The Implementation of the PRC Anti-Domestic Violence Law and the Service Support System: A Multi-Dimensional Examination from Norms to Practice

Ran Gu

Rosary Academy, Fullerton CA 92831, USA

estella.gu@rosaryroyals.org

Abstract. China's 2016 Anti-Domestic Violence Law represents significant legislative progress, yet its implementation remains constrained by a traditional family-centric framework that fails to adequately address violence in diverse intimate relationships, such as cohabitation, post-separation contexts, and same-sex partnerships. Existing research lacks a comprehensive governance perspective, focusing predominantly on legal provisions rather than systemic execution barriers, including institutional biases, high evidentiary burdens, and fragmented service delivery. This study argues that effective intervention requires transitioning from a law-centered approach to an integrated governance system encompassing five dimensions: legal norms, enforcement mechanisms, service support, preventive education, and monitoring mechanisms. It emphasizes the need to expand definitions of violence and relationships—replacing "cohabitation" with an "intimate relationship" standard—to reduce exclusionary practices. The main contribution lies in proposing a holistic framework to evaluate and improve anti-domestic violence governance, particularly for marginalized groups. It offers evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at aligning legal protections with China's rapidly evolving social realities.

Keywords: Domestic violence governance, Anti-Domestic Violence Law, personal safety protection order, systemic exclusion, gender-based violence, China.

1. Introduction

Chinese society is undergoing a rapid transformation, with increasingly diverse family structures and intimate relationships. Accelerated urbanization, frequent population mobility, and the awakening of individual consciousness have continuously reshaped the traditional family model. Domestic violence has also presented new complexities—its scope has gone beyond marital relationships, extending to cohabiting relationships, coercion and stalking after breakups, and same-sex partnerships, i.e., non-traditional intimate relationships. The promulgation of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in 2016 was a landmark, signifying the incorporation of anti-domestic violence work into the realm of national public governance. However, public discussions and policy responses still largely remain within the traditional family framework, leaving victims in "atypical" relationships confronted with ambiguous definitions, evidentiary difficulties, and lack of remedies.

The gap between the legal text and governance practice has become the core challenge of current anti-domestic violence efforts. Legislation is only the starting point; in implementation, lagging social awareness, insufficient interdepartmental coordination, *and* weak support services constitute deep constraints. Particularly for victims outside marital relationships, the failure to meet the law's definition of "family" often results in barriers of recognition and systemic exclusion.

Against this background, this study revolves around the question of *"how the Anti-Domestic Violence Law moves from normative text to practical effectiveness"* and proposes a four-dimensional analytical framework consisting of Legislation, Implementation, Services, and Prevention. This framework captures the systemic chain of domestic violence governance: legislation provides the foundation by clarifying the scope of relationships and types of violence; implementation determines whether judicial and enforcement mechanisms can transform legal rights into substantive protection; services ensure that remedies are supported by accessible shelters, psychological counseling, and

economic assistance; and prevention, through education and awareness, shapes professional cognition and social attitudes, thereby sustaining the system over time.

These four dimensions form a dynamic cycle: vague legislation results in inconsistent implementation and fragmented services, while deficiencies in education and prevention further weaken the governance foundation. Therefore, the evaluation of anti-domestic violence governance effectiveness must depart from isolated observation and adopt a four-dimensional perspective, in order to bridge the "implementation gap" between "good law" and "good governance."

The purpose of this study is to promote the transformation of China's domestic violence governance model from a singular legislative response to a systemic social protection framework, making prevention and control policies more aligned with social realities and providing substantive protection and accessible support for victims in all intimate relationships—regardless of whether their relational form is traditional.

2. Defects and Limitations at the Legislative Level

2.1. Institutional and Judicial Challenges

China has constructed its anti-domestic violence prevention system with the Anti-Domestic Violence Law as its core, establishing key mechanisms such as Personal Safety Protection Orders and Admonition Letters. However, several legislative shortcomings constrain the realization of protection effectiveness, among which the relationship recognition standard of "cohabitation" is particularly prominent [1].

Although Article 37 of the law expands its scope of application to "persons living together other than family members," in judicial practice, applicants often encounter obstacles because they cannot provide "hard" evidence of the relationship such as rental contracts or joint payment receipts. Based on an empirical study of 4,864 judicial decisions, nearly one-fifth of protection order applications were rejected, with a considerable portion linked to insufficient evidence or unclear relationship recognition [2]. Qualitative research and NGO reports also repeatedly highlight that cohabiting and same-sex partners face especially prominent protection gaps, though systematic nationwide statistics on relevant proportions remain lacking [3]. This reflects a disconnect between legislative intent and judicial practice.

