

Female Same-Sex Bidirectional Intimate Partner Violence in China

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Kai Lin¹, Ran Hu², Xiying Wang³ and Jia Xue²

Abstract

Although there exists a growing body of research on female same-sex intimate partner violence (FSSIPV) as well as bidirectional intimate partner violence (BIPV) among lesbian women, much of this literature focuses on the IPV experience of women living in Western societies such as the United States. The current study represents the very first to explore BIPV among lesbian women in China. In this study, we analyze a survey sample of 225 self-identified lesbian women in China to examine FSSBIPV patterns, pattern-specific rates, and risk factors of FSSBIPV. Using the Latent Class Analysis technique, we discover three main patterns of partner abuse, including bidirectional psychological violence (60%), bidirectional violence multiple types with physical abuse (79.1%), and minimal violence (20.9%). Logistic regressions show that there is no significant demographic, socioeconomic, or attitudinal difference between the bidirectional psychological violence group and the minimal violence group while being younger, cohabitating, and holding pro-IPV attitudes significantly predicted higher odds of experiencing multiple types of bidirectional violence. Contributions to the literature, as well as policy implications, are also discussed.

¹California State University, Sacramento, CA, USA

²University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

³Beijing Normal University, Beijing, People's Republic China

Corresponding Author:

Xiying Wang, Institute for Education Theories, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, No. 19 Xijiekouwai Street, Beijing 100875, People's Republic China.

Email: xiyingw@bnu.edu.cn

Keywords

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Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a budding, albeit still very limited research literature on female same-sex intimate partner violence (FSSIPV). Population-based studies in several countries, including the United States and Canada (e.g., Brown & Herman, 2015; Barrett & St. Pierre, 2013), have demonstrated that intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization is most prevalent among women who have sexual or romantic experience with same-sex partners. The limited in terms of number and the demographic diversity of the samples studies conducted in the United States aimed at explaining the etiology of FSSIPV have identified several domains of risk factors, including personality characteristics, relationship dynamics, previous IPV experience, family history of violence, and alcohol use (see Badenes-Ribera et al., 2016, for a comprehensive review). In addition, researchers have also found that a higher incidence of violence among the LGBTQ population was shaped by unique risk factors linked to emotional stress over the minority status commonly experienced by sexual minorities (e.g., Lewis et al., 2012; Messinger, 2011). However, studies of FSSIPV in non-Western contexts remain scarce, and even scarcer are empirical studies of FSSIPV in mainland China where same-sex relationships are still deeply stigmatized (Xie & Peng, 2018; UNDP, 2016), despite having been decriminalized and depathologized since the 1990s.

The past decade has also witnessed the ascendance of a new conceptual framework on the etiology of IPV, one that challenges the traditional “perpetrator/victim” dichotomy and ascribes centrality to the *bidirectional* nature of both IPV perpetration and victimization (Straus, 2011, 2015). An extensive empirical literature documenting the bidirectionality of IPV in several countries has been accumulated (see Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Straus, 2011, for comprehensive reviews). As the perspective of bidirectional IPV (BIPV) gained traction, there have also been several studies that examined BIPV among lesbian couples in Western societies (e.g., Kelly et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2015). However, no known study to date has examined female same-sex BIPV in China, a country with the world’s largest population and a unique mix of economic, social, and cultural conditions.

Since the late 1970s, China has witnessed rapid economic growth as well as social transformation, including the elimination of the crime of “hooliganism,” in which same-sex sexual behaviors constitute a violation, from the

country's Criminal Law of 1997, as well as the removal of homosexuality from the Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders in 2001 (Kang, 2012). Despite progress, same-sex relations remain highly controversial, if not outright deviant in the eyes of the Chinese public (Xie & Peng, 2018). Besides homophobia, the rapid economic and social transformation is also at odds with the still widely endorsed traditional gender roles that justify male dominance and IPV against women (Li et al., 2020; Xu, 2005), and the conventional notion of "face" that perpetuates the view of IPV as a "private shame" ought not to be discussed with those outside the household (Chan, 2012). These various social and cultural conditions interact with one another, rendering Chinese lesbians particularly vulnerable to IPV.

Using a survey sample of 225 Chinese women who self-identified as a lesbian and guided by a theoretical premise that IPV is heterogeneous and dyadic, the current study extends the literature by examining FSSBIPV patterns, pattern-specific rates, and risk factors of FSSBIPV in China.

