



The Patterns and Influencing Factors of Help-Seeking Decisions among Women Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence in China

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Abstract

Although there has been a growing body of empirical research that examines the prevalence rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) and associated factors in Chinese societies, few studies have examined IPV survivors' help-seeking patterns. Drawing on data from a nationwide survey among the general public in mainland China, the present study sought to investigate help-seeking decisions and associated factors among Chinese women survivors of IPV. The sample consisted of 488 IPV survivors who self-identified as heterosexual women in China. Logistic regression analyses were conducted to identify factors influencing participants' help-seeking decisions (help-seeking versus non-help-seeking) and non-help-seeking reasons. A latent class analysis (LCA) was used to explore help-seeking patterns among those who sought help. Multinomial logistic regression analyses, as part of the 3-step LCA approach, were employed to locate significant factors associated with distinct help-seeking patterns identified in the LCA. Over two-thirds of the survivors (73.4%) did not seek help. Among the 26.6% of survivors who sought help, the majority sought support from family and friends, rather than professional services. The main reasons for not seeking help include (a) the belief that they could handle the situation by themselves, (b) not knowing to whom they could turn for help, and (c) the belief that the violence experienced was not severe. IPV type and several relationship-related factors stood out as key predictors for different help-seeking decisions. Implications for future research and practice in the context of China are discussed.

Keywords Intimate partner violence · China · Female survivors · Help-seeking

Introduction

Given its high prevalence and detrimental impact, intimate partner violence (IPV) has been recognized as a serious social problem that affects women around the world. Globally, nearly one-third of women (30%) have experienced physical and/or sexual IPV in their lifetime (Devries et al. 2013). In China,

the prevalence of IPV victimization is similarly high, especially among women. According to the 2010 China's National Survey on Women's Social Status, approximately 25% of Chinese women reported lifetime exposure to IPV, inclusive of psychological, physical, and sexual violence (Xiao and Feng 2014). A recent review on IPV in China also showed that the rates of lifetime psychological, physical and sexual

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violence in the general population ranged from 17.4% to 24.5%, from 2.5% to 5.5%, and from 0.3% to 1.7%, respectively (Yang et al. 2019). The low rate of sexual abuse may be due to the low rate of reporting sexual assault incidents in Chinese societies (Xue et al. 2019a, b).

Studies in different socio-cultural contexts have documented the negative consequences of IPV on women, such as increased risks for mental health symptoms (e.g., PTSD and depression; Gibbs et al. 2018; Liu et al. 2018), substantial health problems (Eaton et al. 2016), employment instability, and other life challenges (e.g., housing instability; Adams et al. 2013). Seeking and receiving timely and proper professional help and social support can greatly mitigate the negative consequences of IPV on survivors (Rizo et al. 2017; Wong et al. 2016). For instance, effective housing programs can alleviate homelessness among IPV survivors (Sullivan et al. 2019). Seeking social support has been consistently linked to improved mental well-being of IPV survivors (see review by Rizo et al. 2017). A Hong Kong-based study found that Chinese women who adopted problem-focused coping strategies, such as seeking instrumental support for IPV, showed a significant decrease in problematic mental health symptoms, compared to those who did not seek such support (Wong et al. 2016). The empirical findings stress the importance of studying IPV survivors' help-seeking behavior and identifying help-seeking determinants.

Despite the increasing research on IPV in China, most studies have focused on the prevalence and characteristics, risk and protective factors, legal responses, and attitudes and beliefs related to IPV (Zhang and Zhao 2018; Xue et al. 2019a). Help-seeking patterns and factors associated with help-seeking for IPV among different Chinese populations remain understudied. Drawing on a sample of 488 heterosexual women survivors of IPV, the present study seeks to fill the knowledge gap by examining help-seeking decisions, patterns, and associated factors among Chinese women.

Help-Seeking for IPV and Influencing Factors

In the context of IPV, help-seeking refers to a series of actions taken in “the active pursuit of and interaction with” one or more third parties by IPV victims in hopes of solving problems or challenges caused by IPV (Cornally and McCarthy 2011, p. 282). A survivor of IPV may decide not to seek help or turn to one or multiple sources of support (Liang et al. 2005). Help may come from either formal or informal sources (Cornally and McCarthy 2011; Liang et al. 2005). Sources of formal help refer to a wide range of professional services and support established in a given society, such as law enforcement interventions, medical and social services, and legal assistance. Informal help is often provided by individuals in survivors' family and social networks, such as siblings, relatives, friends, and neighbors. Disclosing victimization and

seeking help have been reported as critical challenges faced by many women survivors of IPV (Spencer et al. 2014). In a study conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) on women's health and IPV across ten non-Western countries (e.g., Brazil, Japan, and Thailand), 55% to 95% of women who had experienced partner physical violence did not seek help (García-Moreno et al. 2005). Studies across different countries, especially from less developed regions, have shown that informal sources of support were more commonly sought than formal sources of help among women survivors of IPV (García-Moreno et al. 2005; Parvin et al. 2016).

A variety of factors have been found to influence women's help-seeking for IPV. Women tend to be more actively seeking help when they feel that their life is perceived as being in serious danger due to IPV (Barrett and St Pierre 2011). Indeed, the severity and type of IPV have been reported as significant contributors to survivors' help-seeking decisions: More severe IPV, higher frequency of violent incidents, and experiencing physical violence (compared with psychological aggression) are predictive of increased help-seeking among women (Choi et al. 2018) and greater likelihoods of seeking formal sources of support (Cho et al. 2017). In Mexico, that the IPV experienced was insignificant was the top reason for not seeking help among women survivors (Frias 2013). A Bangladeshi study also found that over half of the women did not seek help due to high levels of IPV acceptance and that 80% of those who had sought help because the violence became intolerable (Parvin et al. 2016). People in Mainland China also tended to have a greater tolerance for IPV (Li et al. 2017) and adopt a rather narrow definition of IPV (Jiao et al. 2016; Lin et al. 2016). When a violent situation or a form of IPV (e.g., psychological abuse) does not align with the survivor's definition of “violence,” it is unlikely that help-seeking would be initiated. Severe violence or physical violence is more likely to cause serious problems (e.g., bodily injuries) that often need external support and subsequently to be recognized by women as a “legitimate” form of IPV, facilitating active help-seeking.

