



# The Influence of the Ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Violence in China

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## Abstract

The unprecedented outbreak and continuous spread of the COVID-19 virus starting in December 2019 resulted in a strict lockdown and nationwide long-term home isolation, which has possibly led to increased levels of family violence in China. This commentary aims to explore two issues related to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on family violence in China, with intimate partner violence as its most common form. These two issues are whether the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed had a negative impact on family violence and, if so, what its specific influences upon family violence in China have been. This commentary is largely descriptive and based upon previously published literature and public statistical reports from newspaper, government, and criminal justice sources on family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Despite the lack of relevant and accurate nationwide statistics on family violence in China, multiple reports seem to suggest that family violence has surged during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increase in family violence may be primarily due to the large-scale lockdown that aggravates family conflicts, economic distress and tension caused by the pandemic among family members, and inadequate support for victims of family violence during the pandemic. Family violence has become an important social issue that needs to be dealt properly and swiftly during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as agencies and service sectors, need to be aware of the needs of family violence victims and provide appropriate and immediate assistance to the victims during the pandemic. A detailed discussion of the policy implications and suggestions for future research are provided at the end of this commentary.

**Keywords** Family violence · COVID-19 pandemic · Lockdown · China

This commentary explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon family violence in China. In doing so, it aims to answer the following two questions: Has the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on family violence, with intimate partner violence as its most common form? If so, what specific influence has the pandemic had on family violence in China?

## The Relationship between Pandemics and Family Violence: Theory and Literature

The impact of social structural factors, including public health crises, upon family violence has been addressed by social

structural theory that views violence as an intrinsic part of a given social structure (McCall and Shields 1986; Gelles and Maynard 1987). According to this theory, family violence is a coping strategy or reaction to the stress/strain caused by social structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, isolation, race and ethnicity, and ecological features (Flowers 2000; Gelles and Maynard 1987; Utech 1994). Families who are less educated and have lower incomes and occupational statuses are more vulnerable to structural and situational stress and are therefore more likely to experience family violence. An example of this is found in a study that uses data from the “1999-2000 Chinese Health and Family Life Survey”, which included a nationally representative sample of the adult population aged 20–64. This study claims that the significant risk factors for family violence include sexual jealousy, patriarchal beliefs, low female contribution to household income, low male socioeconomic status, alcohol consumption, and residence in regions other than south and south-east China (i.e., developed regions) (Parish et al. 2004).

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In general, the perpetrators of family violence have been male, poor, and un- or underemployed (Flowers 2000). Although family violence is a term with obvious neutrality, which does not indicate gender superiority against another, it is almost always expressed as a gender-crime, of which women are the most common victims, and the perpetrators mostly are men (H. Zhang). Through surveying 3579 households from Xiangtan prefecture-city in Hunan province, which is a landlocked province in south-central China, the researcher has found that the ratio of male perpetrators (69.2%) was higher than female perpetrators (30.8%), and the education levels of perpetrators were significantly lower than those of the controls ( $P < 0.01$ ) (Chen 2019). These findings also align with data from the western counterparts.

An infectious disease outbreak that is viewed as a public health crisis or disaster is often accompanied by negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These negative emotions are caused by the fear of infection, social isolation, inadequate health communications, limited access to support systems, and the loss of jobs or income (Campbell 2020). A study conducted in Hong Kong interviewed 90 survivors of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and has found that 47.8% of the subjects had PTSD at some point after the SARS outbreak, while 25.6% still suffered from PTSD at 30 months post-SARS (Mak et al. 2010). Another study surveying more than 800 men and women in Hong Kong has shown that a high percentage of the respondents felt helpless, horrified, and apprehensive because of SARS. These negative emotions were more or less caused by increased work stress, financial stresses, and changes in social life as a result of SARS (Lau et al. 2005). Qiu et al. (2018) have further analyzed feedback from documents, informants, and focus groups on events during the SARS and H7N9 outbreaks and claim that both outbreaks had an impact upon China. This has then caused significant negative effects upon public health, the economy, and even national security. In Toronto, Canada, a study has found that the SARS outbreak resulted in a higher level of psychological distress among 129 sampled quarantined individuals. In this regard, longer duration of quarantine was associated with a higher risk of distress and PTSD (Hawryluck et al. 2004). Similarly, research on the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreak confirms that this pandemic accompanied by quarantine may have led to mental health problems among the respondents studied (Jeong et al. 2016; Kim et al. 2018). A more recent study examining the impact of COVID-19 upon the psychological problems of the Chinese respondents shows higher rates of anxiety, depression, hazardous and harmful alcohol use, and lower mental well-being as compared with the usual ratios (Ahmed et al.