FSSIPV

In the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), a nationally representative survey collected in the United States, 40.4% of lesbians reported experiencing partner violence in their lifetime, compared to only 32.3% of heterosexual women (Brown & Herman, 2015; Messinger, 2011). The higher rates of IPV victimization among lesbian couples were also documented in population-based studies in Canada (Barrett & St. Pierre, 2013).

The higher rates of IPV among lesbian couples may seem counterintuitive at first, due largely to the pervasive stereotypes around femininity and lesbian relationships, which tend to underestimate the severity of female-initiated violence (Seelau & Seelau, 2005). These stereotypes include "girls don't hit other girls," trivializing FSSIPV as "cat fights," and the false belief in the "lesbian utopia," where lesbian relationships are perceived as free of any sort of oppressive element (Hassounch & Glass, 2008). These stereotypes create barriers to victims' help-seeking, and reduce the certainty and severity of law enforcement intervention (Calton et al., 2016).

FSSIPV share many common risk factors as IPV between heterosexual partners, including personality characteristics, previous experience with IPV, a family history of violence, and drug and alcohol use (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2016). There are also unique factors, such as the stigma and sexual minority stress resulting from living in a heteronormative society (Lewis et al., 2014; Stiles-Shields & Carroll, 2015), that serve as a potential moderating factor of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals' IPV experience.

FSSIPV in China

There is a substantial body of literature on Chinese IPV among heterosexual couples. In addition to the common risk factors identified in the West such as socioeconomic status, substance use, and gender role ideology (e.g., Lin et al., 2018; Tu & Lou, 2017; Xiao & Feng, 2014; Xu et al., 2005), studies have also documented risk factors specific to the social and cultural context of contemporary China. For instance, conflicts with in-laws are a significant predictor of IPV perpetration and victimization in China, given the more common practice of sharing a living space with the husband's parents (Chan et al., 2008). The traditionally Chinese view of "face," which tends to prefer keeping "domestic shames in the household," also predicts higher risks of IPV (Chan, 2012).

Comparative studies (e.g., Jiao et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2016) have found that traditional Chinese gender roles and male dominance ideologies play a more central role in shaping pro-violence attitudes in China, in comparison to their effects in the West. Male dominance ideology predicts beliefs justifying IPV against women (Li et al., 2020) and attitudes favoring non-intervention from the police (Sun et al., 2011). Risk behaviors that are more common in Chinese societies, such as gambling, also predict IPV (Lin et al., 2018; Tang & Lai, 2008).

In contrast to the abundance of research on heterosexual couples, FSSIPV in China is sorely understudied, mainly because being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is still very much taboo and stigmatized, despite its decriminalized and depathologized status in China. A nationally representative survey released in 2013 found that the majority of the Chinese population (78.53%) disapprove of homosexuality (Xie & Peng, 2018). Even among young and college-educated Chinese from urban areas, almost 30% of them reject LGBTQ individuals in schools or workplaces (UNDP, 2016). As a result, the emotional stress associated with being a sexual minority in China is high (Xu et al., 2017). Emotional distress, especially that related to being a sexual minority, has been identified as an important risk factor (Lewis et al., 2015; Mason et al., 2016) of IPV among sexual minorities.

The only published study on FSSIPV in mainland China (Luo & Chiu, 2020) utilized a nonprobability sample of 428 lesbians and documented that 42% of the respondents were victims of FSSIPV, while only 55% of them sought help. An earlier study (Chong et al., 2013) of 306 residents in Hong Kong recorded a higher rate of psychological (79%) and physical (40%) victimization.

To sum, research on sexual minorities in general as well as descriptive research on FSSIPV, in particular, has suggested that lesbians are especially

vulnerable to IPV and that existing research on FSSIPV in China remains limited, a gap that this study is intended to fill.

BIPV in China

Although much research on IPV among heterosexual couples has documented that severe IPV, including intimate partner homicide, is predominantly perpetrated by male partners (WHO, 2013), the claim that violence perpetrated by women is often a defensive response and should be understood in the context of male violence (Swan & Snow, 2002), does not automatically follow. The traditional, clear-cut dichotomy of “the male aggressor” versus “the female victim” risks excluding female-initiated violence and trivializing women’s agency in intimate relationships (Capaldi & Kim, 2007; Straus & Gozjolko, 2014; Winstok & Straus, 2016).