Given that IPV takes place in an intimate relationship, women who experience IPV may alter their perceptions of what acts or behaviors perpetrated by their intimate partners are considered as violence. In addition, as the level of intimacy grows (e.g., from being in a dating relationship to entering into marriage), women may justify certain violent acts, making help-seeking a difficult and slow decision (Liang et al. 2005). Studies revealed that married women, compared with those who are not in a marriage, were less likely to seek help (Linos et al. 2014), such as reporting IPV to legal authorities (Parvin et al. 2016). In a US-based representative sample, unmarried women were more inclined to seek formal professional support (e.g., a psychologist), and women in a committed long-term relationship tended to seek family counseling, whereas those in shorter and less committed relationships

were more likely to ask for shelter support and police assistance (Vatnar and Bjorkly 2009).

Past research has linked IPV survivors' background characteristics to their help-seeking behavior. For instance, IPV survivors' socioeconomic status and available resources can greatly influence help-seeking decisions (Liang et al. 2005). Both higher levels of education and income have been found to facilitate IPV disclosure and help-seeking (Parvin et al. 2016), especially seeking help from professional counseling (Vatnar and Bjorkly 2009). Some studies also reported that lower levels of income were associated with a higher likelihood of seeking support from family members (Barrett and St Pierre 2011). Being employed is another help-seeking facilitator found in some studies (Linos et al. 2014). Additionally, compared with those unemployed, employed women were more likely to have other concerns than "not needing help" when contemplating contacting the police for IPV incidents (Leone et al. 2014).

Last, cultural influences on IPV help-seeking should also be given due attention as certain cultural practices and beliefs may contribute to a survivor's recognition of IPV as well as justification of help-seeking efforts (Liang et al. 2005). For example, cultural acceptance of male-to-female IPV and stigma associated with IPV disclosure can prevent women from seeking help (West 2016). In the context of Chinese culture, earlier studies argued that the patriarchal family culture that stresses male dominance and male supremacy over women, as well as the cultural emphasis on collectivism and harmony, constituted the main cultural barriers to seeking help (Ho 1990). In a Taiwanese study on cultural barriers to help-seeking for IPV, the main reasons for women not seeking help included a cultural emphasis on self-reliance, shame and fear of others' negative judgment, and the lack of knowledge of resources (Shen 2011). In Mainland China the extent to which these cultural barriers inhibit women's IPV help-seeking remains understudied. The promotion of women's equal rights and the ongoing economic development in recent years nonetheless may have challenged some of the traditional Chinese cultural influences (Zhang and Zhao 2018), contributing to a potential renewal in women's understanding of IPV and help-seeking decisions in the current social context of China.

Aims of the Study

The present study aimed to achieve three objectives: (1) to identify factors associated with women's decision-making of whether to seek help for IPV; (2) among those who sought help, to explore help-seeking patterns and to locate significant factors associated with distinct help-seeking patterns identified; and (3) among those who did not seek help, to analyze the main reasons for non-help-seeking and influencing factors.

Method

Procedures and Participants

Data used for the present study came from a cross-sectional survey of 3334 respondents from the general population in mainland China in 2015 (Hu et al. 2019). The survey was created in Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn), a Chinese survey website commonly used for data collection. Several online venues were used for participant recruitment. First, researchers invited participation via two main Chinese social media platforms, Weibo and WeChat. Second, participants were recruited among subscribers in several e-mail groups that focus on the issues of domestic violence or IPV in China. Last, in collaboration with non-profit organizations in Beijing (e.g., Tongyu, Women's Voice, Anti-domestic Violence Civil Advocacy Group) that focus on women's rights and/or anti-domestic violence advocacy, the research team also distributed the survey to members and clients of these organizations.

Data were collected between September 10 and 25, 2015. The team received returned surveys from a total of 3334 individuals, of which 2875 were cisgender women, 434 cisgender men, and 25 self-identified as transgender. Of all cisgender women, 1941 self-identified as heterosexual. For the present study, we focused on all heterosexual women who reported having experienced at least one type of IPV (i.e., psychological violence, physical violence, sexual violence, or controlling behavior) in the past year and responded to the question, "did you seek help after experiencing intimate partner violence last year," resulting in a final sample of 488 participants. As shown in Table 1, participants' ages ranged from 18 to 63 years ($M = 27.23$, $SD = 7.15$). The majority completed college ($n = 322$, 66%) with 19.1% having obtained a degree above college ($n = 93$). Slightly over one-fourth were in marriage at the time of the survey ($n = 135$, 27.7%).

Measures

Help-Seeking Participants were asked to respond to a dichotomous question: "did you seek help after experiencing intimate partner violence last year?" Participants who reported "yes" were then asked to check all sources of support from which they had sought help, including (1) friends, (2) family members, (3) teachers, (4) neighbors, (5) the police, (6) the Women's Federation (WF),¹ (7) mental health professionals, (8) lawyers, (9) non-profit service organizations, (10) mental health hotline, (11) medical support, (12) social media/journalists, and (13) courts. Participants who reported "no" were

¹ The Women's Federation is also known as The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), a nationwide government-supported women's organization that aims to protect and promote the rights of women and children in China. The ACWF has local chapters that provide support and resources to women who seek help for intimate partner violence.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics and results of logistic regression (N = 488)

