

# CHINA: WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

---

*Esther Schwartz-McKinzie. Ph.D.*

## An internationally recognized problem:

The 1985 Third World Women's Conference in Nairobi prompted international recognition of intimate partner violence against women as a serious and increasing social problem in China. Since then, China has felt international pressure to address high rates of intimate partner and domestic violence.

# Current Statistics:

- Surveys suggest that up to 40% of women in China suffer domestic violence; occurrence is believed to be highest in rural areas.
- The rate is thought to have increased by 25.4% since the 1980s.
- However, domestic violence reporting is rare, with only 40,000 to 50,000 reports registered annually.

# Familiar Perpetuating Factors:

- Deeply rooted ideology that stresses the hierarchical relationship between husband and wife; seen as “a family matter”
- Men are rarely prosecuted
- Police refusal to intervene
- Battering almost never acknowledged as a grounds for divorce
- Widely considered taboo to discuss; a culture of silence (now being broken by internet—producing new, safe forums for exchange and support, and generating research)
- Few support structures for victims of domestic violence

# A Crucial Issue:

## **A lack of safe spaces for battered women:**

“Beijing, a city of 20,000,000 people, has no shelters for battered women, and the few hundred dotted round the country are usually attached to homeless shelters where women feel unsafe. Most have fallen out of use.”

*In contemporary China, murder as a result of intimate partner violence accounts for 10% of all murders.*

# Gendered economic inequality and the feminization of poverty contributes to domestic violence.

- The “Shengnii” or “Leftover Woman” state media campaign, which started in 2007, pressures women to marry young and shames single women over 27 (a way of supporting transitions from a planned economy to a market economy/downsizing)
- 60% of the current unemployed population in China is women
- Women give up property rights when they marry; home ownership is usually male
- A decrease in property rights makes it increasingly difficult for women to leave abusive relationships

# Facilitators of Change:

**Two high-profile stories of two battered women stoked a movement:**

- Li Yan, “an ordinary Chinese woman” from Sichuan, China
- Kim Lee, the American wife of Chinese celebrity & founder of “Crazy English”

# Landmark Case: The story of Li Yan

- Brutal abuse over many years
- Tried repeatedly to get help before she killed her abusive husband during an attack
- Activists utilized social media to promote outrage
- 2010 death sentence overturned in April, 2014 (life in prison without parole)

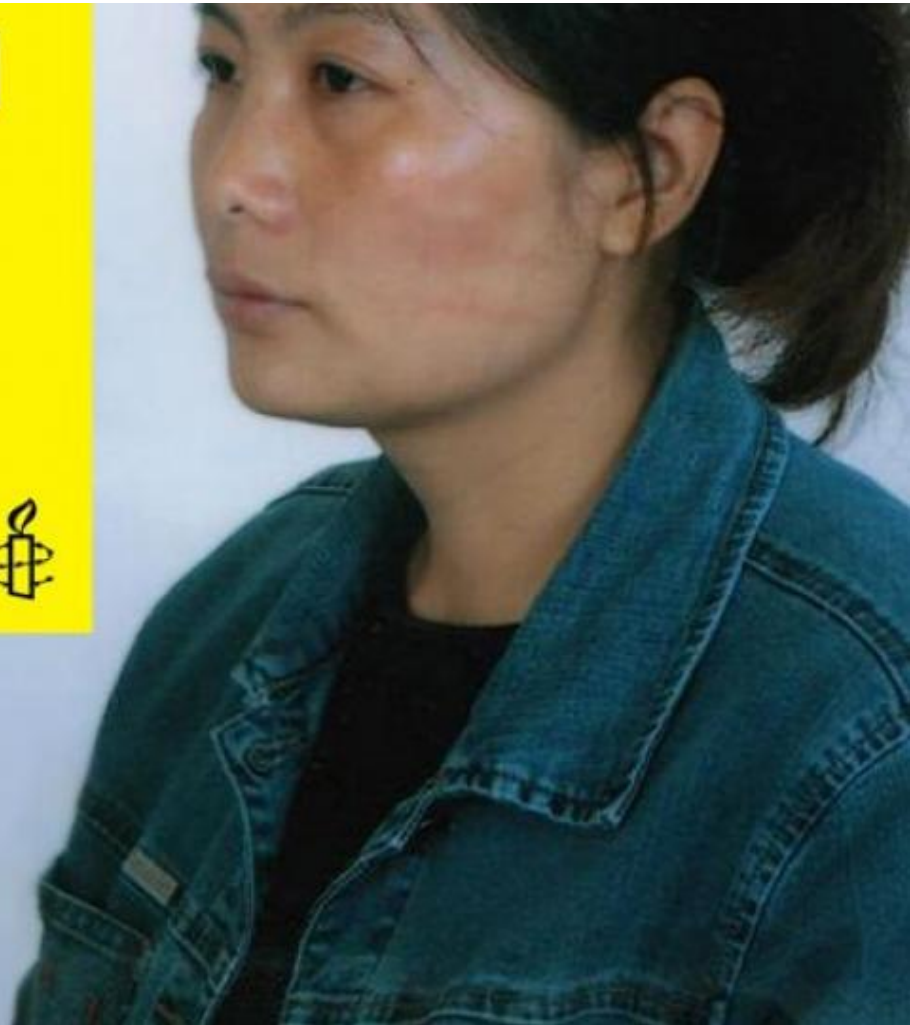
In a letter from jail: ***If China had had a law on domestic violence, my story would have ended differently.***