In contrast, BIPV, also known as mutual partner violence, views partner violence as essentially co-occurring, perpetrated by both partners in an intimate relationship (Straus, 2011, 2015). In a BIPV incident, a person may act as both a victim and a perpetrator. Although BIPV does not necessarily suggest symmetric perpetration of IPV and equal power dynamics between men and women in a heterosexual relationship (Capaldi et al., 2018), it debunks the myth that males and females possess drastically unequal power in an intimate relationship and paints a more realistic picture as for how violence may still occur in otherwise largely egalitarian relationships.

In recent decades, an increasing number of studies have empirically supported the prevalent occurrence of BIPV across various geo-cultural contexts and among different populations. BIPV was found to be the most pervasive IPV pattern across different sample types, from the general population to participants in the criminal justice system, compared to unidirectional types of partner violence (i.e., male-to-female and female-to-male, Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012).

Studies on BIPV in China have been sporadic (Chen & Chan, 2019; Hou et al., 2011; Parish et al., 2004). In their study with 192 heterosexual couples, Hou et al. (2011) found that 31.8% of them perpetrated psychological violence against the other partner (or bidirectional psychological abuse), with 16.1% bidirectional physical violence and 10.5% bidirectional sexual violence, respectively. Chen and Chan (2019) also found a bidirectional pattern in multiple forms of partner violence with mutual psychological violence being the most prevalent (25.44%), followed by mutual physical assault (3.68%), mutual sexual violence (2.62%), and mutual injury (1.08%).

A recent study of BIPV among 1,300 heterosexual women in China (Hu et al., 2019) utilized Latent Class Analysis (LCA) and identified bidirectional

psychological aggression as the most common (34.6%) BIPV pattern occurring in a recall of past-year IPV experience. Furthermore, the study discovered that socioeconomic and demographic factors influence different types of BIPV differently. Being married, for instance, predicts a higher risk of milder forms of bidirectional aggression, but a lower risk of more severe forms of bidirectional partner violence.

BIPV as a theoretical as well as empirical perspective is especially valuable as applied to explaining FSSIPV, given that the incidence of IPV victimization is the highest among lesbians and the power dynamics within same-sex couples likely takes a different form than that within heterosexual couples (Brown & Herman, 2015; Messinger, 2011).

Studies of BIPV among gay and lesbian couples remain scarce. Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al.'s (2012) systemic review of this literature revealed that BIPV incidence tends to equal that of unidirectional IPV among gay, lesbian, and bisexual couples, in comparison to studies on heterosexual couples where higher proportions of BIPV were found. A recent study of dating violence among adolescents in the United States (Messinger et al., 2018), however, did not demonstrate a significant disparity in the proportion of BIPV to all IPV incidence between heterosexual and sexual minority teens. In terms of risk factors, emotional stress and substance use were identified in multiple studies (e.g., Lewis et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2011) as two of the strongest predictors of BIPV among lesbian couples.

The Current Study

The preceding review has indicated a substantial gap in the literature on FSSIPV in China. It has also suggested that BIPV may be valuable as a conceptual *and* empirical perspective to examine the prevalence and the etiological patterns of FSSIPV in China. Using survey data collected from 225 self-identified lesbian individuals in China, the purpose of this study is to: (a) identify the underlying patterns of BIPV, (b) identify pattern-related rates of BIPV, and (c) identify the risk factors associated with specific patterns of BIPV.

Method

Procedures and Participants

Data used in the present study came from a cross-sectional survey of 3,334 respondents from the general population in mainland China conducted in 2015. The goal of the research project was to understand IPV in China and to advocate for a gender-inclusive legal framework against IPV. Participants

were recruited through recruitment advertisements posted via two leading Chinese social media platforms—Weibo and WeChat. The same recruitment post was also disseminated through an e-mail listserv focusing on domestic violence and IPV issues. In addition, in collaboration with anti-domestic violence organizations (e.g., Tongyu, Women’s Voice, and Anti-domestic Violence Civil Advocacy Group), the recruitment flyer was also shared among members and clients of these groups. Participation was voluntary and all potential participants were directed to an online survey, created and hosted on Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn), a Chinese online survey collection tool. Due to the convenience sampling strategy, the final sample for analysis was not representative of the whole population. In the final sample, out of a total of 3,334 participants, 415 self-identified as a lesbian (12.45%). In the present study, we included all lesbian women who were in an intimate relationship in the past 12 months at the time of the study, resulting in a final sample of 225 individuals.

Measures

IPV victimization and perpetration.

