

# tuesday focus

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## Wife-bashing comes into the spotlight

Traditionally a private matter, the problem of domestic violence is slowly coming out of the shadows in China, reports Lijia MacLeod

**R**esting in a hospital on the outskirts of Beijing, Fan Guiping looks like an extra from a horror movie. Bloodstained bandages circle her head and one eye is so swollen it can barely open. Yet she is quick to defend the perpetrator of the crime: her own husband. "He suspects that I'm having an affair, which is not true," she says. "But, you see, he loves me."

Zhang Xianfeng was not so forgiving. When her husband began beating her for returning to school and neglecting the housework, she decided to leave him. While fighting for a divorce in 1982, she learned for the first time that there were shelters for battered women - in other countries. It was then she decided to open a refuge on the mainland.

In 1995, coinciding with the United Nations World Women's Conference in Beijing, she fulfilled her dream by establishing China's first shelter for victims of domestic violence. About 500 women have since sought help at her New Sun Marriage Shelter in Wuhou, Hebei.

cent worse than in the 1980s. One of the reasons, she says, is the increasing economic pressure and loosening of family ties that leave women more vulnerable to their husbands' violent impulses.

Guo Jianmei agrees: "[Sometimes] when men get laid off, or others do better or earn more money, they become depressed." They go home and vent their anger on their wives.

Ms Guo is a founding member of Beijing University's Centre for Women's Law Studies and Legal Service. Tucked away behind a brisk, commercial street in Zhongguancun, the centre provides legal aid for women, usually from underprivileged backgrounds.

Though more women are now aware of their rights, she says some "just put up with domestic violence without telling a soul, for they either don't realize it's wrong or they are too concerned they would lose face."

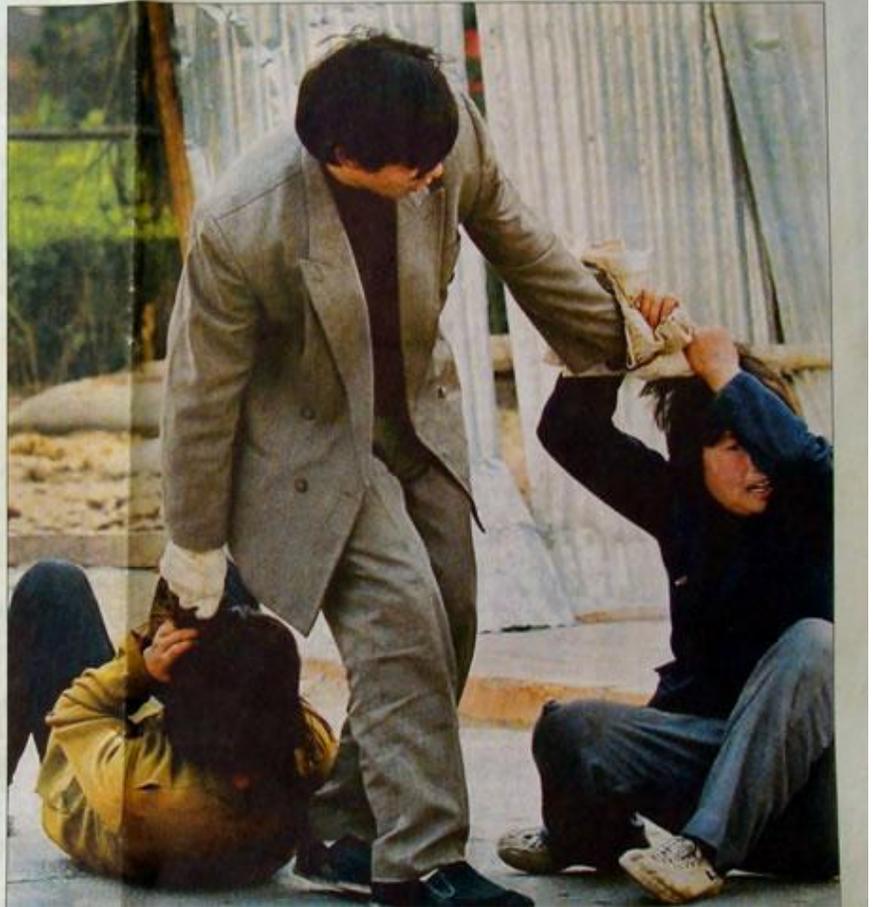
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difficult to accept that communism has improved the status of women. Indeed one still sees in publications the saying: "The Chinese Communist Party liberated women, but just as there is shadow in the sunlight so there are also problems regarding women's issues."

Tong Xin, of Beijing University, says: "Inequality is particularly serious in China because a feudalist male chauvinism was deeply rooted in the minds of men and women for thousands of years."

