Hard Struggles in Times of Change: A Qualitative Study on Masculinities and Gender-Based Violence in Contemporary China

Executive Summary

Background

This qualitative report, Hard Struggles in Times of Change: A Qualitative Study on Masculinities and Gender-Based Violence in Contemporary China, is part of the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific, a regional study on masculinities and gender-based violence coordinated by Partners for Prevention (P4P), a UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV Asia-Pacific regional joint programme for gender-based violence prevention. The qualitative study aims to look in-depth at individual men and women's life histories to understand how they may have impacted on their gender practices and gender beliefs today in relation to gender-based violence in contemporary China.This study also aims to understand the trajectory of expression of (counter) hegemonic practices of masculinities and femininities across and throughout men and women's lives, reflecting acceptance or rejection of violence in society.

Adopting a life history approach, this study interviewed three groups of people:

- 10 'gender-equitable men', i.e. those men who display behaviours that run counter to hegemonic masculinity
- 10 male perpetrators of violence against women
- 10 women who have suffered from gender-based violence throughout their life course.

Summary of key findings

Five research finding chapters are presented according to the timeline of the life history narrative: childhood, school, work, intimate relationships and communities, in order to capture the life course trajectory of gendered construction of masculinitiesand femininities and experiences of gender-based violence.

Childhood:

In general, patriarchal divisions of power, whereby men and boys held higher positions of power than women and girls in the family, were prevalent across the childhoods of all respondents. Parents' preferential treatment of male children was commonly reported by both male and female respondents. In contrast, daughters tended to be heavily involved in housework and childcare, and because of this, some were denied the opportunity to go to school and receive a formal education.This was most common among the older generation of female respondents. Witnessing domestic violence between parents was common acrossall three groups. In particular, the perpetrators were more inclined to justify the normality of violence, and frame it within the context of child discipline.

School:

The life history narratives suggest that experiences within the education sector were varied across the sample groups. The 'gender-equitable' men group tended to report higher performance and achieve higher levels of education than their counterparts in the other groups. Many 'gender-equitable' men also mentioned that they came to have a high level of gender awareness because of different school activities and educational exposure, suggested a linkage between access to higher education and enhanced opportunities to learn about gender equality. Among the perpetrators, most had only received limited education and tended to associate their school years with experiences of fighting and bullying. These differences and similarities across the male respondents suggest that while education and school experiences are significant spaces for socialization, they are not the only factor that determines a man's trajectory toward more equitable or non-equitable norms and practices. Among the female participants, younger women reported higher levels of education than older women, signaling generational differences in patterns of female education in China. Almost half of the female respondents reported experiences of bullying and harassment in school, although this tended to be framed as less physical than confrontations among boys. All three groups experienced – to varying degrees – poor teacher-student relationships and corporal punishment by teachers.While the perpetrators often would "drop out" from school or "fail" to cope with these experiences of abuse, the 'gender-equitable' men and the female participants seemed more able to overcome or disregard experiences of violence and continue to do well at school.

Work:

There were significantly different patterns of how work was discussed and framed within the respondents lives across the three samples. Generally, the 'gender-equitable' men spoke of their passion, motivation, devotion and satisfaction derived from their work, although there were also some reported tensions. The perpetrators tended to frame work as a means to an end: make a living and support lifestyle preferences, such as gambling, drinking with friends or visiting sex workers. In their working lives, there was a substantially higher level of reported conflict and frustration, and tensions often spilled over into the domestic sphere. Among the female respondents, the main trend across respondents was the extent to which women were expected to fulfill a 'double-burden': to be responsible for contributing financially to the household through outside work, and also to maintain the image of "virtuous mothers and good wives" at home.

Intimate Partnerships and Violence:

The analysis of how respondents perceived and dealt with incidents of violence, and the connections with gender norms, revealed multiple forms of violence perpetration – even among the 'gender-equitable' sample. However, perceptions of violence varied across the two male sample groups: the 'gender-equitable' men sample tended to reject, in theory, violence as a conflict solving mechanism, although they sometimes did use violence against their partner. The perpetrators were more likely to perceive violence as a normal occurrence within the intimate partnership space, and often linked their use of violence to disagreements over activities they saw as 'natural' for a man, such as drinking or gambling. They also tended to deny or justify acts of violence by attributing them to outside provocation or to their own "excusable" temper. A significant difference between perpetrator's and women survivors' narratives was the frequent references to sexual violence among the female sample, and the lack of reporting on this topic by men.

