EXPLORING HOW CHINESE DEFINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY IN HONG KONG

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Synopsis — This article examines issues of naming and defining violence against women in the context of Chinese societies. The first part discusses the differences between feminist and crime approaches to defining violence against women. The second part presents the findings of a focus group study which aimed to examine how Chinese people define and make sense of the term violence against women. Our study shows that the power of the term lies in turning people’s attention from violence in general to violence directed against women. However, the use of the term violence tends to limit Chinese people’s conception to the use of brute force (bao-li). It is suggested that an interchangeable use of the terms violence against women, women abuse and/or violation of women would facilitate women sharing their views and experiences. Findings also point to the development of a set of non-physical, subjective criteria in defining violence against women in Chinese societies. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

INTRODUCTION

The power of naming has long been pointed out by feminist scholars (Kelly, 1988a; Koss, Goodman, & Browne, 1994; Spender, 1980). It is through naming that a certain object, event, or feeling comes into existence in our social world. That which has no name is denied reality and value. A major development in the past few decades is the appearance of terms such as sexual harassment, marital rape, and date rape that name women’s experience. Creation of these terms renders the problems visible and allows women to talk about their experiences with legitimacy.

Naming also helps reframe discussions of the nature of an experience. For example, whether an experience is named domestic violence, spousal violence, or wife abuse has effects on how the experience is conceived. Feminist scholars critique the term domestic violence as collapsing the distinctions between husband-to-wife violence, wife-to-husband violence, incest, child abuse, and elderly abuse; and the term spousal violence as obscuring the difference between acts in self-defense and acts initiated to achieve domination and control. In contrast, the use of the term wife abuse, as suggested by Bograd (1988), enables one to focus on the gender and power dimensions of violence, and reframe the discussion according to the question “Why do men beat their wives?” rather than the questions “Why are people involved in violent interactions in families?” or “Why are spouses involved in violent interactions in marriage?”

Since the late 1970s, the term violence against women has appeared in Western societies to describe women’s victimization and reframe discussions of specific forms of violence such as rape (Bart, 1979), wife abuse (Bograd, 1984), and father–daughter incest (McIntyre, 1981). Increasing attention has been paid to