By adapting the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus et al., 1996) to the Chinese context and translating the originally English scale into the Chinese language, a total of 15 items were developed to measure participants’ IPV experience, including victimization and perpetration. Each item was measured on a 3-point Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, and 3 = often). A factor analysis using a polychoric correlation matrix was conducted in an earlier study through which four distinct factors emerged to represent four different forms of IPV: psychological aggression, threatening and controlling behavior, physical aggression, and sexual aggression (Hu et al., 2019). Specifically, psychological aggression was measured by three items (“talking ill or laughing at,” “neglecting,” and “verbally humiliating or cursing.”); threatening and controlling behavior was measured by six items (e.g., “restricting physical freedom,” “controlling financially,” and “stalking or digital monitoring”); four items measured physical violence (e.g., “slapping, pushing, or shoving” and “kicking, biting, punching, or choking”); two items measured sexual violence (“forcing sexual activities” and “forcing sexually touching or kissing”). In the present study, since there were very few respondents who selected “often” among the items, we dichotomized the variables. Specifically, for each of the four forms of IPV, if a participant’s response to all items on an IPV factor was *never*, a 0 was given to represent that this form of IPV did not occur in the past year; 1 was given when a participant’s response to one or more items on an IPV factor was *sometimes* or *often*, representing that this form of IPV occurred in the past year.

IPV-related attitudes.

IPV justification was measured using four items, including “harsh words or deeds are ways to show love,” “when under stress, it is understandable to be physically or sexually aggressive towards one’s partner,” “there is no reason to decline unreasonable requests if one loves the partner deeply,” and “beating or being verbally aggressive is appropriate if the partner does something wrong.” *Endorsement of heterosexual norms* in the context of the intimate partnership was measured using four items, including “having pre-marital 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 meet his need.” These items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree). After reverse coding, higher scores represent higher levels of IPV justification and higher levels of endorsement of heterosexual norms. Ordinal alpha values for IPV justification and endorsement of heterosexual norms were 0.93 and 0.76, respectively.

Other covariates.

Demographic covariates included in the analysis were age (measured in years), education (1 = completed middle school or below, 2 = completed high school, 3 = completed an associate diploma, 4 = completed college, and 5 = completed graduate school or above), monthly income (1 = no income, 2 = below 2,000 Chinese Yuan, 3 = between 2,000 and 4,000 Chinese Yuan, 4 = between 4,001 to 8,000 Chinese Yuan, and 5 = above 8,000 Chinese Yuan), employment (1 = employed, 2 = unemployed students, 3 = unemployed non-students, and 4 = other), marital status (1 = recent relationship ended, 2 = in a dating relationship, 3 = cohabiting, 4 = married, and 5 = other), and status of residence (1 = suburban and rural, 0 = urban).

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted in SPSS 25.0. A three-step latent class analysis (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014) was performed using Mplus 8 to identify participants with similar response patterns on eight binary IPV indicators, including four forms of IPV victimization and four forms of IPV perpetration (i.e., psychological aggression, threatening/controlling behavior, physical aggression, and sexual aggression). Model fit was assessed using 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).

Results

Characteristics of the Sample

Demographic information and participants' IPV experience are shown in Table 1. The mean age was 25.2 ($SD = 5.1$). The majority of the participants had obtained a college or a higher degree (60.9% completed college, 14.7% completed graduate school). Over two-thirds reported having the monthly income (14.2% below 2,000 Chinese Yuan, 27.1% between 2,000 and 4,000 Yuan, 20% between 4,001 and 8,000 Yuan, and 9.8% above 8,000 Yuan). Nearly two-thirds were employed (61.3%), with most of the remaining being students (33.3%). Slightly over one-third were in a dating relationship (36.4%), with another one-third having ended their recent relationship (33.3%).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of All Variables (N = 225).

	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range	α
Age	225	25.17 (5.13)	15 – 43	–
Education				
Completed middle school or below	6 (2.67)	–	–	–
Completed high school	14 (6.22)	–	–	–
Completed an associate diploma	35 (15.56)	–	–	–
Completed college	137 (60.89)	–	–	–
Completed graduate school or above	33 (14.67)	–	–	–
Monthly income				
No income	65 (28.89)	–	–	–
Below 2,000 Chinese Yuan	32 (14.22)	–	–	–
2,000 to 4,000 Chinese Yuan	61 (27.11)	–	–	–
4,001 to 8,000 Chinese Yuan	45 (20.00)	–	–	–
Above 8,000 Chinese Yuan	22 (9.78)	–	–	–
Employment				
Employed	138 (61.33)	–	–	–
Unemployed students	75 (33.33)	–	–	–
Unemployed non–students	9 (4.00)	–	–	–
Other	3 (1.33)	–	–	–