Characteristic	Total (n = 488) n (%)	Sought help (n = 130, 26.6%) n (%)	Did not seek help (n = 358, 73.4%) n (%)	Sought help vs. Did not seek help (ref.) aOR (95% CI)	p
Age	<i>M</i> = 27.22; <i>SD</i> = 7.15	<i>M</i> = 27.5; <i>SD</i> = 7.06	<i>M</i> = 27.19; <i>SD</i> = 7.19	0.98 (0.94, 1.03)	.39
Marital (<i>married</i>)	135 (27.7)	40 (30.8)	95 (26.5)	1.75 (0.94, 3.24)	.08
Education					
Below college	73 (15)	22 (16.9)	51 (14.2)	ref.	
College	322 (66)	86 (66.2)	236 (65.9)	0.81 (0.43, 1.53)	.51
Above college	93 (19.1)	22 (16.9)	71 (19.8)	0.71 (0.32, 1.54)	.38
Status of residence					
Rural/town	22 (4.5)	5 (3.8)	17 (4.7)	ref.	
County/prefecture-level	162 (33.2)	51 (39.2)	111 (31)	1.74 (0.58, 5.25)	.33
Provincial capital or municipality	304 (62.3)	74 (56.9)	230 (64.2)	1.28 (0.43, 3.80)	.67
Income					
Below 2000 CNY	175 (35.9)	41 (31.5)	134 (37.4)	1.37 (0.49, 3.83)	.55
2000–8000 CNY	245 (51)	75 (57.7)	174 (48.6)	1.52 (0.75, 3.07)	.24
Above 8000 CNY	64 (13.1)	14 (10.8)	50 (14)	ref.	
Employment					
Unemployed students	145 (29.7)	34 (26.2)	111 (31)	0.89 (0.37, 2.11)	.79
Unemployed non-students	35 (7.2)	8 (6.2)	27 (7.5)	0.68 (0.25, 1.87)	.45
Employed	308 (63.1)	88 (67.7)	220 (61.5)	ref.	
Acceptance of male dominance	<i>M</i> = 9.33; <i>SD</i> = 2.74	<i>M</i> = 9.41; <i>SD</i> = 2.78	<i>M</i> = 9.30; <i>SD</i> = 2.73	1.01 (0.93, 1.11)	.78
Justification of IPV	<i>M</i> = 5.72; <i>SD</i> = 2.08	<i>M</i> = 5.72; <i>SD</i> = 1.90	<i>M</i> = 5.71; <i>SD</i> = 2.14	1.00 (0.90, 1.12)	.95
Relationship satisfaction					
Good	161 (33)	43 (33.1)	118 (33)	0.81 (0.36, 1.80)	.60
Fair	177 (36.3)	46 (35.4)	131 (36.6)	0.70 (0.33, 1.50)	.36
Not so good	99 (20.3)	23 (17.7)	76 (21.2)	0.58 (0.26, 1.29)	.18
Poor	51 (10.5)	18 (13.8)	33 (9.2)	ref.	
Victimization					
Psychological aggression	434 (88.9)	115 (88.5)	319 (89.1)	1.00 (0.50, 1.97)	.99
Controlling/threatening	231 (47.3)	63 (48.5)	168 (46.9)	0.93 (0.58, 1.49)	.76
Physical violence	151 (30.9)	47 (36.2)	104 (29.1)	1.43 (0.87, 2.34)	.16
Sexual violence	189 (38.7)	42 (32.3)	147 (41.1)	0.61* (0.38, 0.98)	.04
Violence led to breakup					
Yes	117 (24)	45 (34.6)	72 (20.1)	2.46*** (1.49, 4.05)	.00
No	371 (76)	85 (65.4)	286 (79.9)	ref.	
				Nagelkerke $R^2 = 8.3\%$ $p^a = 0.73$	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ ^a p Value was calculated by the Hosmer-Lemeshow test; aOR = adjusted odds ratio; CNY = Chinese Yuan; ref. = used as the reference group; IPV = intimate partner violence

then asked about what made them decide not to seek help for IPV. Specifically, five possible reasons for not seeking help were developed by the research team and the respondents were asked to select all that apply. The five predefined reasons were (1) “I did not know whom I may turn to or where to seek help,” (2) “IPV is domestic shame should not be made public,” (3) “I did not have a chance to seek help due to my partner’s

control,” (4) “I could handle it by myself,” (5) “I did not think help-seeking would be useful,” (6) “Other reasons.”

IPV Victimization The study assessed four types of IPV victimization, including (a) psychological aggression, (b) threatening and controlling behavior, (c) physical violence, and (d) sexual violence. Participants were asked to report the occurrence of

these four types of IPV victimization and perpetration in the past 12 months at the time of the survey. Based on the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus et al. 1996), the research team selected 15 items and adapted them to the Chinese context to measure the four types of IPV. Psychological aggression included three items: “neglecting,” “verbally humiliating or cursing,” and “talking ill or laughing at.” The threatening and controlling behavior included “threatening with self-harming or suicide attempts,” “restricting social interaction with family or friends,” “restricting physical freedom,” and “controlling financially.” Four items were used to measure physical violence, including “slapping, pushing, or shoving,” “kicking, biting, punching, or choking,” “throwing sharp objects or using those to attack,” and “burning with boiling water or cigarettes.” Three-point Likert scales were used for each question item (1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, and 3 = *often*). The three types of IPV victimization were each constructed as an additive scale with ordinal alpha values ranging from 0.71 to 0.85 in the present sample. Given that response options for each item were on a three-point Likert scale and the responses were skewed toward the less frequent side of the scale (i.e. “never”), we chose to use ordinal alpha, instead of Cronbach’s alpha, to estimate internal consistency. Using the polychoric correlation matrix, ordinal alpha is more suitable and recommended for ordinal or Likert-scale data with the presence of skewness (Gadermann et al. 2012; Zumbo et al. 2007). Sexual violence was assessed using two items: “forcing to sexually touch or kiss,” and “forcing to have sexual activities.” In the present study, the response was coded as 0 when the participant answered “never” to all the items on a sub-measure, representing that such type of IPV did not occur in the past 12 months; a response of “sometimes” or “often” on any of the items on a sub-measure resulted a code of was coded as 1, representing that such type of IPV occurred in the past 12 months.

