



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

# Combating Domestic Violence

By Qin Liwen



Members of the ADVN Beijing team include: (standing, left to right) Dong Yige, Wu Yuling, Dong Peiling, Liu Xiaojuan, (seated) Hou Zhiming, Chen Mingxia, Li Hongtao and Zhang Xiao. *Photo by Wang Tao*

In China, a nongovernment organization called the Anti-Domestic Violence Network has worked to end domestic violence for 10 years. Qin Liwen interviews members of the organization, along with a former victim helped by the group.

**Z**heng Guohua, a 51-year-old survivor of domestic violence, speaks in a cheerful voice that belies the two decades of abuse she is describing. In one 1998 incident, Zheng was so severely beaten by her husband that her spleen was ruptured and had to be removed. She says her father, devastated by her mistreatment, died from a brain hemorrhage. “I knelt at my father’s grave, crying and laughing. I told

him, ‘Dad, I promise you, I will [have] revenge!’” says Zheng. “I think I was [awakened] by my father’s death. And I realized that this bad guy (her ex-husband) must be punished. I can’t let him harm people anymore!”

An often bruised and terrified Zheng sought help from family members, neighbors, village cadres, county police and the county Women’s Federation. People in her village repeatedly warned

her husband and once beat him up, but that didn’t stop his abuse. Police ignored her because “meddling with domestic affairs” was not their duty — and was even considered inappropriate. The poorly-funded local Women’s Federation couldn’t do anything to help; no one took the organization seriously.

Shaken by the death of her father and determined to do something, in 1999 Zheng ran away from her

village home to Shijiazhuang, the provincial capital. Finally, she found help. A letter issued by Women's Federation of Hebei Province spurred the local police into action. Her then-husband was arrested and sentenced to four years in jail.

Zheng was lucky. She was supported by an organization that is part of a strong anti-domestic violence movement in China, headed by the Anti-Domestic Violence Network of China Law Association (ADVN). In 2001, a new clause of the Marriage Law made domestic violence illegal. The ADVN played an important role in the adoption of that clause. Today, Zheng is remarried, farming on a piece of rented land in her village.

Inspired by the international gender equality movement and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, a group of Chinese women activists set up the ADVN in June 2000. The ADVN is dedicated to achieving gender equality in China. It was the first — and remains the largest — anti-domestic violence organization in China, and it is responsible for significant progress in legislation, investigation and prosecution of crimes, social support and public awareness. “Ten years ago nobody would even think that beating up wives is a crime. Now many people know about it,” says ADVN co-founder, Li Hongtao, who is director of the Library of China Women's University. “And more and more police, judges and procurators (prosecutors and investigators) are learning that they should take actions against it.”

The ADVN now boasts 118 individual members and 75 group members such as women's federations, research institutes and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Every three years the ADVN identifies a number of projects and selects the most suitable organizational members to conduct the work. Each project is strictly monitored and evaluated. Most concern education and advocacy about domestic violence.

A co-founder and chief coordinator of the early ADVN project management committee, Chen Mingxia, explains its success. “From the very beginning we chose to associate with the China Law Society, an NGO within the [political] system. First because we thought legislation is fundamental for the anti-domestic violence movement. Second, the China Law Association



Chen Mingxia is co-founder of the China Anti-Domestic Violence Network Law Association (ADVN), which helps women escape abusive relationships. *Photo by Wang Tao*

has ready access to the essential, relevant government branches like legislative, juridical and public security offices and is trusted by them.” In China, NGOs are strictly regulated by the government's civil affairs office and are often mistrusted by officials if they are not connected with government. So NGOs such as ADVN use creative, non-confrontational ways of persuading male officials to accept their ideas. “But we also keep the independent identity and operation as an NGO, so that the prospects and goals of ADVN can be reached relatively smoothly step by step,” says Chen.

The other strategic advantage of the ADVN is its open and democratic structure. It is open to any individual or organization that wants to contribute to the shared goal of stopping domestic abuse of women. Strategic goals are set and big decisions are made democratically among representatives across the network, no matter how much debate surrounds issues. This keeps ADVN members active and committed to implementing plans.

“I am happy to work here, because people in this organization are all so kind and idealistic. Everyone believes in what they are doing,” says Dong Yige, a young graduate from Chicago University who has worked for ADVN for a year. “The democratic atmosphere is invigorating.”



ADVN helped Zheng Guohua when she left her abusive husband. Here she poses with her mother and niece in Beijing in 2010. Photo by Wang Tao

Born in August 1940, Chen Mingxia thinks her generation was well educated in gender equality by the Communist government founded in 1949. Chen became a researcher at the Institute for Legal Research of the China Academy of Social Sciences, specializing in marriage laws and women's rights, and she was the former Deputy Director of the Marriage Law Association within the China Law Association. Many ADVN co-founders were scholars, government officials, teachers — elite women of Chen's generation or one generation later.

ADVN activists still see much work ahead. "We have all these

extremely successful cases in different regions: community actions against domestic violence in You'anmen, Beijing; or the training program for public security bureau chiefs in Hunan Province," says Chen. "But these are not enough. We should urge the government to take up the responsibility of anti-domestic violence."

Meanwhile, the ADVN's long-time sponsors, Ford Foundation (United States), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) and the Human Rights Center of the University of Oslo (Norway), are changing their sponsorship levels.

That means ADVN must learn how to raise funds for its projects — and it is doing so.

"Legislation takes time, and it takes even longer to implement a new law under completely different situations across China. Changing ideas is a gradual process. Too many gaps [need] to be filled. We knew it from the beginning, and we're patient. We will march forward," Chen promises.

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