Effects of Gender and Profession Type on Definitions of Violence Against Women in Hong Kong

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The present study aimed to explore effects of gender and type of profession on the definitions of violence against women (VAW) in Hong Kong. Chinese public services providers (N = 2,589), including clinical psychologists, social workers, police officers, medical doctors, nurses, teachers, and lawyers, were surveyed. Results showed that rape, sexual harassment, and unwanted bodily touch were perceived by over 90% of the public service providers as VAW; and the use of force, the inducement of physical wounds, and the lack of consent were perceived by over 90% of the professionals as important criteria in defining behaviors that constituted VAW. Compared to females, male professionals had a narrower scope of VAW and rated various criteria as less important in defining VAW. Among the respondents, clinical psychologists and social workers had the broadest definition, whereas police officers and lawyers had the narrowest definition of VAW. Lawyers, as compared to other professionals, rated the given criteria as the least important when classifying behaviors as VAW.

Violence against women (VAW) is an important research agenda (Goodman, Koss, Fitzgerald, & Keita, 1993) and includes intimate violence such as child abuse, incest, courtship violence, date rape, wife battering, marital rape, and elderly abuse as well as criminal violence of statutory offenses of robbery, burglary, aggravated assault, forcible rape, and homicide (Koss, 1990). Although VAW happens in almost every corner of the world, there

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is no agreement of its incidence and prevalence within or across societies (Fitzgerald, 1993; Koss, 1990; Walker, 1989). Available cross-cultural studies have indicated that societal variations in the amount, frequency, and severity of VAW depend largely upon how individuals in a particular society perceive what behaviors constitute VAW and their concern over stigma and shame in reporting, which are in turn associated with the acceptance of myths and stereotypes, gender-role expectations, and cultural sanctions of general violence (Gallin, 1992; Lewinson, 1989; Honig & Hershatter, 1988).

Within the Chinese culture, VAW is both condemned as well as condoned. Aggression is disapproved in general as the Chinese culture emphasizes harmony, discipline, and self-restraint in interpersonal relationship (Goodwin & Tang, 1996). On the other hand, the traditional patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal Chinese cultural views also place women in submissive and vulnerable positions within the society and family context (Li, 1992). Intimate violence in the form of child abuse, incest, marital rape, or wife battering sometimes may even be condoned as a legitimate treatment of women and defended within the “rules of the family” (jia fa) and “three obediences” of women to defer to their fathers, husbands, and sons.

Extensive studies on VAW in Chinese societies such as China and Taiwan are few. Reports on VAW in China suggest that rape and wife battering has increased significantly in recent years in both rural and urban regions and the female infanticide rate is also on the rise as an unintended result of China’s one-child policy (Honig & Hershatter, 1988). The female sexual victimization rate in the urban cities of Taiwan is estimated to be about 32.3% (Chen, 1997). In Hong Kong, studies have been done in areas such as sex crime against women, rape, wife abuse, sexual harassment, and dating aggression. Cheung and her colleagues (Cheung, 1987; Lee & Cheung, 1991) have studied Chinese attitudes, adjustment, and treatment of rape victims; and found that the acceptance of rape myths and traditional views about women were related to the negative perceptions of rape victims. Tang (1994; 1997) has documented the prevalence of family violence in Hong Kong and the adjustment of abused women and their children. She argued that Chinese cultural values are fundamental to the occurrence of wife abuse in Chinese societies as well as why Chinese women have been reluctant to leave their abusive partners. Tang and her colleagues (Tang, Yik, Cheung, Choi, & Au, 1995; 1996) have also explored sexual harassment in academic setting and found that Chinese college students had lower awareness and experience level in sexual harassment as compared to US students.