2020). Many of these studies, however, have not examined the direct impact of infectious disease outbreaks on family violence.

Despite the lack of data directly measuring the relationship between pandemics of infectious diseases and family violence, previous research has provided evidence that indicates increased levels of family violence during or after large-scale disasters. More specifically, studies in both developing and developed countries have comprehensively demonstrated that family violence increased in the aftermath of natural disasters (Fothergill 2008; Anastario et al. 2009; Chan and Zhang 2011; Gearhart et al. 2018; Rezaeian 2013), such as earthquakes (Chan and Zhang 2011), floods (Gearhart et al. 2018) and hurricanes (Anastario et al. 2009; Schumacher et al. 2010). These events were also accompanied by an increase in divorce rates and child abuse (Fothergill 2008). Kouadio et al. (2012) argued that these natural disasters lead to the displacement of large numbers of people, which aggravates the coordinated risk factors of disease transmission and causes outbreaks of infectious diseases.

According to a number of newspaper and governmental reports, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased levels of family violence worldwide (Taub 2020). This increase in family violence is so critical that it has been described as a “double pandemic” (Bettinger-Lopez and Bro 2020) and a “new crisis” (Taub 2020). Relatedly, Usher et al. (2020) reports that the COVID-19 pandemic has exerted an impact upon family violence by increasing personal and collective vulnerabilities and reducing support options for victims. Peterman et al. (2020) has gone one step further to identify the detailed pathways that link pandemics and family violence based upon the existing published and gray literature. The factors or pathways that he identifies include economic insecurity and poverty-related stress, quarantines and social isolation, disaster- and conflict-related unrest and instability, exposure to exploitative relationships due to changing demographics, reduced health service availability and access to first responders, and the inability of women to temporarily escape abusive partners (Peterman et al. 2020). Many of these social structural factors, such as long-term unemployment, are believed to have significant negative emotional impacts upon both men and women, which thereby reinforces or exacerbates marital conflict (Basbug and Sharone 2017).

Due to the lack of relevant data and research, the impact of the pandemic upon family violence in China, a country severely affected by COVID-19, remains largely unknown. Reported statistics on family violence during the pandemic have been rather sporadic, making it difficult to link family violence with the pandemic and isolate the mechanism that links family violence to the pandemic, if such a linkage exists.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown in China

The Spring Festival, also known as the Lunar New Year, is the most important Chinese annual celebration. For the Chinese population, it is vital to be able to reunite with family at the cusp of the new calendar year (China Daily 2020). Unfortunately, the beginning of the Spring Festival on January 25, 2020 coincided with the unprecedented outbreak and spread of COVID-19 (Chen et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2020). As of August 19, 2020, as many as 84,895 cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed in China alone, with an overall 4634 related deaths (National Health Commission of China 2020b). According to Xiaowei Ma, Director of the National Health Commission of China, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the public health emergency with the fastest transmission speed, the widest range of infection, and the most problematic prevention and control since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (Jia 2020).

Since the first case that was reported in late December 2019 (Chen et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2020), the virus has spread rapidly from Wuhan across China and to other parts of the world. Located in China's central Hubei province with a population of 11 million people, Wuhan is sometimes referred to as "the Chicago of China" because of its role as a transportation hub. In order to curb any further person-to-person transmissions of COVID-19 from Wuhan, all traffic in and out of this metropolis was prohibited starting at 10:00 a.m. on January 23, 2020 (Wuhan Metropolis COVID-19 Pandemic Prevention and Control Headquarters 2020). On the following day, the same ban was enforced across the entire Hubei province, which has a population of nearly 60 million, and similar lockdown measures were implemented across China (Chen et al. 2020; Kraemer et al. 2020; Tian et al. 2020).