(continued)

Table 1. continued

	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Range	α
Age	225	25.17 (5.13)	15 – 43	–
Marital status				
Relationship ended	75 (33.33)	–	–	–
In a dating relationship	82 (36.44)	–	–	–
Cohabiting	55 (24.44)	–	–	–
Married	9 (4.00)	–	–	–
Other	4 (1.78)	–	–	–
Status of residence				
Suburban or rural area	154 (68.44)	–	–	–
Major urban area	71 (31.56)	–	–	–
IPV justification	225	5.66 (2.04)	4–19	0.93 ^a
Endorsement of heterosexual norms	225	7.68 (2.59)	4–15	0.76 ^a
IPV victimization (yes)				
Psychological aggression	141 (62.67)	–	–	–
Threatening & controlling	62 (27.56)	–	–	–
Physical violence	25 (11.11)	–	–	–
Sexual violence	31 (13.78)	–	–	–
IPV perpetration (yes)				
Psychological aggression	138 (61.33)	–	–	–
Threatening & controlling	63 (28.00)	–	–	–
Physical violence	26 (11.56)	–	–	–
Sexual violence	25 (11.11)	–	–	–

Note. IPV = intimate partner violence; ^a α = Ordinal alpha based on polychoric correlations.

IPV Victimization and Perpetration

Psychological aggression was the most commonly reported form of violence for both victimization (62.7%) and perpetration (61.3%) in the four forms of IPV, followed by threatening and controlling behavior (27.6% for victimization and 28% for perpetration). Physical aggression and sexual aggression for both victimization and perpetration were reported less often by participants: 11.1% and 13.8% experienced victimization of physical aggression and sexual aggression, respectively; 11.6% and 11.1% had physical perpetration behaviors and sexual aggression against their partners, respectively.

BIPV Class Memberships

Fit indices for the LCA are shown in Table 2. Overall, based on fit indices, the three-class solution demonstrated a better model fit compared with the two-class solution. Specifically, the three-class model has lower AIC, BIC, and ABIC values. Although the BIC decreased by only 1.5, a reduction considered a rather insignificant improvement (less than 3; Kass & Raftery, 1995), both AIC and sample-size adjusted BIC decreased substantially from two classes to three classes. Additionally, both the LMR Adj. LRT and the BLRT had significant p-values for the three-class model, suggesting a significant improvement from two classes to three classes. Therefore, the three-class model was selected to be the optimal solution for the present study.

Figure 1 showed the IPV patterns based on the three-class solution. Participants in class 1 had relatively high likelihoods to have been victimized by psychological aggression and to have also perpetrated psychological aggression. This class accounted for 60% of the sample ($n = 135$). We labeled this group’s IPV experience as bidirectional psychological aggression. About one-fifth of the participants fell into class 2 (20.9%), a group that has reported very minimal or no IPV victimization and perpetration. The remaining one-fifth (19.1%) were in class 3, a group that has reported high likelihoods of having perpetrated and been victimized by both psychological aggression and threatening and controlling; additionally, they also had moderate to low probabilities of having been victimized by physical and sexual aggression, as well as perpetrated physical aggression and sexual aggression against their partners. Therefore, the IPV experience of this class was labeled as bidirectional multi-types.

Table 2. Model Fit Indices for Latent Class Models (N = 225).

# class	# pars	LL	AIC	BIC	ABIC	LMR Adj. LRT	BLRT p-value	Smallest class size (n)
1	8	-892.4	1800.8	1828.1	1802.7	-	-	-
2	17	-808.8	1651.6	1709.7	1655.8	163.79 ($p < .001$)	$p < .0001$	91
3	26	-783.8	1619.6	1708.4	1626.0	49.06 ($p < .001$)	$p < .0001$	43
4	35	-772.62	1615.2	1734.8	1623.9	21.9 ($p = .06 > .05$)	$p = .18$	23

Note. # 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.