Community Discourses of Gender Norms and Response to Violence:

Overall, most of the respondents agreed in principle to gender equality and the need for equal rights between women and men, although the perpetrators were slightly less likely to report these beliefs. In practice, however, practices varied particularly in relation to acceptability and use of violence. Both 'gender-equitable' men and men in the perpetrator sample tended to describe similar types of ideal men and ideal types of relationships.However, among the perpetrators (and some of the 'gender-equitable' men) these described norms did not always preclude the use of violence to enforce the norm. Female respondents tended to hold idea images of masculinity and femininity that underscore women's role as wife and mother, and men's role as wage-earner and head of the family. Some of the female respondents that violence against women was a crime but at the same time, it was sometimes deserved or needed. Differences between urban and rural living arrangements and community life also played a notable role in our participants' accounts of domestic violence, influencing their perceptions of violence and their experiences of dealing with violence within their communities. In discussions around community response to violence, most respondents strongly emphasized that gender-based violence prevention and intervention need effective community support, accessible support agencies, and multi-sectoralcollaboration.

Recommendations

The findings from this qualitative study support the recommendations produced in the quantitative report on gender-based violence and masculinities produced by UNFPA China, Partners for Prevention, Beijing Forestry University and the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (Wang, Fang and Li 2013). The in-depth nature of the qualitative life history data provides further nuance for recommendations on programmes and policies to prevent violence against women, and also further areas of research needed. Adopting the timeline of the life history, the recommendationsdiscuss programme intervention and policy sites for preventing violence against women during childhood, in schools, in working environments, within the intimate partnership space and across communities.

Recommendation 1:Support healthy childhood environments

Specific Programme Interventions and Approaches

- Set up a positive parenting skills training programmes in China, which engages both fathers and mothers as primary caregivers and provides training in communication skills, conflict and problem solving resolution, respect for children's rights, and equal investment in boys and girls, etc.
- Develop awareness and advocacy campaigns around the negative impacts of physical punishment on child development
- Strengthen the availability of psycho-social support and counselling for at-risk children who witness parental violence or suffer from child abuse, particularly in rural areas

Key Target Policy Sites
- Advocate for paternity leave policies to encourage fathers to engage more fully in child-rearing
- Strengthen implementation of policies to reduce son preference
- Promote a more comprehensive health sector response to child abuse and maltreatment, engaging a wide-range of health-care professionals in identifying and addressing evidence of abuse

Further Research
- Enhance research on child abuse, especially child sexual abuse in urban and rural China

Recommendation 2: Promote school-based gender equality programmes

Specific Programme Interventions and Approaches
- Integrate school-based gender equality and rights curricula within existing sexual education curricula throughout national school systems, and throughout grade levels, to foster early exposure and open communication around topics such as gender norms, sex, sexual relationships, human rights and gender-based violence.
- Implement early-age reading and activity groups within preschool and early primary school classrooms to discuss school bullyingand promote non-violence at an age-appropriate level
- Provide comprehensive training for teachers on non-violent classroom discipline methods and students'rights
- Implement school-based programmes on dating violence and bullying prevention
- In colleges and universities, provide stronger financial and logistical support to students' organizations involved in gender equality and anti-gender-based violence campaigns

Key Target Policy Sites
- Engage the Ministry of Education in efforts to support equal education opportunities and violence prevention within school settings

Further Research
- Promote further studies on school bullying and dating violence.

Recommendation 3: Promote healthy and respectfulintimatepartner relationships free from violence

Specific Programme Interventions and Approaches
- Promote interventions that work with young people to challenge harmful or disrespectful relationship patterns and build communication and relationship skills based on mutual respect, strongcommunication, and non-violence problem solving approaches
- Strengthen formal and informal support systems for women experiencing violence, particularly legal aid, support groups, hotlines, shelters and health care support
- Build programmes to work within communities – particularly among mothers and daughters- in-law – to promotesu pportiveintergenerational relationships

Key Target Policy Sites
- Sensitize and build the capacity of law enforcement and judiciary to more effectively respond to cases of domestic violence or violence against women
- Establish and promote clear legislation to address domestic violence and gender discrimination at the national level
- Promote anti-sexual harassment campaigns and policies in public space and workplaces.

Further Research
- Conduct research on the effectiveness of violence prevention initiatives in China
- Conduct research on the nature and scope of violence within same-sex intimate partnerships

Recommendation 4: Promote notions of masculinities that are built on equality, peace and respect for women

Specific Programme Interventions and Approaches
- Adopt multi-media campaigns to promote non-violent masculinities, particularly among youth and within rural communities
- Promoteneighborhood watch systems within communities to prevent and respond to incidents of gender-based violence
- Design contextual sensitive community projects to challenge sexist cultural beliefs, routines, and conventions

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Partners for Prevention (P4P), is a UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV regional joint programme for gender-based violence prevention in Asia and the Pacific.

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