Relationship Factors A dichotomous item was used to indicate whether participants’ experience of IPV had led to a breakup of a relationship (0 = *no*; 1 = *yes*). Marital status was also assessed with a dichotomous item (0 = *not married*; 1 = *married*). Relationship satisfaction was measured by a four-point Likert scale asking participants to rate their satisfaction with their current (or most recent) intimate partnership (1 = *good*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *not so good*, 4 = *poor*).

Justification of IPV To measure IPV justification, four items were summed up, including “harsh words or deeds are ways to show love,” “there is no reason to decline unreasonable requests, if one loves the partner deeply,” “when under stress, it is understandable to be physically or sexually aggressive towards one’s partner,” and “beating or being verbally aggressive is justifiable if the partner does something wrong”. A

five-point Likert scale was used for each item (1 = *strongly agree*; 5 = *strongly disagree*). After reverse coding, a higher score suggests higher IPV justification. The ordinal alpha was 0.72, demonstrating good internal consistency.

Acceptance of Male Dominance To measure acceptance of male dominance, four items were summed up: “having premarital sex put women in a more disadvantaged position (compared with men),” “on a date, men should pay,” “men are the breadwinner and women should take care of domestic duties, and this is the best arrangement for a family,” and “in a relationship, if men express sexual desire, women should do their best to accommodate”. A five-point Likert scale was used for each item (1 = *strongly agree*; 5 = *strongly disagree*). After reverse coding, a higher score indicates a higher level of endorsement of patriarchal norms. The scale has an ordinal alpha of 0.87, suggesting good internal reliability.

Sociodemographic Factors Five sociodemographic variables included in the analyses were age, education, income, employment status, and residence status. Age was measured in years. Education was measured by a three-level variable (1 = *below college*, 2 = *college*, and 3 = *above college*). Income was grouped into three categories (1 = *monthly earnings below 2000 Chinese Yuan* [290 USD], 2 = *between 2000 and 8000 Chinese Yuan* [1161 USD], and 3 = *above 8000 Chinese Yuan*). Employment status included three categories (1 = *employed*, 2 = *unemployed students*, and 3 = *unemployed non-students* [including retired individuals²]). Last, residence status was grouped into three categories (1 = *rural regions or village towns*, 2 = *in a county or county-level region*, and 3 = *in provincial capital or municipal regions*).

Data Analysis

A multivariate binary logistic regression was used to identify significant factors related to whether participants sought help for IPV ($N = 488$). The sample was then divided into two subsamples to examine help-seeking patterns and reasons for non-help-seeking, respectively. The first subsample was comprised of participants who sought help ($n = 130$, 26.6%), and the second was made of those who did not seek help ($n = 358$, 73.4%).

Since help-seeking is typically not a one-time decision but an ongoing process in which a survivor may turn to several helpers in responding to an IPV situation (Liang et al. 2005), a latent class approach is more suitable to examine help-seeking, as such an analysis allows for including multiple different sources of support, both formal and informal, to identify distinct help-seeking patterns. All sources of help (e.g., friends,

² In Chinese universities/colleges, there are very few employed students or part-timers.

family, and mental health professionals) were used as binary indicators (0 = *did not seek for this source of help*, and 1 = *sought for this source of help*) in the latent class analysis (LCA). The software Mplus 8.3 was used to identify distinct classes that represent unique patterns of help-seeking in the subsample of the 130 women who reported having sought help for IPV. Multinomial logistic regression analyses, as part of the 3-step LCA approach (Asparouhov and Muthén 2014), were employed to locate significant predictors associated with help-seeking patterns identified through the LCA. To assess LCA model fits, we used the following fit indices: Log-likelihood (LL), Akaike information criterion (AIC), Bayesian information criterion (BIC), Adjusted Bayesian information criterion (ABIC), Lo-Mendell-Rubin Adjusted Likelihood Ratio Test (LMR Adj. LRT), and Bootstrapped Likelihood Ratio Test (BLRT).

For the non-help-seeking subgroup, multivariate binary logistic regressions were used to examine what factors were associated with different reasons for not seeking help, respectively. Variables used in these logistic regressions included IPV victimization, IPV-induced breakup, relationship satisfaction, justification of IPV, acceptance of male dominance, and sociodemographic variables. Except for the LCA model, all analyses were conducted in SPSS 25.0.

Results

Help-Seeking Versus Non-Help-Seeking

Table 1 shows the results of the binary logistic regression used to identify significant factors for the dichotomous outcome variable – whether or not participants sought help for IPV. The percentage of participants who did not seek help ($n = 358$, 73.4%) was nearly 3 times the percentage of those who sought help ($n = 130$, 26.6%). Two variables were found to be significantly predictive of the help-seeking decision. Specifically, compared with those who did not experience sexual violence, those victimized by sexual violence were less likely to seek help (aOR = .61, $p = .04$). Those who broke up with their partners due to IPV were more likely to seek help than those who stayed in an abusive relationship (aOR = 2.46, $p = .000$).

Help-Seeking Patterns and Associated Factors

Table 2 summarizes the LCA model fit indices for all three class solutions. Based on fit indices, we determined that a two-class model was the optimal solution among the three, given its lower BIC (1037.52), compared with one-class (1136.34) and three-class models (1074.53). Additionally, the two-class solution also achieved a significant LMR Adj. LRT (164.55, $p < .0001$) and a significant BLRT ($p < .0001$), indicating that

the two-class model demonstrated a significant improvement over the one-class model (Nylund et al. 2007). In the three-class model, neither LMR Adj. LRT (30.69, $p = .2$) nor BLRT ($p = .08$) was significant, indicating that adding a class (i.e. from the two-class model to the three-class model) did not lead to a significant improvement in overall model fit. Therefore, we followed the parsimony principle and retained the two-class model.

