



Because she attended last year's seminar, Qing said she was insulted by her husband and his family. She finally had enough and made up her mind to insist on divorce, despite hesitating for the sake of her son.

A lawyer told Qing that even if she filed a divorce lawsuit, it might not go in her favor.

Many Chinese gay men conceal their homosexuality, which makes it difficult for women to collect evidence of their husband's sexual habits and orientation, said Yang Shaogang, a Shanghai-based lawyer who is experienced in gay-straight divorce cases. As a result, judges often do not grant the divorce, and the women need to file again at a later date, Yang said.

In addition, Chinese law does not make a gay man culpable for the marriage breakdown, meaning it's possible that no compensation will be awarded to the woman. Further, the law offers no privilege for such women to obtain custody of their children.

Yang has called for legal changes regarding the distribution of property and child custody in such divorce cases to encourage tongqi to break free.

Three of the 15 tongqi who attended that first seminar last year are now divorced.

"It shows huge progress that these women were able to stand up to protect their rights," said sexologist Zhang Beichuan.

Disease, violence

A 2013 survey conducted by Zhang and her team sampled nearly 150 women who had either married or divorced gay or bisexual men or who were currently dating such men.

Seventy percent of the respondents said they had suffered long-term emotional abuse from the men, often characterized by sexual apathy.

In addition, 90 percent of the women developed symptoms of depression and 20 percent of them reported beatings.

Nearly 40 of those surveyed also reported symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases. Of the 30 who were tested for HIV, two found themselves infected.

Su Yun, 60, recently divorced her gay husband. She became deaf in one ear after enduring beatings. A day after the divorce, she said her ex-husband and his boyfriend barged into her home.

"I didn't dare call the police. I thought he might strangle me. He tried once and I almost died," said Su, in Shandong province.

Divorced women are often discriminated against in China, and not everyone trapped in an unhappy marriage wants to get out, said Li, the seminar founder.

In general, the tongqi are an invisible group. A large number of women are even unaware that their husbands are gay, due to conservative attitudes toward sex. Li said: "Many never even wonder why they have no sex life in their marriage."