The seriousness of the problem lies in the current lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of the functioning of the relationship recognition standard. There are neither nationwide disaggregated statistics by group nor regularized analysis of local adjudicative variations, resulting in systemic exclusion of certain groups remaining in a state of "invisibility." Legislation and adjudication have set high entry thresholds without dynamic evaluation and remedial mechanisms, causing dilemmas to be repeatedly replicated and solidified in practice, thereby undermining the possibility of policy correction [4].

To alleviate evidentiary difficulties, the Supreme People's Court issued a relevant judicial interpretation in 2022, explicitly permitting the use of audio-visual materials, electronic communication records, and other evidence, and emphasizing that the application for protection orders is not premised on divorce proceedings [5]. This provision indeed lowers evidentiary requirements in form—for example, by formally recognizing electronic evidence as admissible—but it does not address the core relationship requirement of "cohabitation." In practice, courts and public security organs still generally prefer to admit traditional documentary evidence such as rental contracts and household registration booklets, while granting limited probative value to chat logs, transfer screenshots, and other indirect evidence. Existing academic and NGO studies point out that, among publicly searchable cases [6], instances of same-sex partners applying for Personal Safety Protection Orders are extremely rare, with overall visibility persistently low, reflecting that the protection gap for this group remains. Hence, while judicial interpretations have broadened the types of admissible evidence, they have not substantially broken through the rigid logic of relationship recognition.

The statutory expression of "reference enforcement" grants significant discretion to grassroots actors, leading to considerable disparities in local handling outcomes. Some grassroots police officers and judges, influenced by traditional family values, often treat violence in non-marital intimate relationships as "emotional disputes," preferring mediation and compromise rather than lawful intervention. This demonstrates that, even though the law provides a formal guarantee of "reference enforcement," in practice its effectiveness is further weakened by excessive discretion and outdated perceptions [7].

2.2. Parallel Provisions and Definitional Constraints

The 2022 revision of the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, Article 29, allows women to apply for Personal Safety Protection Orders after the termination of a romantic or marital relationship, addressing the need for remedies in "breakup violence" [8]. However, this provision constitutes a parallel clause and does not fundamentally break through the threshold of "cohabitation" under the Anti-Domestic Violence Law. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) also pointed out in 2023 that Chinese law does not cover former partner relationships or economic violence [9]. This indicates that the remedial value of such parallel provisions is limited and fails to truly overcome institutional barriers.

The Anti-Domestic Violence Law's definition of violence is manifestly insufficient, lacking independent and clear delineation of hidden forms such as economic control and sexual violence. Cognitive lag exacerbates the "invisibility" of such forms of violence. A 2022 survey by the Women's Federation of Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, showed that over 40% of respondents did not recognize economic control as domestic violence [10]. Legislative vagueness also constrains judicial responses; for instance, although a 2024 amendment proposal gained approval, it still faces practical obstacles due to difficulties in setting operational standards.

With regard to sexual violence, although there have been precedents convicting marital rape, in the civil protection order system, due to the absence of explicit legal bases, victims still find it difficult to apply for protection orders solely on grounds of sexual violence. This chain dilemma——"From legislative ambiguity to inadequate recognition and the neglect of practice"—renders economic control and sexual violence nearly "invisible" in the anti-domestic violence system. When combined with the threshold of "relationship recognition," this produces a "double exclusion" for victims in non-traditional intimate relationships.

2.3. Supplementary but Structurally Limited Laws

When specialized legislation cannot provide remedies, victims often turn to general laws such as the Public Security Administration Punishments Law or the Criminal Law. However, these laws are not designed to address violence in intimate relationships and present structural limitations: they either focus on incidental interventions, impose excessively high thresholds for application, or provide only post hoc compensation, failing to replace the systemic protection of specialized legislation.

Some local legislations (e.g., Jiangsu [11], Zhejiang [12], and Shenzhen ordinances [13]) have sought to address gaps at the national level by incorporating economic control and sexual violence into regulation. Yet these local ordinances have limited force and cannot form a unified protective framework, highlighting the urgency of national-level amendments to achieve institutional integration. The ambiguities in relationship recognition and the definition of violence at the legislative level directly translate into uncertainty and high thresholds in judicial application and grassroots enforcement. These legislative ambiguities not only constrain judicial remedies but also spill over into enforcement practice, directly shaping the implementation dilemmas to be examined in the following section.