Figure 1 reports the latent class results. Participants grouped in class 1 had a high probability of seeking help from friends and a moderate probability of seeking help from family members, with either minimal or very low probabilities of seeking help from other sources of support. Given this response pattern, we named class 1 “seeking help from friends/family.” This class represented the majority of the participants ($n = 112$, 86.1%) in the subsample of those who sought help for IPV. Participants grouped in class 2 had high probabilities of seeking help from friends, family members, the police, mental health professionals, and lawyers, and moderate probabilities of seeking help from social media/journalists and courts. Therefore, we labeled class 2 “seeking help from extensive sources.” Class 2 accounted for 13.9% ($n = 18$) of the sample.

Two variables, (a) violence type and (b) relationship satisfaction, stood out as predictors for class membership (see Table 3). Specifically, using class 1 as the reference group, those who reported having experienced sexual violence were less likely to seek extensive sources of support (aOR = .13, $p = .005$). Experiencing psychological aggression also had a marginally significant effect on the pattern of help-seeking (aOR = 0.13, $p = .068$). With respect to relationship satisfaction, those who reported “good” or “fair” were less likely to seek extensive sources of support (aOR = .07, $p = .04$; aOR = 0.10, $p = .06$ [a marginally significant effect]; respectively).

Reasons for Not Help-Seeking and Associated Factors

Table 4 shows the frequency distributions of reasons for not seeking help. Over half ($n = 185$, 51.7%) of those who did not seek help believed that they could handle the situation by themselves. About one-third ($n = 108$, 30.2%) did not know to whom they would turn for help. Another nearly one-third ($n = 106$, 29.6%) thought that the violence was not severe. Slightly more than one-quarter ($n = 94$, 26.3%) believed that seeking help was not useful. Another 15.6% ($n = 56$) did not seek help because they considered IPV as “domestic shame” which should not be made public. Merely 3.1% ($n = 11$) were controlled by their partner, a violent situation which prevented them from seeking help. Additionally, 17% of those who did not seek ($n = 61$) also checked “other reasons” for not seeking help.

Table 5 shows the results of the multivariate binary logistic regressions used to identify factors associated with these

Table 2 Model Fit indices for latent class models from one to four classes (N = 130)

Model	# pars	LL	AIC	BIC	ABIC	Entropy	LMR Adj. LRT	BLRT p value
1-class	13	- 536.53	1099.06	1136.34	1095.22	–	–	–
2-class	27	- 453.05	960.10	1037.52	952.125	.978	164.55 (<i>p</i> < .0001)	<i>p</i> < 0.0001
3-class	41	-437.48	956.96	1074.53	944.854	.977	30.69 (<i>p</i> = .2004)	<i>p</i> = .08

pars = number of estimated parameters; LL = Log-likelihood; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; ABIC = Adjusted Bayesian information criterion; LMR Adj. LRT = Lo-Mendell-Rubin Adjusted Likelihood Ratio Test; BLRT = Bootstrapped Likelihood Ratio Test

different non-help-seeking reasons. Participants who did not seek help due to the belief that they were able to handle the violence by themselves were more likely to consider their relationship as poor (aOR = 2.69, *p* = .03). Those who did not know to whom they would turn were younger (aOR = .92, *p* = .009), more likely to appraise their relationship as not so good (aOR = 2.74, *p* = .006) or poor (aOR = 3.38, *p* = .014), and more inclined to have been victimized by partners’ controlling or threatening behavior (aOR = 1.78, *p* = .03) and physical violence (aOR = 2.69, *p* = .014). Respondents who reported that they did not seek help because the violence was not severe tended to be younger (aOR = 0.93, *p* = .03). Those who reported help-seeking was useless were more likely to be married (aOR = 3.53, *p* = .003), more inclined to view their relationship as not so good (aOR = 2.58, *p* = .02) or poor (aOR = 3.99, *p* = .007), and more likely to experience partners’ controlling or threatening behavior (aOR = 2.31, *p* = .004) and sexual violence (aOR = 1.87, *p* = .03). Those who did not seek help due to the belief that IPV was a form of “domestic shame that should not be made public” were less likely to have an education level above college (aOR = 0.11, *p* = .002), less likely to have an income level between 2000 and 8000 Chinese Yuan

(aOR = 0.37, *p* = .04), more likely to have higher acceptance of male dominance (aOR = 1.27, *p* = 0.001), more likely to appraise their relationship as poor instead of good (aOR = 3.94, *p* = 0.03), and more likely to have experienced partners’ controlling or threatening behaviors. (aOR = 2.6, *p* = 0.01).

Discussion

This study serves as one of the first attempts to uncover Chinese IPV survivors’ help-seeking behavior. We found that three-quarters of the Chinese women survivors of IPV in the sample did not seek help from any sources of support. Through the LCA, although those who did seek help were grouped into either seeking help from friends and family only or seeking help from extensive sources of support, the vast majority of them (86%) only reached out to friends and family members. That family and friends were commonly chosen by survivors for support mirrors findings from studies conducted in both Western countries (e.g., Ansara and Hindin 2010) and non-Western countries (e.g., García-Moreno et al. 2005; Parvin et al. 2016).

Previous studies suggested that women who were not in a marital relationship were more likely to report IPV incidents and seek help (Linos et al. 2014; Parvin et al. 2016). In the present study, however, being married was not a significant predictor for seeking help among the survivors. Alternatively, we found that having ended a previous relationship as a result of IPV was associated with a significantly higher likelihood of seeking help. It is possible that terminating a previously abusive intimate relationship helps the survivors better understand the abusive and violent nature of the IPV incident (Liang et al. 2005), facilitating the decision to seek help. We also found that higher levels of relationship satisfaction were accompanied by decreased odds of seeking extensive sources of support. In other words, as survivors’ levels of satisfaction with their intimate relationships decrease, they are more likely to seek support from a broader range of sources.