According to Ms Tong, who researched the issue of domestic violence for her doctorate in sociology, the term *jiatingban* (a direct translation of domestic violence) first appeared in December 1991 in a newspaper article written by Pi Xiaomang, a lawyer and pioneering force in the fight against abuse in the home.

When Ms Pi worked for the Beijing Women's Federation, three-quarters of the hundreds of letters a year she received from women complained of violent husbands. Now a member of the capital's Eastern District



### Wife-bashing comes into the spotlight – a story about domestic violence

Sitting in a Chaoyang hospital bed in the outskirts of Beijing, Fan Guiping looks like an extra from a horror movie - blood stained bandages around her head, one eye so swollen she can barely keep it open. Yet she is quick to defend the perpetrator of this crime, her own husband: "he suspects that I am having an affair, which is not true. But, you see, he loves me."

Domestic violence, traditionally a private matter to be kept firmly behind closed doors, is gradually coming to light in China. In October this year, the same month in which Fan was attacked, Beijing was host to two conferences on this rarely acknowledged issue. Professor Wu Changzhen, the mainland's leading legal expert on women's issues, revealed at both conferences that domestic violence has risen 25% compared to the 1980s, as increasing economic pressures and the loosening of family ties leave women more vulnerable than ever to their husbands' violent impulses.

"When men become laid-off workers, or others do better or earn more money, they become depressed. They go home and vent their anger on their wives. In some other cases, men go home to cause trouble after they find new lovers. One woman told me her husband began to treat her roughly right after *she* was laid off," says Guo Jianmei, founding member of Beijing University's Centre for Women's Law Studies and Legal Service. Tucked away behind a brisk commercial street in Zhongguancun, the centre provides legal aid for women, usually from under-privileged backgrounds. Guo praises women who find the courage to tell others of their plight, for the common reaction is silence - "They just put up with it without telling a soul, for they either don't realize it is wrong or they are too concerned they would lose face." Neighbours of Fan, a worker from a Beijing foodstuffs factory, were shocked to see

her terrible stab wounds, the result of a Sunday afternoon trip to her mother that her husband misconstrued as infidelity. “Ordinarily, I never say a thing when we quarrel, and he beats me here or there. What’s the point of washing dirty clothes in public?” Fan explains.

Just how common is domestic violence? A 1991-92 survey by China’s Academy of Social Sciences showed 1.6% of urban families and 4.7% of rural families suffer this blight. However, a more recent survey by ‘China Women’s News’, the mainland’s top publication on women’s issues, found much higher figures: 11.2% of women complained of marital beatings, corresponding more closely to the percentage of men who admit to having beaten their wives, 14.6%. Meanwhile, a private study this year, by Dr Li Yinghe from China’s Academy of Social Sciences, suggests that up to 21% of households experience domestic violence.

In the countryside, where women’s status is lowest, their situation is also at its worst. Sayings that circulate among farmers actually encourage the practice: “If you do not beat up your wife for three days, she’ll go up to lift the roof tile”, meaning women should be kept under one’s thumb, or they’ll do whatever they like. Xin Meihong, a migrant from Hebei, recalls her next door neighbour struck his wife when she was pregnant, while another repeatedly abused his wife for giving birth to a girl. “It’s no big deal,” she adds, “we country girls are tough and do not make as much fuss as city women.”

The global issue of fundamental inequality between the sexes is often cited as the ultimate reason behind the problem. “Inequality is particularly serious in China because a feudalist male chauvinism was deeply rooted in the minds of men and women for thousands of years,” says Tong Xin of Beijing University. She chose to research domestic violence for her doctorate in sociology as it is a telling issue of a changing Chinese society, and an area into which little research has been conducted.

The very phrase ‘*jiatingbaoli*’, a direct translation of ‘domestic violence’, only appeared in the Chinese press as late as in December 1991, when Pi Xiaoming, a pioneering force in the field, wrote an article in ‘China Women’s News’ entitled “A White Paper On Domestic Violence”. Before that, wife-beating was more or less taken as a matter of fact. Law graduate Pi used to work for Beijing Women’s Federation, handling complaint letters from women. Among the hundreds of letters she received every year, some 75% complained of violence in the home. As a woman from a family with ‘caring parents and loving husband’, she was shocked to find a serious yet hidden social problem. She began to lobby their case, but soon found it a daunting task.

Song Chunqi, a journalist from ‘Beijing Daily’ revealed in an article in the paper how his chief editor rejected a detailed report submitted by Pi Xiaoming in 1991. After asking two sub-editors if they beat up their wives, and after receiving the answer ‘no’, the chief editor jumped to the conclusion “*You* do not beat up your wife; and *I* don’t beat up mine; and *he* doesn’t, either. That means it is not a common problem.” The very next day a woman with a badly bruised face arrived at Pi’s office, explaining how she was tortured by her husband because she went to dance in the park. Pi immediately informed ‘Beijing Daily’. Song arrived to become, in his own words, the ‘first journalist in China’s presscorp who is convinced of the domestic violence issue’.