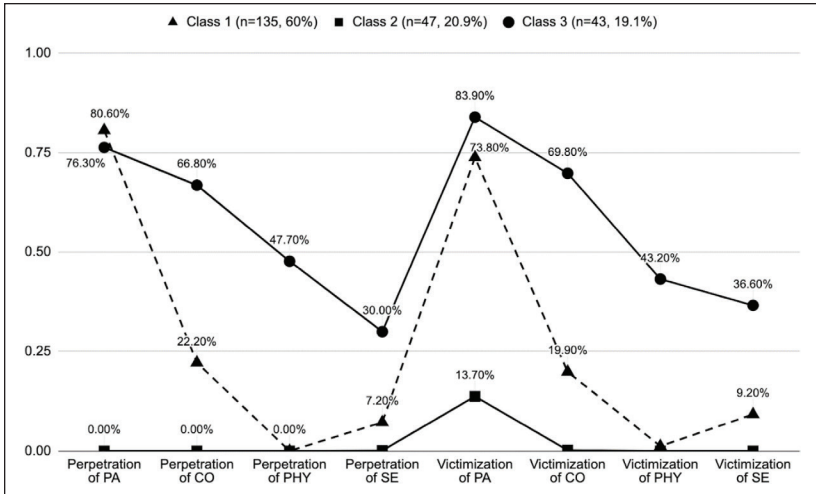


Figure 1. Latent class probabilities of IPV victimization and perpetration: Three-class model ($N = 225$).

Note. IPV = intimate partner violence. Class 1 = bidirectional psychological aggression; Class 2 = no violence; Class 3 = bidirectional multi-types.

Predictors of IPV

We used class 2, the group that experienced minimal IPV victimization and perpetration as the reference group to identify significant predictors of IPV. The results of Multinomial Logistic Regressions are summarized in Table 3. When comparing class 1, “bidirectional psychological aggression,” and class 2 “minimal IPV victimization and perpetration,” none of the factors included in the regression analysis was significant. Compared with class 2, participants in class 3 “bidirectional multi-types” were more likely to be younger ($OR = 0.91, p < .05$), to have reported higher IPV justification ($OR = 1.42, p < .05$), and to be in a cohabiting relationship or married ($OR = 3.1, p < .05$).

Discussion

The results of this study have, first and foremost, affirmed the prevalence of female same-sex bidirectional IPV in China. As is illustrated in Figure 1, bidirectional psychological aggression is the most common pattern (at 60%) of IPV among the current sample of Chinese lesbians. This is to be contrasted with a recent study of BIPV among heterosexual women in China (Hu et al., 2019), which also documented bidirectional psychological aggression as the most common IPV pattern, but only at 34.6%. In addition, only

Table 3. Multinomial Logistic Regressions: Class 1 or Class 3 vs. Class 2 (N = 225).

	Class 1 vs Class 2 OR (95% IC)	Class 3 vs Class 2 OR (95% IC)
Age	0.95 (0.87, 1.04)	0.91* (0.84, 0.99)
Employment		
Unemployed ^a /Other (ref.)		
Employed	1.91 (0.59, 6.21)	0.91 (0.29, 2.80)
Place of residence		
Suburban or rural area	1.21 (0.51, 2.86)	1.33 (0.54, 3.32)
Major urban area (ref.)		
Education		
Below college ^b	0.60 (0.16, 2.28)	0.77 (0.17, 3.39)
College	1.32 (0.43, 4.09)	0.75 (0.20, 2.82)
Graduate school or above (ref.)		
Monthly income		
Below 2,000 Chinese Yuan	1.10 (0.33, 3.61)	0.24 (0.07, 0.79)
2,000 Chinese Yuan or above (ref.)		
Marital status		
Relationship ended/other	2.03 (0.90, 4.58)	1.93 (0.73, 5.06)
Cohabiting/married	1.92 (0.78, 4.74)	3.10* (1.09, 8.80)
In a dating relationship (ref.)		
Norm	0.92 (0.79, 1.07)	1.03 (0.86, 1.22)
IPV justification	1.20 (0.95, 1.51)	1.42* (1.09, 1.86)

Note. *p < .05. IPV = intimate partner violence. Class 1 = bidirectional psychological aggression; Class 2 = no violence; Class 3 = bidirectional multi-types.

^aUnemployed includes unemployed students and unemployed non-students.

^bBelow college includes completed middle school or below, completed high school, and completed an associate diploma.

20.9% of the lesbian women in our sample reported almost no presence of IPV in their relationship, in contrast to over 50% among their heterosexual counterparts. The incidence of physical violence is also higher among the current sample of lesbian women (at 19.1%), compared to 12.2% among heterosexual couples.

In comparison to IPV among heterosexual couples, the higher incidence of FSSIPV reported in the current study is consistent with findings reported in the West (Brown & Herman, 2015; Barrett & St. Pierre, 2013; Messinger, 2011). Like their Western counterparts, the higher incidence of FSSIPV may

be because it is often trivialized as “cat fights,” and the severity of FSSIPV is often underestimated (Hassouneh & Glass, 2008; Seelau & Seelau, 2005), which in turn normalizes IPV among otherwise at-risk subpopulations.