3. Practical Dilemmas in the Implementation of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and Systemic Reflections

3.1. Challenges in Legal Norms and Implementation Mechanisms

At the enforcement stage, a general tendency of "de-domesticating" domestic violence exists, serving as a direct cause of institutional "secondary victimization." In practice, domestic violence cases are often categorized merely as "family conflicts" or "emotional disputes." Such enforcement bias not only obstructs cases from entering formal legal procedures but also substantively denies victims' experiences and their legal subjectivity. Even when judicial procedures provide limited remedies in individual cases, the absence of shelters, psychological counseling, and economic assistance often forces victims to return to violent relationships. This illustrates the intrinsic linkage between implementation dilemmas and deficiencies in the support service system.

A UNFPA study shows that in China, only about 7% of women subjected to partner physical violence chose to report to the police, and the filing rate was extremely low [2], profoundly reflecting how systemic exclusion at the enforcement stage exacerbates victims' sense of helplessness and trauma. This enforcement deficiency is directly tied to the systemic lack of protection: when grassroots law enforcement agencies, constrained by outdated attitudes or insufficient professional competence, refuse to file cases or downplay incidents, the "first line of defense" envisioned by the law is dismantled. Victims are pushed into a vicious cycle of "no recourse—re-victimization." Low reporting rates and enforcement bias reinforce one another, further marginalizing victims in non-traditional intimate relationships, who face dual deprivation in both legal recognition and protection. This institutional nonfeasance, in essence, constitutes a form of "secondary violence" imposed by the state apparatus, underscoring the structural deficiencies inherent from the outset of the anti-domestic violence system.

With respect to relationship recognition, although Article 37 of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law includes non-marital intimate relationships under "cohabitation," the requirement of proving "cohabitation" poses significant evidentiary barriers in practice. Despite the Supreme People's Court's 2022 judicial interpretation permitting multiple forms of evidence (such as audio recordings, electronic communications, and community testimony), inconsistent standards and heavy evidentiary burdens persist in grassroots enforcement and adjudication, making it difficult for cohabiting or former partners to secure equal protection [14].

Personal Safety Protection Orders, as a core remedy, have gradually expanded in scope to cover forms of violence such as psychological abuse and post-breakup harassment, yet their application remains constrained by traditional conceptions of violence. Although judicial practice has established a "high probability" evidentiary standard, victims often face obstacles due to weak evidence awareness or inadequate evidence-gathering ability. Ensuring uniform judicial standards and reducing adjudicative disparities is key to enabling protection orders to achieve their function of "rapid protection."

However, even if judicial procedures formally provide remedies, without accompanying shelters, psychological support, and economic assistance, victims may still be forced to return to violent relationships due to real-life constraints. This fully demonstrates that the effectiveness of remedies depends not only on legal texts but also on the substantive support of service systems.

3.2. Structural Deficiencies and Accessibility Barriers in Support Services

The current anti-domestic violence support service system in China suffers from profound structural deficiencies. Its institutional design, resource allocation, and service provision remain centered on traditional marital relationships, systematically excluding victims in non-marital partnerships and sexual minority groups. Accessibility barriers in various service dimensions are summarized as Table 1:

Table 1. Structural Exclusion in Anti-Domestic Violence Services and Legal Remedies

Service Dimension	Core Issue	Key Data / Legal Basis	Manifestation of Structural Exclusion
Shelters & Support	Resource scarcity; institutional and informational barriers limit accessibility.	Among women subjected to partner physical violence, about 17% sought help from institutions or hotlines [15].	Non-traditional relationship victims (unmarried, sexual minorities) are overlooked due to lack of trust and accessibility.
Psychological Services	Supply-demand mismatch; lack of inclusivity.	37% of sexual minorities considered seeking counseling, but 55% indicated they would not do so [16]; over 60% of transgender individuals did not seek help after abuse [17].	Produces a "consideration—frustration—silence" cycle, marginalizing sexual minorities.
Economic Assistance	Application rules embed identity exclusion.	The Draft Social Assistance Law specifies that minimum livelihood guarantees are applied for by "households" composed of cohabiting family members [18].	Policy premised on traditional family structures systematically excludes unmarried individuals.
Judicial Relief	High thresholds and unstable outcomes for property preservation; unclear rules for property division in cohabitation.	Judicial practice: divergent rules (analogous to marriage, partnership, or co-ownership), leading to inconsistent judgments.	Ambiguous rules and high thresholds exclude vulnerable parties from effective judicial relief.