In addition to the movement restrictions, the range of rigorous mobility control measures included the suspension of public transportation (such as buses and subways), lockdowns of schools and entertainment venues, and the prohibition of public gatherings. The relevant statistics show that 200 cities (64.3%) banned public gatherings and closed entertainment venues, 136 cities (39.7%) suspended public transportation within the city, and 219 cities (64.0%) prohibited inter-city movement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tian et al. 2020). In addition, rural communities blocked roads with earth and stones or by digging ditches to prevent visitors from entering their communities (Liu and Zhang 2020).

According to the *Sixth National Population Census*, which contains the most recent national census statistics, China's total population was 1.37 billion with 401,517,330 households in November 2010 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011). As a result, millions of Chinese families were confined to their homes to prevent infection starting at the end of January 2020. Regarding this specific population, these

lockdowns are likely to have been the largest quarantine event in human history (Tian et al. 2020).

The outbreak and continuous spread of COVID-19 brought Chinese family members into close proximity with one another at all times. As families were restricted to their homes to curb the large-scale community transmission of the COVID-19 pandemic, the amount of space for family activities became smaller and more crowded than ever before, and the buffer zone for conflicts narrowed. While some sources predicted enhanced family closeness, other sources warned that the lockdown and long-term home isolation measures could lead to a variety of social problems, including family violence.

## Prevalence of Family Violence in China

Family violence is explicitly prohibited in the *Chinese Anti-Family-Violence Law of 2015*, which was implemented in March 2016. It prohibits physical, mental, and other violations being committed by family members on other family members such as beatings, binding, mutilation, restrictions on personal freedom, and frequent abuse and intimidation (Article 2). This law applies not only to family members but also extends its protections to non-family-members such as intimate partners (Article 37). Although nationwide statistics that demonstrate the changes in family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in China are not yet available, some regional statistics and media outlets have pointed to an increase in both divorce rates and overall violence.

## Family Violence

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the statistics on family violence in China are alarming. Academic research has shown that the lifetime prevalence rate of family violence reported in the general population ranged from 10.2% (Cao et al. 2006) to 65.0% (Chen and Xia 2015). Despite the current lack of national or provincial reports on family violence cases during the pandemic, some regional reports have indicated a significant increase. For example, the number of family violence reports received by the local police in Jianli, a rural county located in Hubei province near Wuhan, doubled in January 2020 in comparison to January 2019 (Zhang 2020a). In February 2020, when 162 instances of family violence were reported, the numbers had tripled in comparison to the year before. Males accounted for 97.44% of the perpetrators and females accounted for 94.67% of the victims, indicating that women are more vulnerable to such violence (Cao and Feng 2020). In Qianjiang, another rural county in Hubei province devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the local police department recorded 85 and 83 cases of family violence in January and February, respectively, which were double the numbers from the same period in 2019 (Xiong 2020).

Family violence has increased not only in the Hubei province but across China. Guangdong, a coastal province in south China that is the most populous and has the largest economy, also imposed a strict lockdown. This province then reported an increase in family violence cases. For instance, in Zhuhai, a coastal prefecture located in south Guangdong, a local women's rights advocacy center received 42 complaints of family violence during January and February, which is an increase of 20% when compared with the same period from the previous year.<sup>1</sup>

