distress for male victims. Under the combined influence of subjective and objective factors, Chinese men tend to remain silent about the violence they suffer from their partners. Even when they muster the courage to seek help, they often cannot obtain strong support due to the low level of societal attention to this issue and the insufficient professionalism of social organizations. In this regard, the study analyzes and summarizes the changes in gender ideology in China since the reform and opening-up, traditional notions of masculinity, and the development of social work and services in China, attempting to fill the research gap in this area. However, due to the limited relevant literature, the study struggles to explore and summarize the unique experiences of male victims in China compared to men in Western societies. Additionally, since the only legally recognized intimate partner relationship in Chinese society is marriage, much of the research in China focuses on domestic violence rather than the broader scope of intimate partner violence. Therefore, future research on intimate partner violence in China could not only focus on female victims but also shift the research perspective to male victims and examine violence in intimate relationships beyond the family context.

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