These structural deficiencies in support services not only place victims in the dilemma of being "legally visible but practically helpless" but also expose deeper challenges in systemic coordination and evidence-based foundations of anti-domestic violence work. In fact, the fragmentation and vagueness of service chains largely stem from the overall insufficiency of interdepartmental coordination mechanisms and data support systems. The fragmentation and exclusivity of support services largely stem from weak interdepartmental coordination and the absence of a comprehensive data support system. Without unified platforms and integrated resources, service chains remain incomplete and inconsistent.

3.3. Insufficient Interdepartmental Coordination and Data Support

Anti-domestic violence work, by nature, requires systemic interdepartmental collaboration. Yet in practice, coordination mechanisms display obvious fractures: there is a lack of unified case acceptance standards, clear referral procedures, and sustainable resource guarantees. Consequently, victims frequently face interrupted service chains when seeking critical support, severely affecting the continuity and effectiveness of protection.

A deeper issue is the absence of a national-level data support system. There is no nationwide official statistical data disaggregated by type of violence, relationship form, or victim group. As a result, policy-making lacks precise foundations. The incompleteness and incomparability of data not only hinder accurate recognition of the overall domestic violence landscape but also obscure regional disparities in services, making scientific evaluation and targeted improvement difficult.

Therefore, advancing anti-domestic violence work from textual rights to substantive protection requires transcending piecemeal remedies and moving toward systemic, data-driven, collaborative

governance solutions. China's anti-domestic violence work urgently needs to shift from fragmented governance to systemic governance in order to fundamentally address the structural predicaments of the current system. The lack of interdepartmental collaboration and systematic data further constrains the development of education and prevention measures. Without unified statistics and evidence-based feedback, public education and professional training cannot be targeted or sustained, weakening the possibility of preventive governance at the source.

4. Toward Systemic Governance: Improvement Paths and Policy Recommendations

4.1. Promoting Curricular and Systematic Anti-Domestic Violence Education

Currently, anti-domestic violence education in schools remains largely limited to scattered publicity, lacking systematic and staged curriculum design. This has resulted in serious deficiencies in young people's recognition of hidden forms of violence. In a nationwide sample of middle school classrooms, the "violence" theme had the lowest coverage, with an overall score of only 28.87/100, and all violence-related topics had coverage rates below 50% [19]. This demonstrates systemic neglect of education on violence recognition, help-seeking channels, and gendered power relations, restricting the development of young people's early recognition and self-protection capabilities from the source.

Drawing on Australia's experience of making "respectful relationships" a compulsory subject, China should embed anti-domestic violence education comprehensively into moral, mental health, and legal education curricula, designing content by school age to build a preventive barrier at the cognitive source.

4.2. Building a Life-Oriented, Multi-Channel Public Awareness Mechanism

Public understanding of domestic violence remains generally confined to physical violence, with weak recognition of hidden forms such as economic control and psychological abuse. According to the 2018 *Implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Middle Schools in China* report, among the five core themes, "violence" had the lowest coverage, with an overall score of only 28.87/100, and all subtopics under it had coverage rates below 50%. This reflects that young people lack systematic education and training in recognizing non-physical forms of violence [20].

It is necessary to break away from reliance on case-based, dramatized communication models and, referencing the UK's practice of incorporating relationship education into public campaigns, systematically disseminate information on the diverse forms of domestic violence and available legal remedies through film, community education, and digital platforms. This would gradually shape social consensus and lay the cognitive foundation for legal implementation.

4.3. Eliminating Cognitive and Implementation Biases among Frontline Personnel through Professional Training

The professional competence of law enforcement and judicial personnel directly affects the effectiveness of the anti-domestic violence system. Yet current research shows significant shortcomings in frontline cognition and implementation. In seven reported incidents, four received no police response, and in two others police responded but failed to stop the violence or treated it lightly. There were even cases where domestic violence was dismissed as a "family matter" or same-sex victims were advised to "correct their sexual orientation" [21, 22]. Such misconduct in practice not only undermines the effectiveness of legal provisions but also reflects institutional gaps caused by a lack of gender sensitivity and professional training in enforcement.