## Divorce and Family Violence

Family violence has been proven to have a significant effect on divorce (Bowlus and Seitz 2006; Ellis and Stuckless 2006; Supreme People's Court of China 2018). The likelihood of abused women divorcing their spouses is 1.7–5.7 times higher than among women with no history of abuse (Bowlus and Seitz 2006). According to the 2011 Chinese Marriage Law, family violence or abuse and the abandonment of family members are among the main legal grounds for divorce (Article 32). According to the latest report released by the Supreme People's Court of China in 2018 entitled "Judicial Big Data Special Report on Divorce Disputes," the country's divorce rate has steadily climbed for 15 consecutive years since 2003 (Supreme People's Court of China 2018). A total of 4.461 million divorce cases were processed in 2018, which represents an annual increase of 2.0% (Ministry of Civil Affairs of China 2019). The report further stated that family violence was reported in 14.86% divorce cases, among which 91.43% were cases of violence against women (Supreme People's Court of China 2018). It is worth noting that the divorce rates in China peak every year after the Spring Festival, suggesting that longer periods of reunion may stimulate or aggravate existing conflicts among family members. For example, in the period from 2013 to 2018, the divorce rate was two times higher than usual within one month after the Spring Festival (Tian 2020b).

This pattern seems to have been transferred onto the long-term lockdown. After the two-month lockdown was finished, the number of divorces in China surged in March. One example of this can be seen in Xi'an, the capital city of Shaanxi province in the hinterland of inland China with a population of over 10 million. Seventeen marriage registration offices resumed work on March 2 and reported that divorce-processing appointments were fully booked, thus resulting in a small peak (Guan 2020). Similar patterns were reported in other cities, including all four tier-one metropolises (Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Shenzhen) with populations of 20–

30 million people, indicating an emerging divorce wave across the country (Deese 2020; Fang 2020; Zhang 2020b). A Shanghai divorce lawyer, Steve Li, reported an increase of 25% in the number of cases he received following the end of lockdown in Shanghai in mid-March (Deese 2020).

At present, however, no systematically gathered data or empirical studies are available that would indicate whether the increased divorce rates during the pandemic are caused by family violence and whether their frequency and characteristics have changed from previous years. Jing Zhang, a lawyer committed to combating family violence, solicited responses on his personal Weibo (a Chinese online micro blog similar to Twitter) concerning spousal relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has found that the lockdown had both positive and negative effects on spousal relationships. The poll yielded 1640 responses from men and women alike. While 672 (41%) respondents reported improvements in their marital relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic, 295 (18%) indicated that their relationships had worsened. Moreover, as many as 475 (29%) respondents reported their intentions to divorce after the pandemic (Tian 2020c). Despite the convenience sampling, this sample size is relatively large, and the statistics generally indicate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marital relationships.

## The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Violence

Despite the limited precedents for the current crisis, some earlier research has found the following effects that result from pandemics: a rapid increase in pressure, sudden changes in daily work, the closure of school and community resources, and a rapid reduction in available resources after natural disasters (Campbell 2020). In addition, controlling behavior (usually a means of dealing with trauma), unemployment, and restrictions on access to social support systems have been identified as risk factors for family violence, and these risk factors often occur after natural disasters (Zahran et al. 2009). Research reports exploring the impact of natural disasters upon crime and violence have argued that although property crimes and other forms of violent crime may or may not be affected, family violence often significantly increases after a catastrophic event (Parkinson 2019). Campbell (2020) has further warned that the increase in family violence reports during and after the COVID-19 pandemic may even exceed the large increases observed in the reports following natural disasters and other catastrophic events.

On April 15, 2020, the Supreme People's Procuratorate of China published the first-quarter crime statistics related to public prosecutions as an integral part of the nationwide "war" against the COVID-19 pandemic (Supreme People's Procuratorate of China 2020). The report reveals that, as compared with the first quarter of 2019, the total number of arrests

<sup>1</sup> The statistics were obtained by the author through the communications with the director of a local women's rights advocate center.

made by the prosecutors nationwide was 132,914, which represents a decrease of 41.8%, while the total number of cases prosecuted was 275,540, which represents a decrease of 25.7%. Traditional violent crimes such as intentional assault, group fighting, rape, and robbery collectively showed a significant decrease of 30.9%. The five principal types of crimes addressed include fraud, crimes of interference with public administration, the illegal production and sale of fake and inferior products, crimes of provocation, and the illegal production and sale of disqualified medical devices (Supreme People's Procuratorate of China 2020). The only reported increases in crimes are related to fraud, which includes fraud using internet technology as a means of carrying out crime (an increase of 41.6%); internet crime as a whole (an increase of 32.8%); and crimes related to the illegal hunting, purchasing, transporting, and selling of wild animals (an increase of 62.4% in terms of public prosecution); there were no mentions of increases in any other types of crimes (Supreme People's Procuratorate of China 2020). In other words, family violence has not been reported or prosecuted as a major type of crime during the first quarter of 2020.