# EXECUTION

TAKE ACTION NOW

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL 



Li Yan, a 43-year-old woman from Sichuan, China convicted for killing her husband after years of domestic abuse, had her death penalty sentence overturned.

## East Asia Program at Amnesty International *on overturning the death penalty verdict for Li Yan:*

*“It really was a political decision because of the public outcry on this case, and the very skillful advocacy by women’s rights activists... It will serve as a foothold to future cases and also gives some measure of legitimacy to people who are pressing for more activism on the issue of domestic violence.”*

*Nicholas Bequielin, Director*

# Landmark Case: The story of Kim Lee

*“I was hurt, my child who had witnessed this was shaking. To be told to just go home, that everything would be fine, was something I could not accept.”*

- After police “lost” records in 2011, she posted images of her injuries on Weibo (China’s equivalent of Twitter); went viral
- Granted a divorce, and \$1.9 million in alimony and compensation
- The first time domestic violence discussed on state-run China Central Television



One of the photos American Kim Lee posted online in 2011 after her Chinese husband beat her. Her decision to go public marked a milestone in the fight against domestic abuse in China.



Kim Lee speaking to Beijing students about domestic abuse on November 25, a day to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.



Women demonstrating against domestic violence in Beijing on Feb. 14, 2012. The posters say, from left, "Love is no excuse for violence," "Only equality is harmonious; violence is not a special zone" and "When violence is around, are you still silent?"



A 2014 billboard in Beijing advocating for putting a stop to domestic violence.



**Beijing authorities banned an art exhibition about feminism and domestic violence just before it was set to open November 26, 2015.**

Timed for the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the event was to be held at Beijing's Ginkgo Space art gallery. More than 60 Chinese artists — half of them women — contributed work to the show. When they arrived, they found themselves locked out and the gallery staff absent.



## A New Direction:

The 2001 Marriage Act outlawed domestic violence in China, but it included no mechanisms for enforcement and did not amount to more than “lip service.”

In December, 2015, China passed an historic Domestic Violence Law with the potential to reverse current trends.

# What the Law Does:

- Prohibits any form of domestic violence, including psychological abuse;
- Covers married couples, cohabiting couples, and children;
- Gives victims of violence access to redress and protection, including restraining orders, and requires local governments to set up more shelters;
- Is aligned with guidelines for judges and police saying that self-defense can apply in cases where defendants are victims.

# Limitations:

Critics of the law are concerned that it fails to:

- outlaw marital rape;
- cover divorced couples or same-sex relationships;
- address sexual violence;
- adequately emphasize health and social services.

***Traditional ideas about family and gender remain very strong, and many resist the idea that “public power” can intervene in family disputes.***

The law is a big leap forward, but  
much work still has to be done...

*“It is like fruit that is not ripe; it  
tastes a bit sour.”*

*Cai Yiping, Leading Women’s Activist*