

USALI Perspectives

The Long Road to Ending Gendered Violence in China

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In June 2022, a group of men **violently attacked four women** at a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan, China, after one of the women rejected a pickup attempt. Video of the attack went viral, and millions of Chinese on social media expressed outrage at the slow response of police and their attempts to downplay the women's injuries as minor. What happened next revealed the problem at the heart of gendered violence in China: instead of acknowledging the role gender played in the attack, authorities treated it as a **case of gang criminality**. They announced a **nationwide crackdown** on gangs and police collusion with gangs – a move that,

while welcomed by many citizens, nevertheless failed to strike at the root of violence against women.

In fact, gendered violence is rife in contemporary China in both public and private spaces. A study by the advocacy group Beijing Equality found that although the Anti-Domestic Violence Law took effect in March 2016, domestic abuse remains widespread. Between March 2016 and December 2019, there were **942 reported cases of domestic violence nationwide, resulting in 1,214 deaths**; most of the victims were women. (These numbers likely reflect under-reporting.) In 2013, the

UN Population Fund published a study that found intimate partner violence is pervasive, with 52% of Chinese men surveyed admitting they had engaged in physical or sexual violence against their partner. Among men who admitted to rape, the most commonly cited motivation was “**sexual entitlement**” – a belief that they deserved, and thus should possess, the oft-objectified bodies of women. Passage of the law prohibiting domestic violence – the first comprehensive legislation of its kind in China – was legally significant, but the lack of effective enforcement or changes to social norms and attitudes meant that it made little real difference.

Two major obstacles make it difficult for female victims of domestic abuse to access justice through the Chinese judicial system, let alone find genuine protection and deterrence of future violence.

The first is the lack of strong leadership from the central government to press for systemic change within the Chinese state. Rather, district and municipal actors have played the main role in steering implementation of the relevant legislation. Feng Yuan, a feminist scholar and the founder of Equality, **observed** that anti-domestic violence efforts have been most successful in areas where local leaders “have made fighting domestic violence a priority and have implemented corresponding

training and work requirements for front-line personnel.”

The converse also holds true: the lack of centralized training, progress monitoring, and internal accountability mechanisms within public security departments has meant that the crackdown on violence against women has been sluggish in areas where local leaders do not view it as a top policy priority or make it a “key performance indicator” for promotion. This is further exacerbated by the **buck-passing** between government departments such as public security and civil affairs and state-affiliated organizations such as the All-China Women’s Federation.

It does not help, of course, that the Chinese bureaucracy remains a heavily **male-dominated environment**, especially at the very top. There were no women in the Politburo line-up unveiled in the 20th Communist Party Congress in October, and only 11 of the 205 Central Committee seats went to women.

The second major obstacle is the refusal by Chinese law enforcement and judicial actors to openly and unambiguously acknowledge the gendered dimension of violence against women. When discussing cases such as the attack at the Tangshan barbecue restaurant or the discovery of a **trafficking victim chained in a hut in Xuzhou, Jiangsu province**, the state

media and officials often frame them as standalone episodes of violence or criminality.

Sometimes front-line police officers and their commanders are correctly punished for failing to respond more quickly or even being complicit in cases of gender-based violence. Yet conspicuously absent is any acknowledgment that toxic masculinity – rooted as much in traditional Chinese values (see Birdwhistell’s [discussion](#) of Mencius’ ‘Three Subordinations’ (三從) as in the sexualization of women imported into China as a [side product](#) of the country’s reform and opening-up) – has played an instrumental role in legitimizing misogynistic attitudes among Chinese men.

Eliminating gender from the legal discussion contributes to a broader problem of hermeneutical deprivation in Chinese law, in which key actors lack the language and awareness required to process the trauma suffered by female victims. Despite attempts at reforms, Chinese [courts remain ill-equipped](#) to take seriously the testimonies and experiences of victims of gendered violence. After incidents like the attack at the Tangshan restaurant, official prescriptions have centered on maintaining law and order rather than spreading awareness of the troubling consequences of patriarchal norms. This both stems from and reinforces the

broader exclusion of female voices from conversations about social policy and governance.

The formal contents of laws are helpful in establishing the boundaries of what the state permits (or prohibits), but do very little to encourage genuine respect for women. The latest revisions to the Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women ([amended on October 30 2022](#)) fall short of what is needed. Reforming the Chinese legal and political systems to tackle these issues must stay on the agenda: legislation must be updated to reflect both contemporary understandings about the multi-faceted nature of violence – physical and psychological – that women experience, and the demands of a new generation of women.

At the same time, the essential complement to top-down legal change is grassroots, bottom-up advocacy for better implementation of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, laws against trafficking women, and other legislation that aim to protect women’s rights. Yet grassroots attempts at feminist [consciousness-raising](#) have increasingly been viewed with suspicion by a state apparatus that sees such activity as a potential challenge to its authority.

Closer engagement with sympathetic officials and provision of economic support, psychological counseling, and

legal aid on a one-on-one basis to victims of gender-based violence may be all that is possible at the moment. Ultimately, whether and when the efforts of Chinese feminists can make headway against deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes turns on not only

their own strength and political capital, but whether the Chinese party-state can recognize the seeds of gender-based discrimination latent in its own public discourse, policies, and legal system.



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