A capacity-oriented training system should be established, making skills such as recognizing hidden forms of violence and culturally sensitive responses compulsory for police, judges, and social workers, and integrating these into professional assessments. By strengthening training in handling

diverse relationship structures and compound forms of violence, the system can be prevented from failing or deviating at the execution stage. Taken together, the problems identified across legislation, implementation, services, and prevention form a self-reinforcing structural dilemma. Overcoming this requires systemic governance and comprehensive reform, moving from fragmented responses toward holistic reconstruction.

5. Toward Systemic Governance: A Comprehensive Path for Improving the Anti-Domestic Violence System

Inclusive and scientifically grounded legislation is the essential starting point. The legal framework must evolve from a "blood-related family" model to one centered on "intimate relationships." This shift is crucial to overcome the systemic exclusion created by the "cohabitation" requirement, thereby extending legal protections to cohabiting, same-sex, and former partners and ensuring the law's equal application. Furthermore, legislation must explicitly identify "power and control" as the core characteristic of domestic violence. Expanding the categories of punishable behavior to include economic control and sexual violence will significantly enhance the law's ability to recognize and address complex abuse, providing clearer guidance for judicial authorities.

Building on a robust legal foundation, coordinated and effective enforcement becomes the critical next step. Current challenges, such as delayed responses and inconsistent standards, severely undermine protection. To address this, rapid adjudication procedures for protection orders and rules that ease victims' evidentiary burdens must be established, making judicial interventions more timely and more accessible. The creation of a unified national digital platform is also vital to facilitate data sharing and operational collaboration across different agencies. Introducing a performance evaluation system focused on recidivism rates and protection order enforcement would strengthen accountability, transforming fragmented efforts into an efficiently coordinated system.

Beyond legal and enforcement mechanisms, the approach must be rounded out with integrated, human-centered support services. The effectiveness of anti-domestic violence efforts depends not only on sanctions but also on a strong, victim-focused support network. Currently, resources like shelters, legal aid, and counseling are often dispersed, preventing the formation of a continuous support chain. A "one-stop" service mechanism, integrating resources from police, judicial, civil affairs, and social organizations, is needed to ensure seamless support from emergency shelter and temporary housing to long-term recovery. Embedding gender equality and cultural sensitivity training into these services is key to improving professionalism and preventing secondary victimization.

Ultimately, systematic and front-loaded prevention through education addresses the root of the problem. Lasting change requires early and systematic intervention. Integrating content on respectful relationships, gender equality, and violence recognition into the national education system is fundamental to cultivating young people's ability to form healthy intimate relationships. Simultaneously, specialized training for key groups like law enforcement, teachers, and social workers will enhance their capacity to recognize and respond effectively. Public awareness campaigns and responsible media guidance are equally important to reshape social attitudes, fostering a culture of zero tolerance that prevents violence from taking root in the first place.

6. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that the deficiencies of the current anti-domestic violence system are both structural and systemic. At the legislative level, the requirement of “cohabitation” for relationship recognition poses significant limitations, while definitions of hidden forms of violence such as economic control and sexual violence remain vague, institutionally excluding victims in non-traditional intimate relationships from the outset. At the levels of implementation and services, the “de-domestication” tendency in grassroots enforcement, the marriage-centered orientation of the support service system, and the fragmentation of interdepartmental coordination and data support

mechanisms collectively place victims in situations where they are legally visible but practically helpless, and even subjected to "secondary violence" due to institutional failures. At the level of education and prevention, the absence of systematic school education, limited public awareness, and insufficient professional competence of frontline personnel further erode the social cognitive foundation required for systemic sustainability, weakening the possibility of preventive governance at the source.

In sum, the challenges facing China's anti-domestic violence system fundamentally reflect the structural tension between traditional fragmented governance models and the increasingly diverse and complex realities of intimate relationships. The gap between legal texts and governance practice obstructs the effective transformation from "good law" to "good governance." Thus, future reforms must transcend piecemeal fixes and move toward systemic governance based on data-driven and coordinated approaches. Specifically, legislation should establish an "intimate relationship" foundation and expand the scope of protection; implementation should improve responsiveness and interdepartmental coordination; services should build integrated and human-centered support networks; and education should promote systematic, front-loaded prevention. Only through comprehensive systematic reconstruction across these four dimensions can the transition from rights declaration to substantive protection be achieved, ensuring equal, accessible justice for individuals in all forms of intimate relationships.

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