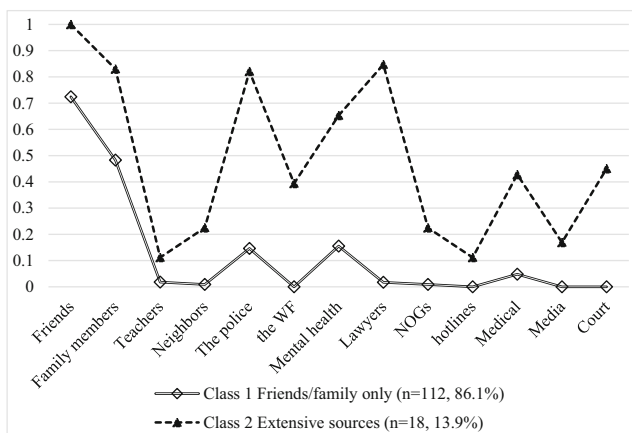


Fig. 1 Latent class probabilities of sources of help sought by participants based on the two-class model (N = 130)

Table 3 Class 2 versus Class 1 (N = 130)

	Class 2 versus Class 1 (ref.)	aOR [95% CI]	<i>p</i>
Age	1.10	[0.98, 1.23]	.09
Marital (<i>married</i>)	0.34	[0.03, 3.54]	.37
Victimization			
Psychological aggression	0.13†	[0.02, 1.17]	.068
Controlling/threatening	0.66	[0.12, 3.55]	.63
Physical violence	1.68	[0.23, 12.12]	.61
Sexual violence	0.13**	[0.03, 0.53]	.005
Education			
Below college (ref.)			
College	1.26	[0.12, 13.38]	.85
Above college	1.93	[0.17, 22.05]	.60
Status of residence			
Rural/town/County/prefecture-level (ref.)			
Provincial capital or municipality	0.46	[0.12, 1.75]	.26
Income			
Below 2000 Chinese Yuan	0.36	[0.05, 2.57]	.31
2000–8000 Chinese Yuan	0.22	[0.04, 1.32]	.10
Above 8000 Chinese Yuan (ref.)			
Employment			
Employed	3.34	[0.46, 25.57]	.23
Unemployed ^a (ref.)			
Acceptance of male dominance	1.15	[0.87, 1.54]	.33
Justification of IPV	1.07	[0.63, 1.80]	.81
Relationship satisfaction			
Good	0.07**	[0.01, 0.86]	.04
Fair	0.10†	[0.01, 1.01]	.06
Not so good	0.10	[0.00, 2.40]	.16
Poor (ref.)			
Violence led to breakup (<i>yes</i>)	1.94	[0.55, 6.85]	.31

ref. = used as the reference group. IPV = intimate partner violence. CI = confidence interval. aOR = adjusted odds ratio

† *p* value was close to .05, suggesting a marginally significant effect

**p* < 0.05

***p* < 0.01

^a Unemployed = unemployed students and unemployed non-students; we combined these two groups because the group of unemployed non-students had only 8 observations

Table 4 Reasons for not seeking help (N = 358)

	Reasons	<i>n</i> (%)
1	I could handle the situation by myself.	185 (51.7)
2	I didn't know to whom I would turn.	108 (30.2)
3	The violence was not severe.	106 (29.6)
4	It was useless to seek help.	94 (26.3)
5	IPV is domestic shame that should not be made public.	56 (15.6)
6	I did not have opportunity to seek help due to partner control.	11 (3.1)
7	Other reasons.	61 (17)

Table 5 Logistic regression results: reasons for not help-seeking (N = 358)

