

Impact of Domestic Violence on the Workplace in China

China's Anti-Domestic Violence Law (DV Law) identifies employers as key stakeholders in addressing domestic violence. However, there is limited data on how domestic violence affects the workplace in China or how employers understand their responsibilities. The Asia Foundation and SynTao Co., Ltd. conducted research to fill this gap, and the findings reveal how domestic violence impacts both employees and their coworkers, and how domestic violence has cost implications for employers.



BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Domestic violence (DV) is not only a crime against basic human rights, it is also a global public health problem that results in significant losses to individuals, families, businesses, and society. Researchers, policymakers, and activists in countries around the world are increasingly focused on the economic impacts of DV, including its costs to businesses, and how employers can be effectively engaged in efforts to address DV. In March 2016 China enacted its first DV Law, which identifies employers as important stakeholders in addressing DV. The law also includes provisions that require employers to act against DV through measures such as disciplining abusers among their employees and providing assistance to victims.

Despite these provisions, the legal expectations for employers in China are not well defined, or systematically understood or implemented. Employers have a low level of awareness of the many ways in which DV can adversely affect them and what workplace strategies can be used to address the issue. There has also been limited data available on employee experiences of DV and on the effects of DV on the workplace for

the Chinese context. Altogether, this lack of clarity and data contributes to a broad underestimation of the costs of DV to employers, as well as a lack of commitment by employers to implement policies that support survivors of DV and discipline perpetrators.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The Asia Foundation and SynTao Co., Ltd., a leading consulting firm on corporate social responsibility, initiated a research project in 2016 to fill these knowledge gaps. This research expands understanding of the impact of DV on the workplace, as well as employers' engagement in efforts to combat DV, from both employees' and employers' perspectives. Official statistics suggest that about one quarter of all married women in China experience DV, but regional studies in China suggest prevalence rates that are significantly higher. Survivors in China are challenged by the difficulty to access social safety nets, especially because of the high mobility of the population. Workplace can be an important avenue for survivors to access information and assistance, as 68% of the working-age population are engaged in formal employment, 44% of whom are women. In this context, workplace-based interventions

can play a crucial role in addressing DV in China. Moreover, as an organization's overall productivity, internal culture, and public image have become increasingly important in standing out amongst market competition, this is a strategy with high potential payoff for survivors, the anti-DV cause, and employers themselves.

This study's findings are intended to fulfill two purposes: (1) To form an initial baseline of knowledge on the understandings, experiences, and effects of DV among employees and employers; and (2) To inform and improve employer responses to DV, as required by the DV Law of China.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study took a two-pronged approach to examine how DV impacts the workplace. From an employee perspective (including both survivors and coworkers), the study assessed employee experiences of DV and DV's impact in the workplace, including on performance and productivity. The study also explored employer understanding of DV and the DV Law, employer capacity to respond to DV, and the costs incurred by employers as a result of DV.

For this research, DV was defined as behaviors perpetrated by an intimate partner related to physical, verbal, sexual, and psychological abuse; constraint of personal freedom (including ability to go to work); economic control; and deprivation of contact with one's children. The research team included in-house researchers from The Asia Foundation and SynTao Co., Ltd., two gender experts, one lawyer, two economists, and one statistician. Rigorous safety and ethical standards addressed risk assessment, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity; and free counseling services were offered to participating DV survivors.

Data collection tools included surveys, in-depth interviews, and a literature review. The research team developed two separate surveys: the Survey of Employees on Domestic Violence Issues and the Survey of Human Resource Managers on Domestic Violence Issues. Due to their expertise in employee services policies and workplace issues, Human Resource (HR) managers were surveyed to represent the employer perspectives and practices. In total, 799 valid surveys were completed, with 706 employees and 93 employers participating. 488 employees and 60 employers were recruited through an online platform that was advertised through news and social media to reach a diverse sample of respondents nationwide from a range of industries and job positions. The majority of these respondents (80% of employees and 73% of employers) were women. To ensure representation of two groups that comprise a significant portion of the working population in China, researchers also surveyed domestic workers (48 respondents)

and factory-based workers (170 employees and 33 employers from three manufacturing factories in Guangdong Province). Unless otherwise noted, findings are drawn from the general public sample surveyed online.