In sharp contrast, regional statistics indicate an increase in family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned earlier, Jianli and Qianjiang counties of the Hubei province suffered severe damage due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The local police departments recorded more family violence cases through first two months of 2020 as compared with the number from the same period in 2019 (Cao and Feng 2020; Xiong 2020).

At the same time, Chinese media outlets have reported a large number of family violence-related cases, which indicates that family violence had become a serious social problem. The media reports have identified three possible factors contributing to the surge in family violence: (1) more opportunities for family violence were created during the large-scale lockdown; (2) the large-scale economic crisis led to tension among family members; and (3) social support for victims became relatively inadequate (e.g., Cao and Feng 2020; Fang 2020; Li 2020b; Jia 2020; Tian 2020b, c; Xiong 2020; Zhang 2020a, b).

## The Large-Scale Lockdown and Surge in Family Violence

The nationwide lockdown and orders to stay at home during the COVID-19 pandemic forced victims to live in constant close proximity with perpetrators, resulting in increased opportunities for and the aggravation of family violence. In some cases, the large-scale and long-term lockdown and isolation created conflicts among family members, which increased the likelihood of family violence. Moreover, in cases where family violence already existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown and isolation may have worsened the situation.

Although the lockdown across China was a protective measure to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, it also resulted in quarantine for all family members, including children. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of UN Women, stated the following on March 20: "With children out of school, mothers at home may still work, but many have also become teachers and caregivers, with consequences for those previously employed in those roles" (Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020). According to the "2019 National Statistical Bulletin on Education Development", there are 530,100 schools of all levels and types in which 282 million students are enrolled in China (Ministry of Education of China 2020). Most Chinese schools were closed in March 2020 (Leung et al. 2020). However, a few provinces carefully arranged for the graduating students of their local junior and senior high schools to return to campus and resume classes from April 7, 2020. The nationwide school closures have meant that children are constantly with their parents, who are required to homeschool them. Such circumstances may easily aggravate conflicts and disputes, and even lead to family violence. Moreover, intimate partner violence and child abuse often occur concurrently, and it is likely that children are at risk of suffering significant physical and/or emotional harm when isolated at home (Campbell 2020; Humphreys et al. 2020). Researchers in the United States have estimated that children living in a home where family violence occurs are at as much as 60 times the risk of child abuse or neglect as compared with the general US child population (Campbell 2020). Humphreys et al. (2020) express concern regarding increased levels of antagonistic behaviors from children, which are likely to cause severe responses from parents. When combined with parental anxiety and the stress of financial, logistical, and survival issues, these interactions are likely to lead to outbursts of temper and verbal and physical abuse.

As a result of school closures, stay-at-home orders, and movement restrictions, no Chinese student could resume their schooling before April 7, 2020, and therefore parents needed to help their children to learn at home. Mandatory homeschooling during the COVID-19 pandemic took a challenging toll on both parents and children, which might exacerbate family disputes and highlight conflicts regarding access to educational, financial and psychological supports at home. These pressures are incredibly difficult for some children. For example, on March 5, 2020, an 11-year-old schoolboy in Guilin, a prefecture-level city in the northeast Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (provincial level) in south China, quarreled with his father over homework problems and then jumped from the 20th floor, ending his young life (Guilin Police 2020). This may represent a microcosm of similar cases, which suggests that children who are stuck at home with family during COVID-19 are facing heightened risk of physical, sexual, or emotional violence, much of which has

increased as a result of isolation measures and new socio-economic pressures.

