



## **Economic and Social Council**

Distr.: General  
17 November 2014

Original: English

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

#### **Fifty-ninth session**

9-20 March 2015

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women  
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled  
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace  
for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, 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

Founded in 1966 by a Buddhist nun, the venerable Master Cheng Yen, in a rural and impoverished area along the eastern coast of the Taiwan Province of China, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation is a prime example of how the empowerment of women through taking action can help to bring about egalitarian and environmental consciousness rooted in compassion and strengthened by Buddhist philosophy. While leading a simple and austere monastic life, Master Cheng Yen saw how the poor in her neighbourhood suffered from a lack of food, medicine and shelter. To address that, she and her 30 disciples, all of whom were housewives, began a simple grass-roots campaign to save just two cents per day in order to help those who were less fortunate to meet their most basic human needs: water, food, shelter, medicine and, most importantly, dignity. These small, minute and ostensibly trivial matters, when added up or even when considered separately, can have a significant impact not only on safety and security, but also on the empowerment of women and other marginalized groups. Although saving just two cents a day seems small and insignificant, the intention, faith and hope can make an insurmountable difference over the long term. What began as a small grass-roots campaign, initiated by the goodwill and compassion of just a few women, has turned into a global organization and a community of more than 10 million volunteers and donors in 50 countries. With the leadership and initiative of local (mostly female) volunteers, the Foundation has provided humanitarian aid, community programmes and disaster relief in more than 85 countries around the world.

To this day, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation continues to make great strides in female empowerment. For example, the development of jing-si rice by Tzu Chi nuns in the Taiwan Province of China is of great significance to the protection of human dignity and basic human rights. Jing-si rice is a nutritious food resource that does not require cooking to prepare but rather only the addition of either heated or room-temperature water. Like the act of saving two cents a day, jing-si rice, while it may seem small and insignificant, also has the potential to safeguard life and dignity. Women and girls, particularly refugees and internally displaced persons, face a series of day-to-day obstacles that many in developed nations and cities may not even consider, such as cooking or, more specifically, the requirements for cooking. According to the Women's Refugee Commission: "Women and children, especially girls, are typically responsible for cooking family meals, and their health and safety are threatened every day as they search for cooking fuel, often traveling up to 10-20 kilometres into the bush to find firewood." The introduction of jing-si rice eliminates the need to heat water for food, thus reducing the necessity of such a gruelling and time-consuming chore that is expected of women in patriarchal communities. It is the very simple and easily neglected qualities of jing-si rice that can mean the difference between life and death for these women and girls. But before such empowerment can even begin to have an effect, people must have a decent education.

Confucius once said: "If your plan is for one year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; but if your plans are for 100 years, give education." A truly free society, one that is governed for the people and by the people, cannot exist if people are not educated. Moreover, a free society cannot exist if people are not in a position to receive an education and, subsequently, empowerment. It is with this belief, one that Tzu Chi upholds in conjunction with

Buddhism, that Tzu Chi has initiated education programmes and built schools in countries such as Haiti and South Africa. Although the development of jing-si rice stemmed from the aim of providing instant meals to victims of disasters who are in positions of insecurity, the value and significance of the rice is that it does not require hot water and can be used to promote vegetarianism, a sustainable and more ethical way of eating. Along with the empowerment of women through education, this promotion of ethical eating and vegetarianism extends throughout Tzu Chi's various humanitarian programmes around the world.

For example, in South Africa and Haiti, women in rural, often dangerous communities are taught, as part of Tzu Chi educational programmes, to grow their own vegetables. The harvested vegetables are often sufficient to provide for the women's families and communities and, in some cases, the women sell their excess produce in exchange for cash. In the Zulu communities of Durban, South Africa, women are empowered with practical and necessary skills, and thereby become self-sufficient. Over 5,000 of these Zulu women have since become Tzu Chi volunteers themselves. By helping to eradicate hunger and poverty through improving living standards, promoting social participation and strengthening life skills, Tzu Chi has empowered communities to become more self-sufficient. Like Tzu Chi's initiatives in South Africa, the foundation's projects in Haiti also enable its citizens to become more self-reliant, but on an even larger scale. With the support and collaborative efforts of Tzu Chi's Catholic partners, the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Anne, Tzu Chi has built or rebuilt three schools in Port-au-Prince, a show of faith-based, inter-faith and volunteer determination. In order to attain a free, equal and environmentally sustainable society, schools must be built and provisioned, and children must be able to receive an education that will help them shape their own futures and those of their communities.

Reflective of the commitment of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women to the idea that humans have the right to realize their potential to benefit others, Tzu Chi volunteers spring into action whenever they discover someone in need, working through the existing welfare system and filling in the gaps. Recipients of charity gradually become economically secure, and, like the Zulu women who became volunteers themselves, discover that by being rich in love and compassion, they too can help others in difficult situations and realize the joy of giving and helping others, particularly in their own communities. It is this realization that empowers both women and men.

Buddhist philosophy is one based on compassion and egalitarianism, in which all things, man, woman and beast are treated with the utmost respect and compassion. Every living being is to be treated with dignity and kindness, as humans and beasts both experience the same suffering, the same fears and the same joys; all feel pain, love and loss. The statement that "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny" is a belief and idea expressed in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail". Similarly, Master Cheng Yen states that "the actual purpose of 'deliverance' is to commit great ambition, pledge great vows and extensively dedicate great love to all sentient beings". Deliverance or, in some sense, the realized awakening, is great love or universal love, which through the lens of Buddhism and Tzu Chi means indiscriminate compassion for all animals, our environment and all of humanity.