Economic Insecurity and Husband-to-Wife Violence

Asian Family Matters

Changing Family in Asia Cluster
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This brief is intended to provide an overview of research produced by the Changing Family in Asia Cluster at the Asia Research Institute.
Economic Insecurity and Husband-to-Wife Violence

Recent economic restructuring and globalisation have led to emerging poverty and unemployment for unskilled workers in Hong Kong. In particular, men are more vulnerable to the shrinkage of the manufacturing sector and are more likely to suffer from structural unemployment. These changes have played an important role in re-shaping the family dynamics in Hong Kong. Although men’s dominant position in the household is becoming less based on how much more money they make than women, studies have shown persistently how important men’s economic role and dominance in the family are to the construction of male identity in Hong Kong. Past studies found that family problems are still generally considered by many people in Hong Kong, including social workers and police officers, as private issues, although family violence is legally prohibited. Under this context, physical violence (ranging from minor assaults such as slapping and grabbing to severe assaults such as beating and kicking) may be used as an alternative instrument to maintain power in the relationship.

In this study, Cheung and Choi used the couple-level data from a household survey collected in 2007, to examine the impact of men’s economic insecurity on husband-to-wife violence in Hong Kong. They found that about 10 per cent of the sampled couples reported at least one episode of husband-to-wife physical assault during one preceding year. The survey reveals that both subjective (i.e. perceived financial stress) and objective indicators (i.e. low absolute income status, low relative income level as compared to the wife’s income, and unemployment) of husband’s economic insecurity are positively related to the risk of husband-to-wife violence. For instance, low income, unemployed and financially stressed husbands are more likely to act violently against their wives. When a husband is financially stressed (i.e. earning less than his wife, or is not employed full-time), he tends to have a stronger desire to gain more decision-making power in
the relationship. As a result, this desire for more power provides a motivation for the husband to use physical violence.

Therefore, as illustrated in the figure below, husbands with a stronger desire for power are more likely to act violently against their wives. On the other hand, husbands with less or no desire for more power are less likely to act violently. For example, according to the figure below, only 6 per cent of those who had no desire for power had physically assaulted their wives. In contrast, the risk of husband-to-wife violence nearly triples for husbands who had a strong power motive.

![One year prevalence rate of husband-to-wife violence (adjusted)](chart)

**Note:** Prevalence rates shown in this figure are predicted probabilities, derived from a statistical model that has taken other factors (e.g. couple’s age and education, husband’s gender-role attitudes and power arrangement within the family) into account. Hence, the rates are adjusted accordingly.

These findings echo the past theoretical literature, which suggests that violence is not an expression of power. Rather, violence implies an attempt to obtain power when a husband feels that his dominance in the relationship has been challenged. This finding has important implications, especially in times of economic restructuring. Recent economic changes, such as the shrinkage of manufacturing sectors, have been particularly affecting men’s economic security. With the rise of women’s status in the recent years, the power dynamic has gradually changed in this Chinese society. Yet the traditional male-breadwinner model is still culturally desired by many. As a result, some men in Hong Kong are increasingly worried about their diminishing power within the family, consequently turning to use violence. If egalitarian arrangements between husbands and wives are more widely accepted, economic stress for men led by the economic changes can become less of an issue.
Research Cluster Activities

International Conference on *Becoming an Adult in East Asia: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approaches*, University of Pennsylvania, United States, 28 February – 1 March 2014

- Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Qianhan Lin, “The Urban-Rural Divergence of School-Work Paths of China’s Youth”.
- Qianhan Lin, “A Youth with No Regrets?” – How China’s Sent-down Generation Reviews Their Rustication Experience”.

Seminar for Master of Arts Contemporary China program, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, 20 March 2014

- Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, “Divergent Destinies: China’s Hukou System, Education Reforms, and Intergenerational Mobility”.

ARI Seminar Series, ARI Seminar Room, NUS, Singapore, 18 February 2014


Keynote Speeches by Prof. Arland Thornton and Prof. Ronald Rindfuss at


- “Clashes of Culture, Social Systems, and Family Behaviour in Asia”.
  
  Prof. Arland Thornton, Research Professor, Population Studies Center, University of Michigan.

- “Networks, Institutions, Attitudes and Behaviour: How Marriage and Fertility Change Can Occur”.
  
  Prof. Ronald Rindfuss, Robert Paul Ziff Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina.

Prof. Deborah Davis gave a seminar at the ARI Seminar Series on 11 March 2014.

“Privatising Marriage in Post-Socialist China”.

Over the past three decades, a distinctly post-socialist institution of marriage has emerged in China as a result of economic changes such as re-privatisation and the individualisation of property rights. However, these developments are also accompanied by broader cultural shifts. Professor Davis’s lecture traced the development of this phenomenon by examining the economic and legal foundations for marriages, and how the Supreme People’s Court started interpreting these foundations differently after 2001 in China.