### Economic Distress and Tensions among Family Members

China is the world's largest economy after the US. The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has surpassed the economic impact of SARS in China in 2003 (Hai et al. 2004). Prior to the pandemic, China's economic growth had continued to face downward pressure. Through the first quarter of 2020, the Chinese economy slowed considerably, and the GDP decreased by 6.8% (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). The outbreak has also severely damaged export markets, and 12,396 import/export trade enterprises across the country were annulled from February 1 to April 1, 2020 (Li 2020b).

At the same time, the unemployment rate in China is increasing. The National Bureau of Statistics of China has reported that China's urban unemployment rate in January of 2020 had climbed to 5.3%, while the rate in February reached 6.2% due to the impact of the pandemic. This represents the highest number ever recorded, with more than 5 million people losing their jobs (Lin 2020). However, the rate in March did slightly reduce to 5.9% (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). This unemployment rate also exceeded the rate (4.2%) recorded during the worldwide financial crisis in 2008 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2009). Key sectors such as retail, accommodation, food services, and manufacturing now face severe declines in output and high risks of unemployment. Meituan Research Institute (2020) conducted a survey of 32,000 food service providers across China in early February 2020, and it shows that 72.5% of the providers surveyed were experiencing revenue declines, 15.3% of whom planned to close businesses, while the remaining providers planned layoffs.

Previous research on unemployment and family violence has found that unemployment may lead to an increase in family violence (Staggs and Riger 2005; Bowlus and Seitz 2006). Men and women face different risks regarding unemployment, and woman usually face greater challenges in securing jobs during drastic socio-economic changes and turmoil. Hu et al. use a randomized survey sample from Chengdu ( $N=300$ ), the capital of Sichuan province, and have found that wives' unemployment and subsequent economic hardships, deteriorating mother-child relationships, husbands' negative responses, and wives' symptoms of psychological distress all had deleterious effects on urban marriages. They conclude that a wife's unemployment is indeed negatively associated with marital quality as urban China was in an era of reform (Hu et al. 2010). Although information on female unemployment rates for the first quarter of 2020 is unavailable, the

COVID-19 pandemic has placed tremendous economic pressure upon many Chinese families and created new conflicts among family members.

### Support Inadequate for Victims of Family Violence

Many studies have shown distinctive profiles detailing the needs of and resources required by women who seek legal, health, economic, and religious support services for problems related to violence and substance abuse (Macy et al. 2005; Staggs et al. 2007). Previous research has highlighted a correlation between inadequate social support and family violence in China (Tang and Lai 2008). This lack of social support for victims of family violence can then lead to additional pressures.

Given that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented, the existing support system for victims of family violence has been weakened. As supporting the fight against the pandemic has been the first priority, family violence has attracted little attention. In the fight against the pandemic, governmental agency staff and social support agencies have been frontline workers supporting the slowing of the pandemic and helping those immediately affected by it. For example, a total of 34,498 governmental employees assisted in crises management by enforcing the emergency rules in Wuhan, the epicenter of China's COVID-19 (Tian 2020a). To this end, shelters for victims of family violence (cf. Article 18 of the *Chinese Anti-Family-Violence Law of 2015*) have been transformed into shelters for the homeless (Zhang 2020a). For example, in Jianli county, Hubei province, the shelter for family violence victims was transformed to hold vagrants or those who could not go home due to the lockdown (Zhang 2020a).

In such circumstances, victims of family violence have faced more hardships than ever before. On March 19, 2020, *Southern Weekly* published a special report on family violence during the pandemic in the hope of attracting the attention of the general public, the government and the criminal justice agencies in order to leverage support for the victims. The newspaper reported upon the nature of the difficulties faced by family violence victims including the difficulty in escaping from home, finding a shelter and the resulting economic hardship (Cao and Feng 2020). An especially poignant story in the report involved a 42-year-old woman in Shanxi province who committed suicide by jumping from her home on the eleventh floor after experiencing abuse from her husband on March 9. Another story reported on a 32-year-old woman and her two children who were abused by the woman's ex-husband and escaped from home. After walking for five hours, they failed to find a shelter in the cold weather. A third story described a woman in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, which is

an autonomous province located in north China, who was abused by her husband during the Spring Festival. She was forced to live for days in her car with her mother to avoid contact with the abusive husband (Cao and Feng 2020). In short, during the COVID-19 pandemic, victims could not flee violence using the usual methods of escaping family violence and securing safety given that victims seeking to escape or simply survive may not have ready access to help and resources.