	Did not know aOR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	“Domestic shame” aOR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	Help-seeking was useless aOR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	Violence not severe aOR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>	Handled by myself aOR (95% CI)	<i>p</i>
Age	0.92** (0.87, 0.98)	.009	1.02 (0.96, 1.09)	.53	0.95 (0.90, 1.01)	.10	0.93* (0.88, 0.99)	.03	1.00 (0.95, 1.05)	.95
Marital (married)	1.39 (0.63, 3.04)	.42	0.86 (0.32, 2.33)	.76	3.55** (1.52, 8.19)	.003	0.94 (0.44, 2.01)	.87	0.87 (0.44, 1.72)	.69
Education										
Below college (ref.)										
College	1.14 (0.52, 2.51)	.75	0.52 (0.22, 1.26)	.15	1.20 (0.53, 2.75)	.66	1.28 (0.57, 2.88)	.55	1.20 (0.60, 2.41)	.61
Above college	0.97 (0.37, 2.53)	.95	0.11** (0.03, 0.44)	.002	0.67 (0.25, 1.83)	.44	0.96 (0.37, 2.48)	.93	1.09 (0.49, 2.44)	.83
Status of residence										
Rural/town (ref.)										
County/prefecture-level	1.40 (0.40, 4.86)	.60	0.55 (0.15, 2.07)	.38	0.64 (0.20, 2.08)	.46	1.27 (0.36, 4.44)	.71	0.31* (0.10, 0.98)	.047
Provincial capital or municipality	1.65 (0.49, 5.55)	.42	0.75 (0.21, 2.69)	.65	1.13 (0.36, 3.51)	.83	1.72 (0.51, 5.82)	.38	0.34 (0.11, 1.07)	.07
Income										
Below 2000 CNY	0.33 (0.10, 1.12)	.07	0.34 (0.08, 1.50)	.16	1.84 (0.52, 6.49)	.35	0.32 (0.10, 1.05)	.06	1.44 (0.49, 4.29)	.51
2000–8000 CNY	0.50 (0.23, 1.11)	.09	0.37* (0.13, 0.95)	.04	0.90 (0.39, 2.10)	.81	0.59 (0.28, 1.27)	.18	1.63 (0.80, 3.31)	.18
Above 8000 CNY (ref.)										
Employment										
Unemployed students	0.62 (0.18, 2.09)	.44	0.46 (0.12, 1.74)	.25	1.66 (0.45, 6.07)	.44	0.83 (0.24, 2.84)	.77	1.26 (0.43, 3.63)	.67
Unemployed non-students	0.61 (0.20, 1.84)	.39	0.58 (0.16, 2.13)	.41	0.96 (0.30, 3.04)	.95	0.87 (0.28, 2.67)	.80	1.07 (0.40, 2.84)	.40
Employed (ref.)										
Acceptance of male dominance	1.05 (0.95, 1.18)	.35	1.27** (1.10, 1.47)	.001	1.00 (0.89, 1.12)	.97	1.01 (0.91, 1.12)	.89	0.91 (0.83, 1.00)	.06
Justification of IPV	0.94 (0.83, 1.08)	.39	0.88 (0.74, 1.04)	.14	0.91 (0.80, 1.05)	.19	0.92 (0.81, 1.05)	.23	0.97 (0.87, 1.09)	.65
Relationship satisfaction										
Good (ref.)										
Fair	1.43 (0.74, 2.78)	.29	2.02 (0.76, 5.34)	.16	1.99 (0.98, 4.04)	.06	1.16 (0.65, 2.06)	.62	1.64 (0.95, 2.82)	.08
Not so good	2.74** (1.34, 5.59)	.006	2.08 (0.77, 5.61)	.15	2.58* (1.21, 5.51)	.02	0.84 (0.42, 1.67)	.61	1.32 (0.70, 2.49)	.40
Poor	3.38* (1.28, 8.93)	.014	3.94* (1.19, 13.07)	.03	3.99** (1.46, 10.96)	.007	0.51 (0.17, 1.50)	.22	2.69** (1.10, 6.61)	.03
Victimization										
Psychological aggression	1.31 (0.55, 3.08)	.54	0.94 (0.29, 3.09)	.92	0.79 (0.34, 1.83)	.58	0.93 (0.43, 1.98)	.84	2.01 (0.96, 4.21)	.06
Controlling/threatening	1.78* (1.05, 3.04)	.03	2.60* (1.26, 5.37)	.01	2.31** (1.32, 4.04)	.004	0.98 (0.59, 1.63)	.94	0.75 (0.47, 1.21)	.24
Physical violence	2.69*** (1.57, 4.60)	.00	1.48 (0.73, 3.00)	.27	1.52 (0.86, 2.68)	.15	0.84 (0.48, 1.48)	.55	0.69 (0.42, 1.15)	.16
Sexual violence	0.98 (0.57, 1.69)	.92	1.26 (0.62, 2.55)	.53	1.87* (1.06, 3.32)	.03	1.16 (0.69, 1.96)	.58	1.03 (0.64, 1.66)	.91
Violence led to breakup (yes)	1.18 (0.63, 2.24)	.60	1.19 (0.53, 2.67)	.67	1.66 (0.87, 3.21)	.13	0.75 (0.40, 1.43)	.39	0.77 (0.43, 1.37)	.37
	Nagelkerke R ² = 21.3%		Nagelkerke R ² = 26.7%		Nagelkerke R ² = 21%		Nagelkerke R ² = 8.3%		Nagelkerke R ² = 9%	
	<i>p</i> ^a = 0.34		<i>p</i> ^a = 0.16		<i>p</i> ^a = 0.22		<i>p</i> ^a = 0.35		<i>p</i> ^a = 0.42	

aOR = adjusted odds ratio, IPV = intimate partner violence

p* < 0.05 *p* < 0.01 ****p* < 0.001

^a *p* Value was calculated by the Hosmer-Lemeshow test

The most frequently reported reason for Chinese IPV survivors not seeking help was the belief that they could handle the situation by themselves. Data used for the present study were collected before the passage of the first Anti-Domestic Violence Law in Mainland China in 2016. The lack of a legal framework to protect IPV victims may have contributed to certain prevailing societal assumptions, such as the perception that IPV is a “domestic” and private matter, rather than an issue of legal rights, so that IPV incidents should be kept within the family or that they themselves are expected to cope with the violence without reaching out for informal or professional support. A comparative study of Chinese and American college students’ perceptions about who should be responding to IPV showed that the Chinese participants were more likely to be in favor of neighborhood-based approaches whereas the American students were more leaning toward legal and criminal justice interventions (Li et al. 2013). It is thus not completely surprising to find Chinese IPV survivors’ preference for handling their victimization by themselves.

A more alarming finding is that nearly one-third of the women did not seek help because they did not know to whom they would turn for help. Without a legal protection mechanism and a comprehensive social service network, Chinese women might have been unable to relate partner violence to a severe social problem and thus to believe that external support is available for them. Our findings indeed reflect a societal reality that, prior to the passage of the anti-domestic violence law, social and community resources for IPV survivors were lacking or difficult for survivors to access. Without a legal recognition of IPV survivors’ rights, there might have also been a low public awareness of IPV survivors’ rights, leading to insufficient social support and services in the society. Furthermore, those who reported having experienced physical violence and coercive control were more likely to report not knowing from whom they could seek help, suggesting a potential association between IPV type and knowledge level of resources for IPV survivors. It is possible that these two forms of violence, particularly controlling behavior, tend to constrain survivors’ social interactions with others and reduce their regular exposure to mainstream sources of knowledge (e.g., newspapers and online media), leading to a limited understanding of available social and legal resources.