The other factor that may explain the high incidence of FSSIPV stems from the still highly stigmatized status of sexual minorities in China. Although public attitudes toward lesbians are more tolerant than those towards gay men (Lin et al., 2016), most gay and lesbian individuals, experience a tremendous amount of pressure to conform to societal norms, especially pressures from their parents and other family members (Chow & Cheng, 2010). As a result, sham marriages between gay men and lesbians are very common in China (Liu, 2013), and those who are brave enough to embrace their sexuality by cohabitating with their same-sex partners often choose to maintain a very low profile of their sexual orientation, if not outright staying in the closet.

The stigma and the risks of being outed increase stress levels and internalized homophobia, which itself may become a risk factor for IPV. Indeed, a study of gay men in mainland China (Yu et al., 2013) found that gay men were five times as likely than their straight counterparts to experience IPV. A total of 12% of the gay men in this study also experienced the threat of being “outed” by their abusive partners, which poses a more severe level of distress given the stigmatized status of sexual minorities in China. It could be reasonably deduced that lesbian women also experiences similar stress about their sexual minority status. Sexual minority stress may also partially explain why those who experienced multiple types of BIPV, the most severe pattern of IPV in our current study, were more likely to be cohabitating than dating: sexual minority stress is likely heightened when sexual minorities defy societal expectations and boldly express their identities.

In contrast to Western studies of FSSBIPV (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012), which demonstrate a slightly lower to an almost equal proportion of BIPV (out of all IPV patterns) among lesbian couples as compared to heterosexual couples, our findings revealed the opposite pattern among Chinese women: among the lesbian surveyed, they either experienced BIPV (79.1% [including both class 1 and class 3]) or almost no violence (20.9%) at all, in contrast to their heterosexual counterparts, a small proportion of whom still experience unidirectional victimization from their male partners (Chen & Chan, 2019; Hou et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2019). Given that this has only been documented in the current study of Chinese lesbians, more research is needed to explore such a disparity.

For the time being, however, this finding may be contextualized by the different tactics of violence between men and women, which itself is influenced by societal level gender inequality. It is well established that the vast majority of intimate partner homicides, the most severe form of IPV, are

perpetrated by males against their female partners (Fridel & Fox, 2019; WHO, 2013). As physical force is a much more common tactic of violence by men, the risks of severe physical victimization and sexual victimization are far greater among heterosexual women than lesbian women. Furthermore, women in a heterosexual couple also make significantly less income than women in a lesbian couple (Klawitter, 2015), which may exacerbate unequal power dynamics between men and women in a heterosexual relationship and contributes to more unidirectional violence from men. Indeed, even sexual minority couples do not live free from gendered power dynamics. Past research on sexual minority couples (e.g., McKenry et al., 2006; Oliffe et al., 2014) has found that gendered power dynamics is mimicked in same-sex relationships and adds to the risks of IPV: a higher degree of masculinity display is correlated with a higher risk of violence perpetration.

It is somewhat surprising that we did not find the significant demographic, socioeconomic, or attitudinal difference between those who experienced bidirectional psychological aggression and those who perpetrated and experienced minimal IPV. This may be explained by the fact that the present study did not include a variable that measures the severity of psychological aggression; it is possible that by accounting for the level of severity, the significant effects of socio-demographics, socioeconomic status, and IPV-related attitudes may emerge. Equally likely, it may be that a lesbian woman who experienced and perpetrated minimal violence is simply not that different from a lesbian woman who engages in bidirectional psychological aggression in terms of their demographic, attitudinal, and socioeconomic characteristics. After all, bidirectional psychological aggression is prevalent as documented in the current study and previous studies (Chen & Chan, 2019; Hou et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2019; Parish et al., 2004); engaging in bidirectional psychological aggression may be a convenient (albeit unhealthy) tactic to cope with stress. Finally, we did not include any measure of mental well-being in the instrument; the difference in mental well-being may explain some of the variations between the minimal violence group and the bidirectional psychological aggression group.

Compared to the minimal violence group, those who experienced multiple types of BIPV were more likely to be younger. This effect is consistent with studies conducted in the United States, which documented an apparent age effect on the risk of IPV perpetration and victimization (Breiding, 2014; Johnson et al., 2015). Pro-violence attitude is another significant predictor of violence in this study. This finding also affirms those from previous studies in China (Lin et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2005) and elsewhere (Eckhardt et al., 2012; Schwartz et al., 2012) on the effect of pro-violence attitudes on IPV perpetration/victimization.