As for the criminal justice response to family violence, police officers, prosecutors and judges all play important roles in responding to this kind of violence. Previous research has shown that immediate and effective judicial responses to family violence, such as issuing a protection order, can provide prompt protection for victims (Carlson et al. 1999). The *Chinese Anti-Family-Violence Law of 2015* stipulates that a victim can legally ask for protection on the grounds of potential or existing family violence (Article 23). Statistics obtained through searching the published court cases on *China Judgments Online* (<http://wenshu.court.gov.cn>), administrated by the Supreme People's Court of China, suggest that such protection order applications were increased by 11.45% in the first quarter of 2020, when the COVID-19 crisis peaked in China, compared with the first quarter of 2019. The search conducted by this author on August 20, 2020 produced 146 rulings on protection order applications in the first quarter of 2020, while 131 rulings on protection order applications across China were processed in the first quarter of 2019.

### Policy Implications and Suggestions for Research

Recent research indicates that the lockdown has, in fact, slowed the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, which has ultimately limited the scale of the pandemic and reduced overall morbidity and mortality rates (Chen et al. 2020; Kraemer et al. 2020; Leung et al. 2020; Tian et al. 2020). April 6, 2020 was the first day on which no new COVID-19 deaths were reported in China (National Health Commission of China 2020a). Wuhan re-opened on April 8, 2020 following a 76-day lockdown. Despite this encouraging progress, the possibility of additional pandemic outbreaks and community transmission remain due to the increased number of asymptomatic carriers and imported cases. In fact, many scientists warn that a second wave of COVID-19 in China is probable (Leung et al. 2020; Xu and Li 2020). As of August 19, 2020, 2346 imported cases of COVID-19 had been confirmed in China, and 352 asymptomatic carriers were still under medical observation (National Health Commission of China 2020b).

As a result of the pandemic, which may last longer than initially expected, tens of millions of Chinese families have made adjustments to their everyday lives and social

interactions. As the number of persons infected has decreased, governmental policies have gradually shifted from fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic to economic recovery. The victims of family violence thus remain a relatively neglected group despite the clear need for further help and assistance during the pandemic. Another reason that family violence remains a “non-” or minor issue is the deeply embedded patriarchy that exists in Chinese society, which remains pervasive despite the developments in gender equality made in the Zhang and Zhao 2018). Indeed, continued family violence in China is the result of a variety of risk factors, including patriarchal family values, conservative notions of marriage, economic inequality, and underestimated legal rights (Zhang 2014). China, with a history of thousands of years, was dominated by patriarchal ideology in which men have been considered superior to women. Culturally and historically, the traditional wisdom in China is to deal with family violence as something that is “best kept inside the house” (Zhao and Zhang 2017). Such patriarchal ideology is so deeply embedded in all aspects of their social lives that family violence was often considered a private family issue (Sun et al. 2011). Although women's social status has significantly improved since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, especially in recent decades, traditional patriarchal ideology still lingers deep in Chinese culture (Sun et al. 2012). The interests of individual members of the family, particularly vulnerable members such as the elderly, women, and children, can be sacrificed if their interests are in conflict with those of the family as a whole. Family violence is largely seen as an abuse of power within family settings. Traditional patriarchal attitudes have influenced generation after generation of Chinese people's thinking and behavior, and they continue to have a significant role even today (Zhang 2014). The victims tend to keep dirty linen hidden, and many even believe that keeping violent confrontations as private matters resolves family conflicts. For example, a study conducted among 3998 married women aged 18 or above in 25 counties in Jilin, Anhui, and Chongqing has found that over half of the women (51.4%) believed that physical fighting between a husband and wife is a private family issue and should be kept among family members only (Zhao et al. 2007).