Survey of Employees on Domestic Violence Issues & Survey of Human Resource Managers on Domestic Violence Issues

**799 Surveyed
706 Employees & Employers**

In addition to the surveys, the research team conducted in-depth, structured interviews with eight DV survivors and seven employers from various industries in order to develop representative case studies of the experiences of survivors and the impacts of DV on their work, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of both survivors' and HR managers' perceptions of employer responsibilities around addressing DV. The DV survivors interviewed were identified with input from survivor-assistance service providers across the country.

FINDINGS

The central findings of this research are the following:

1. 13.3% of respondents have experienced DV in the past 12 months, and nearly half of these survivors have experienced DV in the workplace. In addition, 56.4% have witnessed DV suffered by acquaintances, and 65.8% of these witnesses have seen the victims continue to be abused in their workplace;
2. Employers have a limited understanding of the expectations of either their employees or the DV Law on what workplace policies to support survivors or discipline abusers should be implemented;
3. Survivors of DV suffer many physical and emotional effects, both of which have great negative impacts on employee safety and productivity in the workplace (to survivors themselves as well as their coworkers); and
4. Employers pay expensive DV-related costs, due to the loss incurred by reduced productivity, missed work hours or work days, and staff turnover as a result of DV.

**13.3% of respondents
have experienced
domestic violence
in the past 12 months.**

Many employees have experienced DV, both at home and in the workplace. Among employees surveyed, 13.3% reported experiencing some form of DV in the past 12 months. The majority of abusers are spouses, partners, or former partners. Most self-reported victims were female, although male victims were not rare. Nearly half (46.2%) of these survivors have experienced abuse by their partners while at work, and 22% reported that their abuser has harassed, threatened, or even assaulted their coworkers. Nearly 37% of respondents have witnessed acquaintances experience DV while in the workplace.

DV affects job performance and career advancement. 95% of respondents believe that DV has adverse effects on productivity and job performance due to resulting stress, fatigue, injuries, and distractions, as well as forced absences or job changes. Almost 45% of respondents who have experienced DV reported missing work hours or work days due to DV.



45% of respondents experiencing domestic violence miss work hours or work days due to domestic violence

On average, each survivor missed fifteen work days, took eleven days of personal leave, and/or arrived late/left early from work five times in the past 12 months. Nearly 17% reported that they once changed or quit jobs as a result of DV. Overall, 70.8% of survivors reported that DV negatively affected their career advancement due to lowered work performance, poor attendance, and career disruption caused by having to change jobs or give up opportunities of professional training and promotion.

DV generates significant costs to employers due to lost productivity, absence from work, and employee turnover—which in turn creates additional human resource and administrative costs. Employees want help from employers, but are reluctant

Domestic violence generates significant costs to employers due to lost productivity, absence from work, and employee turnover.

to ask for it. Although the majority of employees believe that their employers should intervene to provide assistance (91%) or discipline perpetrators (65.6%) in instances of DV, and while more than half of survivors surveyed did disclose their experiences of DV to coworkers and/or supervisors, general employee willingness to seek help from employers in instances of DV remains low (less than 10%). An important reason for this is that employees have limited knowledge of the willingness or ability of their employers to intervene, the availability of resources for interventions, or the possible effects of intervention. Other reasons for employee reluctance to seek help from employers include concerns about privacy, discrimination, and losing face or being ridiculed.

Employers are largely unaware of employee experiences with DV. Only 10% of HR managers surveyed were aware of their employees experiencing DV, and even fewer (5%) realized there were abusers among their staff. Only 3.3% of HR managers were aware of employees seeking help from their employers due to DV, reinforcing the finding that while a significant number of survivors may be willing to disclose their experiences with DV to supervisors/coworkers, this is not equivalent to seeking institutional help or drawing upon official workplace policies for support.

