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Statement submitted by Thin and High, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Creating more Chinese nightingales: prevention and elimination of violence against rural Chinese women and girls through higher enrolments in nursing schools

Introduction

Women and girls living in China's vast rural hinterlands are disadvantaged in many areas. They are unlikely to obtain more than just a few years of education and are usually married off at a young age. Their chances of being inflicted with physical and sexual violence are also substantially higher than those of their urban counterparts. This is due mainly due to lack of education, poor legal awareness and, most important, the low social status of women and the deeply ingrained culture of women's subservience that still exists in large parts of rural China.

Violence against women in rural areas

Like women elsewhere, rural Chinese women face economic, livelihood and marital challenges. In addition, they are subjected to cultural norms that place heavy pressure on them to be obedient and submissive and, in the case of married women, to produce male offspring.

Violence and abuse against women in rural settings are difficult to detect and even harder to eradicate. Even in the more progressive urban areas, wife-beating is often seen as an acceptable social practice, so that law enforcement agencies are often unwilling to interfere. The reason often cited is that internal family matters are beyond the jurisdiction and adjudication of outside parties.

Victims often have little choice but to suffer in pain and silence, or resort to suicide. Violence against rural women can take many forms, ranging from marital and non-marital rape and molestation to physical beating and assault, outrages against modesty, emotional, psychological and verbal abuse, and physical and sexual enslavement, as well as ridicule, threats and intimidation. In some cases, baby girls have been sold to families with sons suffering from physical disabilities or mental retardation in order to become "brides" when the sons have grown up. In addition, women are sometimes kidnapped and sold in order to become wives to rural men who cannot find spouses as a result of poverty and the skewed gender ratio. The violence committed against these two latter groups of women is sometimes even more severe.

Abused rural women, especially those living in remote areas, often find it difficult to escape from their violent situations. In short, ignorance, lack of employable skills, fear and a fatalistic mindset have all conspired to keep these women in constant danger of physical harm and sexual violence.

Nursing school as an option in the prevention and elimination of violence

Taking young rural women out of their homes is the first step in the prevention and elimination of violence. The second step is equipping them with marketable nursing skills, thereby making them less economically reliant on their families or husbands. The third step is to enlarging their social circles, which will make it easier for them to share their stories of violence or abuse, as well as to seek and obtain

help, if necessary. The fourth and most important step is equipping them with greater awareness of and knowledge about their legal and social rights as women.

If carried out, this four-pronged approach will not only prevent and eliminate violence, but also allow rural women to decide if marriage is really a necessary or desirable option. Most domestic violence in China's rural areas is perpetrated by husbands and male relatives, owing to a lack of better options for the women.

If they enrol in nursing school, young rural women will not have to enter into a premature marriage as a result of parental pressure or lack of economic independence. If married, they do not have to stay in an unhappy, abusive or violent marriage.

Greater knowledge of such issues as sex education and birth control will also help prevent the sorts of marital strain that lead to physical and sexual violence against women.

Addressing other social problems

Thin and High believes that encouraging more rural girls to enrol in nursing school can be a positive and stabilizing force in China. In addition to enabling them to be gainfully employed and productive members of society and to have the opportunity to lead more satisfying and fulfilling lives, a more respected job with better social and medical coverage will contribute to the building of a harmonious society as espoused by the Chinese Government.

Even if women who have graduated from nursing school return to their hometowns, they can continue to make effective contributions by working as nurses in local hospitals and clinics. They are also a ready and useful source of paramedic assistance during natural or man-made disasters.

Despite the fact that China has a large population, hospitals and clinics suffer from a shortage of trained and qualified nurses. Therefore, the enrolment of more rural women in nursing schools would also help to alleviate the chronic nurse shortage in the country.

Action plan

Authorities should undertake concrete and proactive measures to encourage more rural women to enrol in nursing school. More nursing schools should be set up. In addition to nursing skills, the curriculum should include education about human rights and the promotion of greater legal awareness.

Furthermore, public education and programmes should be launched to improve the image of nurses and alter the traditional notion that professional nurses merely perform dirty and unpleasant tasks. Instead, the profession should be more accurately portrayed in order to reflect its true nature, which is a job of dedication and devotion that helps reduce suffering, as well as offer aid and solace to those in need, pain and distress.

In addition to traditional social norms, violence inflicted on rural women is worsened by the existing authoritarian structure in China. The high-handed and brutal ways in which dissent is put down are echoed and even imitated by those at lower levels of the political hierarchy, creeping into neighbourhoods, villages and families. The climate of repression and the fear of speaking up act as accomplices

that have exacerbated violence against rural women. Therefore, authorities need to undertake political and structural reforms and ensure greater judicial independence so that social frictions and resentments do not fester, spiral out of control and eventually lead to social instability.

Conclusions

The prevention and elimination of violence against Chinese rural women require a multifaceted approach and efforts both within and outside China. Thin and High hopes that the United Nations and its affiliated bodies can make use of its global influence and clout in calling upon and exerting influence on the Chinese Government to take further concrete measures to encourage more rural women to attend nursing school. The United Nations and its affiliated bodies should also consider setting up an international women's watch and undertake active intervention, if necessary, so as to play a contributing role in the prevention and elimination of violence against rural women in China.

Case studies

Hou Dandan

Twenty-three-year-old Hou Dandan is a Xiaoxian native living in rural Anhui province. Her father was crushed to death by a brick mixer when she was eight years old. Her mother left home to work elsewhere in order to send money home. A shy and introverted child, Dandan was raised by her grandmother. In rural China, orphans or children without their parents often run the risk of being bullied or, worse, suffer from physical and sexual violence. Dandan dropped out of school after having completed secondary school. She remained at home for several months and enrolled in a nursing school only upon the encouragement and assistance of Thin and High. She now works as a qualified nurse at a public hospital in Hefei. With greater knowledge and awareness of her rights, Dandan now knows how to protect herself from violence.

Zhao Yingmei

Twenty-eight-year-old Zhao Yingmei comes from Yuzhong county, in rural Gansu province. A recipient of the Thin and High assistance programme, Yingmei graduated from a nursing school in Lanzhou and worked for a few years at a public hospital in Beijing, where, as a person who was not from Beijing, she faced discrimination in the form of unfavourable working hours and longer shifts. She has since returned to her hometown, where she now works as a clinic nurse. Living in a violence-free family and work environment, Yingmei is a source of inspiration for many young rural girls in her hometown.

Niu Yanhong

Eighteen-year-old Niu Yanhong was adopted at a young age by a rural family in Gansu province. She often felt like an outsider, as her adoptive mother told her that she had been adopted and treated her as a servant. A quiet and sensitive child, Yanhong dropped out of school owing to slow progress and poor results. She stayed home to perform household chores for her adoptive family. But after a visit to her village by Thin and High volunteers this year, Yanhong acted on their encouragement to enrol in a nursing school in Xi'an, in Shaanxi province. The bold

move to leave her village has removed Yanhong from potential sources of violence inflicted on poorly educated women with low social status such as herself, whose only option was to marry young and bear children. Yanhong is now more upbeat and optimistic and looks forward to prospects of a better life free from violence and abuse.