The current economic hardship in China also represents a significant challenge to providing support to the victims of family violence. Chinese nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been an important sector for providing economic and other types of support to victims of family violence. Many of these NGOs were experiencing shortages in staff and funding even before the pandemic. These organizations largely rely upon external donations, and the Spring Festival is usually the peak period for the collection of such funds. This year, the fundraising activities were interrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fei Wan, a retired police officer and head of an anti-family violence NGO in Jianli,

Hubei province, stated that the funding that their NGO received during the Spring Festival of 2020 was less than Chinese RMB ¥10,000 (approximately USD \$1400; Cao and Feng 2020).

Economic depression, financial distress, and increased unemployment rates resulting from the large-scale lockdown seem to have increased the occurrences of family violence. Consequently, the victims of family violence need immediate and stronger support from both governmental and non-governmental agencies. This support, however, has been significantly weakened and has still not fully returned due to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns regarding economic recovery. Accordingly, if stronger and more accessible support and services are not available for victims, it is critical that the various social agencies and the criminal justice system resume their usual functions. In fact, specific policies should be introduced to provide immediate and appropriate services. First, government authorities must raise public awareness of the increased risk of family violence during pandemics and emphasize the importance of communities staying connected and reporting family violence (Usher et al. 2020). Second, healthcare facilities and NGOs at various levels across the country should update the information and resources for locally provided services to include general guidelines about critical emotional support and counseling services, protective services, legal advice, crisis helplines, and emergency shelters. Third, and above all, such information and knowledge regarding available resources should be communicated to the general public through a range of sources, including social media, websites, and health facilities. NGOs should be encouraged to design and publish specific guidelines on family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on what measures families can take to support the isolated. Fourth, police officers, prosecutors, and judges should raise their awareness on this issue and be provided training on how to respond to victims, protect them, and refer them to the appropriate services. Criminal justice agencies, particularly police departments, need to update their safety protocols and further strengthen the response to a family violence incident at the onset and during the COVID-19 crisis. Additional funding and support are also needed for healthcare facilities, law enforcement, and anti-family violence NGOs. In this regard, two American scholars, Viveiros and Bonomi (2020) have recently called on violence prevention leaders to take bold action and “prioritize the needs of women in medical, social and legal settings using innovative intervention and service engagement (e.g., e-filing for protection orders, virtual advocacy services)” while dealing with family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to a rise in family violence during COVID-19, the Chinese policy-makers at levels are now adapting to new realities to safety of family violence survivors. For instance, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the shelters across

China required support to manage demand, and these needs have increased significantly. The Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region has recognized the importance of such issues and taken a further step in strengthening their support by passing the *Anti-Family Violence Regulations* on April 1, 2020 (Li 2020a), which stress the need for temporary shelters for the survivors of family violence. This is one of the few provincial regulations that prescribe a mandatory focus on such shelters during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The number of family violence cases reported by Chinese media outlets and regional organizations most likely do not cover the majority of cases. However, a search of previous literature resulted in only one empirical study that examined the COVID-19 pandemic and associated psychological problems among 1074 Chinese people (Ahmed et al. 2020). No research has empirically investigated the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and family violence in China. It therefore remains unclear as to how prevalent family violence has become during the pandemic and to what extent the large-scale lockdown, economic distress, and weakened social support for victims have affected the levels of family violence.

With these issues in mind, future research should include, but not be limited to, addressing the following in China: First, producing data related to the regional or nation-wide prevalence of family violence at the onset, during, and after COVID-19 pandemic, with examples of actions already taken; Second, studying the social structural factors that may influence or aggravate family violence during the COVID-19 pandemics, such as the social isolation, economic distress, unemployment, and patriarchal beliefs. Third, performing mechanism linking COVID-19 pandemics and family violence, and demonstrating how necessary to ensure the continuity and sustainability of services of healthcare facilities and NGOs. It is also important to evaluate how police officers, prosecutors, and judges respond to the family violence at the onset and during the COVID-19 crisis. Fourth, paying particularly close attention to the impact of the lockdown on violence that affects the well-being of the most vulnerable people (children, women, and elders of low-income families) and determine what the field is doing to provide support during COVID-19 pandemics.

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