Employers are unfamiliar with the DV Law and few have adopted anti-DV workplace policies. Employees' concerns over employer capacity or willingness to help are not unfounded. Employers currently take few intervention or assistance measures to address DV, and their awareness of possible solutions that they could adopt in the workplace is far below employees' expectations. Moreover, 48% of HR managers stated that their workplace did not have anti-DV measures in place, while another 48% stated that they simply did not know whether any workplace policies around DV were in effect. In fact, nearly half (48%) of employers surveyed were unaware of the enactment of the DV Law in 2016 and its provisions.



Nearly 1/2 (48%) of employers unaware of the enactment of DV Law in 2016

Employers also have several concerns about engaging in anti-DV efforts. The most prevalent concerns include the following: (1) Laws and regulations need to be improved and clarified around employer responsibilities and effective strategies; (2) The perceived difficulty of measuring the input-output ratio in terms of what employers would need to invest in workplace-based measures compared to the benefit to employers may hinder sustainable financial investment in these measures by employers; and (3) Employers are unsure of the best ways to intervene without compromising employee privacy. Despite these concerns, most HR managers (85%) state that their employers would be willing to both adopt simple anti-DV toolkits to guide their actions and to organize awareness-raising and training activities in the workplace.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research, combined with the new measures in the DV Law, is intended to support and encourage employers to take action against DV. The findings indicate a lack of awareness of the true costs of DV to employers. These costs could be minimized by awareness-raising and survivor assistance programs in the workplace to help prevent DV, and enable survivors to seek assistance or leave abusive relationships sooner. In addition, 92% of respondents believe that appropriate survivor assistance programs in the workplace would increase their loyalty to their employers and build good will around the organization. Therefore, it is important that employers realize the substantial costs DV creates for their business operations, and of the numerous positive impacts that will accrue when employers enact effective anti-DV measures in the workplace.

These findings point to several steps that can be taken by employers, policymakers, and advocates to facilitate the creation of comprehensive and practical workplace policies to address DV. These include the following:

1. Clarifying relevant laws, regulations, and guidelines and raising awareness around workplace safety, labor protections, and employer responsibilities around DV;
2. Increasing employer understanding of DV, its negative effects on the workplace and costs to business operations, and the potential positive benefits of addressing DV;
3. Raising the awareness of employees of their employers' responsibilities, capacity, and willingness to act in cases of DV; and
4. Providing employers with a simple to understand and use anti-DV toolkit that is relevant to Chinese employers and balances the needs and concerns of both employers and employees.

These actions will help to increase employers' sense of responsibility and ability to implement and promote anti-DV measures in their workplaces. They will also help survivors of DV see employers as a viable and important resource in escaping or addressing violence.

The government plays a vital role in this process, and there are a number of additional actions that can be undertaken to better integrate employers as effective partners in anti-DV efforts. For instance, the government can allocate financial support for DV awareness and employer capacity building, facilitate pilot programs, promote best practices on workplace DV interventions, and include employers in the government's multi-sectoral coordination network. Advocacy by UN organizations, All-China Women's Federation, All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), industry associations, and civil society organizations is critical in encouraging policymakers to take these steps. In addition, high-quality data is critical to furthering understanding of the effects of DV on employers and of workplace interventions; future research should be done to verify the applicability of the cost factors identified by this study to nationally representative and industry-specific samples.

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.



HEADQUARTERS
465 California Street,
9th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104 USA
Tel: (415) 982-4640
info.sf@asiafoundation.org

WASHINGTON, DC
1779 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Suite 815
Washington, D.C. 20036 USA
Tel: (202) 588-9420
dc.general@asiafoundation.org

BEIJING REPRESENTATIVE OFFICE
Suite 1905, Building No. 1
18 Jianguomennei Avenue
Beijing 100005, China
Tel: (86) 10 6518-3868
country.china.general@asiafoundation.org

china.asiafoundation.org