We also found that experiencing sexual violence was significantly associated with non-help-seeking, a result consistent with the findings reported in a recent systematic review that survivors of sexual IPV were more hesitant than other IPV survivors to disclose their victimization (Lelaurain et al. 2017). Further, among participants who did not seek help, those having experienced sexual violence were also more likely to believe that help-seeking is useless. It is possible that some of these women may have attempted to locate external help but not had their concerns resolved successfully. Meanwhile, both experiencing psychological aggression and

sexual violence were found to be associated with lower likelihoods of seeking extensive sources of support. For psychological aggression, studies have shown the positive effect of social support and support from IPV survivors’ informal networks (e.g., trusted friends and family members) on mental and emotional well-being (Rizo et al. 2017). Likely, surveyed Chinese survivors also obtained beneficial support from their close circle of friends and family. Meanwhile, it may also be possible that some survivors do not perceive psychological aggression as a form of serious violence that needs to involve professional services or the police. For survivors of sexual IPV, the reluctance to seek help or reach out to extensive sources of support may be a result of internalizing certain prevailing misbeliefs about sexual victimization such as rape myths (Xue et al. 2019a, b). Rape myths refer to “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists in creating a climate hostile to rape victims” (Burt 1980, p. 217), and these misbeliefs can be internalized by the victims as well as lead to negative reactions toward the victims (e.g., victim-blaming) among the general public (Rollero and Tartaglia 2018). The endorsement of rape myths and other misbeliefs about sexual victimization can intersect with other cultural misperceptions, preventing survivors from seeking help. For instance, unmarried Chinese women who are in dating relationships may avoid seeking help due to fear of being judged by family members and the public for involving in premarital sexual activities (Shen 2011). Nevertheless, since the present study did not include variables of rape myth-related measures, it remains hypothetical how particular culture-specific misbeliefs about sexual IPV may influence Chinese women’s help-seeking behaviors.

Limitations

Before discussing the implications for future research and policy, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, given the cross-sectional nature of the present study, we were unable to draw causal relationships (e.g., did a relationship breakup lead to active help-seeking or vice versa). Second, IPV severity has been reported in some previous studies as an important factor associated with survivors’ help-seeking (e.g., Choi et al. 2018). The present study, however, did not take into consideration the frequency and severity of each of the four types of IPV. Third, with respect to reasons for not seeking help for IPV, since we predefined a list of reasons from which for participants to select, we were unable to examine reasons beyond those listed as response options. For instance, a total of 61 participants selected the category of “other”. We thus are unable to reveal additional reasons explaining non-help-seeking, such as fear of retaliation (Leone et al. 2014). Fourth, the use of an online survey to gather data has several limitations that lead to sample selection

bias. Since the survey was mainly distributed through online social media platforms and e-mail list serves, we did not know how many people saw the survey; therefore, the response rate was unknown. Additionally, the web-based survey might have only solicited participation from those with Internet access and felt comfortable with this data collection method. For survivors in rural regions and experiencing partner control, their participation in the study could have been limited. Our data indicated that rural women accounted for only 4.5% of the sample with the majority of them having a job and college degree. Previous studies on the prevalence of IPV in China reported higher victimization rates among rural women (Gao et al. 2011) or migrant women in urbanities (Chen et al. 2016; Li and Jin 2012) who experienced different types of economic instability (Tu and Lou 2017; Xu et al. 2005). Therefore, it is likely that socio-economically disadvantaged women were underrepresented in the present sample.

Implications

A few additional directions deserve future research attention. Given the paucity of studies on women's help-seeking for IPV in China, future IPV research should devote more efforts to this particular topic and continue to examine survivors' help-seeking behavior, decisions, barriers, and facilitators, and how IPV help-seeking patterns may be similar and different across diverse socio-cultural groups in China (e.g., internal migrants, LGBTQ groups, and men). In addition, future studies can examine if the use of technology and social media plays a role in survivors' help-seeking behavior (Xue et al. 2018; Wan et al. 2019). Since the data used for the present study were collected prior to the passage of the first Anti-Domestic Violence Law in China, it will be meaningful for future research to assess how the adoption of the law may play a role in influencing IPV survivors' help-seeking intentions, possibly through longitudinal approaches (e.g., interrupted time series analysis). Last, future studies should invite many other key stakeholders involved in IPV survivors' help-seeking process to be research participants, such as survivors' family members, community-based social service professionals, healthcare workers, and law enforcement officers. Since these individuals and professionals are potential helpers in providing support and delivering services, their perceptions of IPV and experience related to supporting IPV survivors are critical in revealing IPV help-seeking facilitators and barriers embedded in survivors' interpersonal and social contexts.

Given that the majority of IPV survivors chose not to seek help for their victimization, more social policies and programs geared toward encouraging survivors to seek external support and report violent incidents are needed. The design of these interventions should take into consideration a variety of concerns that IPV survivors may have when reporting

victimization. For instance, in the sample of the present study, many survivors did not know from whom they might seek help, suggesting a lack of sufficient knowledge about available resources. Therefore, some interventions may prioritize efforts to increase public knowledge of the resources for IPV victimization. Given that those who reported having experienced physical violence and coercive control were more likely to not know from where they may seek help, some strategies should also focus on survivors of these particular forms of IPV, such as developing innovative approaches to reach victims with limited exposure to the mainstream sources of knowledge (e.g., Internet) due to partner control. Police officers, often as one of the first responders to more severe forms of IPV, should also be given proper training to be prepared for investigating reported IPV cases in an effective and responsive manner (e.g., assist victims in obtaining protection orders) as well as connecting victims to appropriate services and professionals when needed. With the adoption of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in China, a comprehensive IPV responding system built upon a cross-sector collaboration among the public, different service providers, medical facilities, law enforcement agencies, and legal services ought to be in place to better serve the needs of IPV survivors. Such a system, when made visible and accessible to the general public, is likely to send a strong signal to IPV victims that they are not alone in fighting violence, pursuing justice, and seeking support.

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