Pi now devotes herself to fighting for battered women as a lawyer under the capital’s East District Women’s Federation. Together with other law teachers from China’s Women’s College, she organized a conference in October on drafting a law on domestic violence. To date in China, there are only regional regulations regarding domestic violence, the first of which went into effect in January 1996 in central China’s Changsha, followed by a few other cities. These regulations ask ‘grass-root governments and party committees to incorporate domestic violence as a problem in maintaining public order’. Women activists warmly welcome such regulations, but point out they lack the effect of law, and are often vague and incomplete; for example, there is no definition of the term ‘domestic violence’ itself. They hope the draft law will serve as a good reference when China is ready to formulate such a law, specifically protecting women from domestic violence.

Interestingly, the other conference in October also discussed the use of legal weapons to protect women from violence, specifically the proposed acceptance of ‘rape within marriage’ as a legal term. Professor Wu Changzhen led calls to

strengthen legislative and judicial work to respond to the new situation. In reality, the sad truth is that lawsuits in China all too often fail the women who bring them. Academic Tong Xin concludes that there is not much battered women can do since legal procedures are tight and unfavourable. To begin with, an injury has to be 'severe' enough before an injured wife is 'qualified' to bring her husband to court. One of Tong's academic friends was hurt on nose by her husband, another academic. When she consulted a lawyer on the possibility of suing, she was told the cut had to be above 7 cm before any court could accept her case. Even if women succeed at the initial step, the courts tend to give light sentences to violent husbands. Professor Yan Dawen from People's University, a key member in promulgating a law on the protection of women in 1992, points to history to explain the phenomenon. "In the Tang Dynasty, if a man injured his wife, the sentence was half as severe as if he had battered other people; On the other hand, a woman got double sentence if she injured her husband."

The earliest reports on domestic violence appeared in tabloid newspapers available in the street and train stations. Such reports offer little help to needy women, but instead are full of graphic details of violence and abuse. Even decent newspapers fall prey to this tendency: in January 1995 the 'Beijing Legal Paper' led with a detail description of how a peasant and his friends sexually abused his barren wife, raped her and brutally chopped off her foot. Tong Xin strongly dislikes such junk journalism. "Reports like this can only satisfy people's need for sensation. They can be misleading as well. A man might say 'look, what I did was nothing. Look at this guy!'" As an academic, what interests Tong is not these higher-profile sensational cases, but the repeated abuse that takes place quietly in many homes.

Chinese like to compare tourist mecca Hangzhou with heaven, but for Sun Xuqing, a resident of the Zhejiang provincial capital, her life has been hell ever since she married Mo Wenhui. "My heart is bleeding!" the 35 year-old electrician weeps, as she describes the day in late October last year when Mo changed her life forever. A habitual wife-beater, Mo became enraged when Sun asked her driver husband to collect their boy from kindergarten, as she was busy on night shift. When Mo refused, she reasoned with him "why not? He is *our* child." Mo suddenly got angry and began to beat her. He chased her to the balcony, and shouting "I'll smash you to death today, you stupid bitch!" he lifted up his small, slim-built wife and dropped her headfirst to the ground below.

With a broken spine, Sun's life is totally ruined. Even 13 months after the incident, she can barely sit up properly. To her disbelief, Mo was given a mere six months' imprisonment for 'accidentally dropping' his wife. Xu Jianmin who kindly offered free service as Sun's lawyer thinks it is incredible. "My personal guess is the court still saw it as family dispute. I can not imagine that he could get away so easily if he throw another woman from upstairs."

Lying in the large and barren medicine room the sympathetic hospital provides her free of charge, Sun looks particularly small and helpless. She says with feeling in her voice "If anything good can come out of my sad drama, I hope women sharing the same fate as me will learn lessons from my experience. If your husband does not how to treat you as a human being, rebel!" Sun and her grief-stricken parents vow to appeal.

A popular saying about domestic violence runs: 'Even the most clear-headed judge cannot handle family matters', suggesting people stay away from matters between couples. Guo, the young and energetic lawyer, is upset that a court has just refused to grant a divorce to her latest client, though the poor woman has suffered so much abuse from her husband. "It's always like this. The court thinks the 'little quarrel' between the couple will soon be over."

Another twist adding to the odds stacked against abused women is that the power-brokers and law-makers are almost always male. At one early seminar on domestic violence, academic Tong almost fell off her chair when she heard one well-known scholar, an elderly man, remarking "Oh, it is just the way the couple exchange their feelings." "I don't think many men understand quite how hurt and humiliated battered women feel," she states.