The findings of the current study have inspired two policy recommendations. First, in late 2015, China passed its first and only Anti-Domestic Violence Law with the advertised intention of protecting women from IPV. The law, however, exclusively protects individuals in heterosexual relationships, either legally married or cohabitating. The current legislation has limited the potential to extend its protection to lesbian couples who were shown to suffer from a higher rate of BIPV. We recommend that the law adopts a broader definition of “domestic violence” that applies to cohabitating sexual minorities. Second, as is well documented in the literature and illustrated in the current study, sexual minority stress issuing from the stigmatized status of the LGBTQ population in China may well explain, at least partially, the much higher incidence of IPV among lesbian couples. Along with recognizing the risks of IPV among sexual minorities in the anti-domestic violence legislation, further societal and policy changes, such as legislating against the discrimination of sexual minorities, would go a long way in alleviating the stigma and stress associated with being a sexual minority, which should ultimately reduce the risks of IPV. Albeit concerning, the higher rates of IPV among lesbian and other sexual minorities may provide an opportunity for advocacy groups in China to more effectively campaign for various legislative changes for the protection of sexual minorities.

Concededly, the current study has several limitations that should be noted. First, as was mentioned previously, the survey instrument used in the present study did not include a variable that measures the level of the severity of psychological aggression, which may be more sensitive to various demographic characteristics. Since we dichotomized all violence measures, we were unable to capture how frequent each type of violence was experienced or perpetrated. In a similar vein, the survey did not include any measure of mental well-being, which could further explain some of the unexplained variations in the three patterns of IPV. Finally, the sample used in this study, despite being one of the very first, was not representatively diverse, and the sample size, despite being sufficient for meaningful statistical analyses, was not as large as we would have liked. Future research efforts adopting a more nationally representative and larger sample would be highly desirable.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored BIPV among lesbian women in China by analyzing a survey sample of 225 lesbian women to identify IPV patterns, pattern-specific rates, and risk factors of FSSBIPV. Using Latent Class Analysis technique, we discovered three main patterns of partner abuse: bidirectional psychological violence (60%), bidirectional violence multiple types with

physical abuse (79.1%), and minimal violence (20.9%). Logistic regressions found no significant demographic, socioeconomic, or attitudinal difference between the bidirectional psychological violence group and the minimal violence group, while being younger, cohabitating, and holding pro-IPV attitudes significantly predicted higher odds of experiencing multiple types of bidirectional violence. These findings support those from previous studies documenting the prevalence of BIPV among heterosexual couples in China and lesbian couples around the world. They also present a different contrast to earlier findings on the proportion of BIPV to all IPV. Based on our results, we recommend that the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in China adopts a broader definition of “domestic violence” that applies to cohabitating sexual minorities, and that advocacy groups campaign for various legislative changes for the protection of sexual minorities in China.

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ORCID iDs

Ran Hu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5068-8833>

Jia Xue  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1668-2531>

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Author Biographies

Kai Lin, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Division of Criminal Justice at California State University, Sacramento. His research areas include the etiology of violence, comparative criminology, law and society, and sexualities. His publications appear in journals such as *Sexualities*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Journal of Family Violence*, and *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*.

Ran Hu, MSW, is a doctoral student at the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Her research interests include stigma, structural and interpersonal violence, violence against women, and issues related to commercial sex and human trafficking.

Wang Xiyang, PhD, is a professor in Faculty of Education at Beijing Normal University, and a visiting scholar at Harvard-Yenching Institute (2019-2020). Her

research interests include gender-based violence, sex education, school bullying, women live with HIV/AIDs, education of sociology, youth studies, intimate relationships, and qualitative research methods. She has written and published around 100 research papers in both English and Chinese, including journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, working papers and reports. Her articles have been published widely in international peer-reviewed journals including *Modern China*, *Violence Against Women*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *positions*, *Smith College Studies of Social Work*, *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* and gained a lot of attention, both locally and internationally. Her book, *Gender, Dating and Violence in Urban China* was published in 2017. She has been the principal investigator of different projects funded by Ministry of Education, Ministry of Civil Affairs, UNFPA China office, UN Women China Office and so on.

Jia Xue, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. Her research focuses on intimate violence, dating violence in young adulthood, child abuse and gender-based violence in international and cross-cultural contexts. Her research has been published in scholarly journals such as *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Violence and Gender*, *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *American Journal of Public Health*, and *British Journal of Social Work*.