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“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for
the twenty-first century”**

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

Mobile medical teams for girls in rural China

Introduction

Health standards in rural China are rudimentary and often inadequate. This has resulted in a situation where preventable and even common illnesses and diseases among young children, especially girls, go undetected and untreated. Furthermore, the Chinese traditional practice of favouring boys over girls implies that boys are invariably given preferential medical attention and treatment over girls, often to the detriment of the latter's health and well-being. During more than 17 years of conducting charitable and voluntary projects in rural regions of China, Thin and High has come into contact with many girls who have suffered preventable illnesses and even died owing to the lack of early medical attention and treatment.

Thin and High, therefore, proposes that mobile medical teams be set up and dispatched to remote villages and regions all across China to help diagnose and provide treatment for medical problems and ailments among rural children, with special attention being focused on female children. These mobile medical teams could be set up, run and managed either by the Chinese government at the provincial or village levels, or by private groups and non-governmental organizations.

Background

The economy of China has developed phenomenally over the past few decades, lifting millions of people out of poverty and improving their health. However, many health issues remain unresolved. For instance, many poor people, especially those living in the country's vast rural regions, do not have adequate access to even the most basic health services. Indeed, one estimate has suggested that timely medical care is not available to over 100 million people in rural areas. This is worsened by the reality that government expenditures on health services tend to heavily favour those living in urban areas.

While the lack of health services and resources in rural regions of China has an adverse impact on the adult population, the impact is felt more acutely by one of the most vulnerable groups in such regions: female children. In rural areas, the traditional practice of favouring boys over girls is still deeply entrenched and widely prevalent. The result is that female children, especially those left behind by parents who work as migrant workers elsewhere in the country, are often overlooked or, worse, left unattended. Similarly, visible and non-visible health problems and symptoms experienced by girls are overlooked or ignored. It is exceedingly likely that boys who experience similar health problems will be attended to, however, and that such attention will lead to early diagnosis, treatment and eventual recovery. Indeed, expert research has highlighted widespread discrimination against female children in China, contributing to the well-known problem of "missing" women and the gender imbalance in which the ratio of men to women is heavily skewed in favour of the former.

Thin and High has more than 17 years of experience in conducting charitable, voluntary and environmental projects in rural regions of China. During visits to villages across the country, we have observed that, in families with both male and

female children, male children are invariably given preference and priority in being taken out of the villages in the event that parents can afford to take one or more of their offspring to the cities in which they work. Being in cities means that those male children enjoy the prospect of better health care and treatment of possible medical problems and ailments. However, it also implies that female children who are left behind are often left unattended or are cared for by ageing guardians who are often not in the best position to assist in the event that these girls experience an adverse medical event. The result is that the medical problems of female children go undiagnosed and untreated.

Cases of rural girls with health problems

Bai Yanru from Kuangou village in Gansu Province

When Thin and High first met Yanru in 2013, the 11-year-old looked anaemic and unwell. However, no efforts whatsoever had been made to help Yanru seek medical attention, since both of her parents were working elsewhere as migrant workers. Thin and High subsequently made arrangements to send Yanru to a hospital in Shanghai, where she was found to be suffering from congenital heart disease. Yanru eventually underwent surgery and is now on the path to recovery.

Zhu Hong from Burqin County in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

When Thin and High met Hong over a decade ago, the 20-year-old was suffering from a paralyzed leg and strabismus, a condition in which the eyes are not properly aligned. These physical ailments were the result of a serious illness that had caused a prolonged and severely high fever when Hong was a child. Hong's physical conditions also brought her years of ridicule and mockery by other children, as well as pain, isolation and an inferiority complex. To make matters worse, Hong had been raped by her brother. Thin and High assisted Hong by paying for several surgeries to help correct her physical deformities. With Thin and High's encouragement, Hong was also able to gain the confidence she needed to eventually lead a normal and productive life.

Jiao Fangqing from Kuangou village in Gansu Province

Thin and High met Fangqing in 2012, when the 17-year-old was in the final stages of leukaemia. By then, Fangqing had bloodshot eyes and a bloated body; despite her desperate quest to live, she died less than three weeks later. Fangqing had been diagnosed with advanced-stage leukaemia at a hospital in Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu. Apart from the late detection of her medical condition, what also contributed to Fangqing's ultimate death was the inability of her family to secure financial resources that would have allowed her to seek medical attention. In line with local custom, Fangqing's status as an unmarried person, along with the nature of her death, led to her being denied a proper burial. Fangqing's body was eventually burned along with some old tires in an isolated and unmarked spot in the village.

Wang Yufeng from Kuangou village in Gansu Province

When Thin and High met the 13-year-old in 2014, Yufeng was suspected to be suffering from leukaemia. After Thin and High sent her to a hospital in Lanzhou for diagnosis, it turned out that she was merely anaemic as a result of

undernourishment. Thin and High then made long-term arrangements to boost her nutritional intake.

Wu Caixia from Qidou village in Hunan Province

The 7-year-old was covered with scabs in various stages of healing all over her face, limbs and torso when Thin and High met her in the summer of 2013. The scabs had been caused by insect bites, poor personal and home hygiene, high humidity during the summer, persistent scratching caused by discomfort, as well as the lack of simple but prompt medical treatment and attention. Thin and High's timely intervention allowed Caixia to be treated by a medical practitioner, and her condition improved instead of degenerating into skin diseases and permanent scarring.

Proposal for mobile medical teams in rural China

The aforementioned cases highlight health problems and deficiencies that could have been identified and treated, or even prevented, at an early stage if fairly basic health-care facilities, knowledge and resources had been readily available. Early diagnosis and treatment would have also meant that these girls would not have had to endure such pain and suffering. Indeed, it is also evident that late detection, as in the case of Fangqing, can sometimes have fatal consequences.

Therefore, Thin and High proposes that mobile medical teams be set up and dispatched to remote villages all across China to diagnose medical problems and ailments among rural children, with special attention given to female children. These mobile medical teams could be set up, run and managed either by the Chinese government at the provincial or village levels, or by private groups and non-governmental organizations.

By ensuring early detection, treatment and diagnosis of illnesses and diseases among female children, these mobile medical teams would help alleviate and prevent unnecessary pain and prolonged suffering. In addition, they could help to disseminate knowledge on health-related issues, such as malnutrition, that disproportionately affect children.