More than half of the divorce cases handled by Xu Jianmin, Sun's lawyer, are caused by domestic violence - a commonly held belief is that domestic violence is responsible for a quarter of all marriage breakdowns. He never forgets the misery of a middle aged woman who begged her husband "Could you please do not hit me so hard as my old skin and bones do not recover quickly?" Xu is pleased to notice more and more women are willing to put up a fight and opt for divorce, though practical difficulties, such as concern for children, lack of financial independence or

house, still prevent many women from leaving abusive husbands. And slowly, more reports appear in the press. A media search conducted by 'China Women's News' found three articles on the issue in 1992 and 83 in 1996, mostly from their own pages.

While hesitating to acknowledge a dramatic rise, lawyer Guo believes domestic violence has become a more open issue in China. Like many in the field, she contributes this positive change to the Fourth United Nations World Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1995. "People generally speaking are more conscious about gender issues now; activists who took part were inspired and made aware that the anti-domestic violence campaign is high on the worldwide women's agenda, so the issue is addressed with more attention. Some women's NGOs emerged on the scene for the very first time." A good example is Guo's own legal aid centre, set up just before the Women's Conference. Other NGOs include a women's hotline and the Jinglun Family Centre, all of which are sponsored by foreign organizations and deal with domestic violence, among other women-related issues. There was even a hot-line specifically established to deal with domestic violence, but lack of funds has shut it down.

Simultaneous with the Women's Conference, businesswomen Zhang Xianfeng established China's first rescue centre for battered women in Wuhan, Hubei province, with her own money. A victim of domestic violence herself, Zhang named her centre the 'New Sun Marriage Shelter'. Zhang offers counselling to new arrivals, coaching them to be strong and independent, to forget the unhappy past and begin a new life. They get free accommodation and food and work at Zhang's tiny factory producing iodine-added sugar, before they are ready to move on. After going through thick and thin, the 'New Sun' is still the only such centre in China today. Zhang confesses she is in two minds about the future of the centre as it faces many difficulties. "I really wish the authorities, say, the women's federation, could give me some help, for, when the number of refugees gets too many, I simply do not have the money and resources to cope."

Yet Zhang's 'New Sun' is the lucky one. There was another in Shanghai called "Nanfang Domestic Violence Protection Centre", set up in the beginning of 1996 also by private sponsorship. For a while, there were many positive reports about the shelter - China's official Xinhua news agency even ran a story claiming 'Battered women find a haven in Shanghai.' But the haven was shut down quietly in a matter of a few months because 'the nature of such organization is not clear' according to various newspaper accounts. Even before its closure, local journalists were instructed not to report this place that showed the negative side of society.

"Shelters for battered women are usually established by NGOs. But there is no space for NGOs in China. The Women's Federation is full of bureaucrats and generally unhelpful," complains one western worker at a foreign development agency in China. She sees a long road ahead for the fight against domestic violence. Professor Wu and her colleagues have vowed to press that fight all the way, determined to win a better deal for China's women, and more outcomes like a recent case in Hunan province, where Yu Xiumei was injured by her husband after an argument broke out. When he refused to apologize and pay all the medical costs, she decided to bring him to court. The court case made a big stir in sleepy Fangcheng county. Some men asked "Beating his own wife, so what?", while others wondered what was the point as the couple ought to be in economic union. But many supported her, including the judge. Yu said "I do not care what others think of me. I just want to teach him how to respect me." Even the loser, husband Hu Dongpo, acknowledged the wrong, "Now, I learnt a lesson. Beating a wife, even one's own, behind closed doors, is against the law. Now our relationship is even better than before."

**Lijia MacLeod**  
**BEIJING**  
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**BEHIND CLOSED DOORS**

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"When men become laid-off workers, or others do better or earn more money, they become depressed. They go home and vent their anger on their wives. In some other cases, men go home to cause trouble after they find new lovers. One woman told me her husband began to treat her roughly right after *she* was laid off," says Guo Jianmei, founding member of Beijing University's Centre for Women's Law Studies and Legal Service. Tucked away behind a brisk commercial street in Zhongguancun, the centre provides legal aid for women, usually from under-privileged backgrounds. Guo praises women who find the courage to tell others of their plight, for the common reaction is silence. Neighbours of Fan, a worker from a Beijing foodstuffs factory, were shocked to see her terrible stab wounds, the result of a Sunday afternoon trip to her mother that her husband misconstrued as infidelity. "Ordinarily, I never say a thing when we quarrel, and he beats me here or there. What's the point of washing dirty clothes in public?" Fan explains.

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While hesitating to acknowledge a dramatic rise, lawyer Guo believes domestic violence has become a more open issue in China. “People generally speaking are more conscious about gender issues now. As a result, the issue is addressed with more attention and more women are ready to put on a fight.”

**Lijia MacLeod**

**BEIJING**

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