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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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Preventing sexual violations of left-behind girls in rural china

Background

Since China launched its reform and opening-up, almost four decades ago, the country has witnessed phenomenal economic growth. However, the accomplishment has been marred by various social problems, one of which is the inability to ensure greater gender equality and the empowerment of females in its vast rural regions; especially pertinent is the issue of left-behind children in the countryside.

Left-behind children refers to minors whose parents have left to work in large cities across China. Due to the high cost of living in cities, parents are unable to take their children with them; the children are left behind in their hometowns and usually taken care of by their grandparents. Administrative issues also make it extremely difficult for children of migrant parents to be admitted into public schools in large cities. As a result of gender bias, most of the left-behind-children are girls.

Plight of left-behind girls

Left-behind children face many developmental problems, including lack of parental love, care and guidance. However, those faced by young girls are especially daunting as they are more vulnerable to sexual predators, assaults and violations. The perpetrators of these sexual violations are mainly males from the community and village in which the left-behind girls reside, but also include local officials and teachers, relatives and even family members.

Due to the nature of the problem and the feeling of shame on the part of victims and their families, exact figures are hard to come by. In a 2015 report issued by the All China Youth and Teenagers Foundation, just in the city of Huazhou in the Guangdong province alone, 94 per cent of those who encountered sexual violations were left-behind female children in rural areas. If figures across the country are obtained, they could potentially be even more staggering. These occurrences of sexual assaults of vulnerable left-behind girls, are clearly obstacles to the country's efforts in achieving gender equality and setbacks in the empowerment of rural females in China.

Recommendations for preventing sexual violations of left-behind girls

To prevent left-behind girls from being sexually violated and to address obvious signs of gender inequality as well as to ensure greater female empowerment, society and non-government groups need to undertake more constructive and sustained efforts, such as the following:

Precautionary tips and sex education should be made a top priority

This is especially important in rural areas of China which place a high premium on personal relations, including those living in the same village or community. In such a society, people tend to trust each other somewhat wholeheartedly. Adults seldom tell their children to remain alert. They also do not make it a point to tell their children that no one, not even family members, are allowed to touch their private parts.

Sex education in the form of talks, workshops and seminars can and should be held at all levels by local and provincial education boards and women's federation as

well as by non-governmental organizations. Apart from precautionary tips, these events should also emphasize the importance of gender equality and female empowerment. Greater knowledge and awareness will help the girls better protect themselves and stay away from potential danger. It will also empower them by ridding them of the somewhat traditional and fatalistic mindset that being violated is their lot in life, as well as teaching them the importance of reporting any violations to responsible adults, teachers or even the police. Indeed, more sexual violations hotlines need to be set up across the country, especially at county and village levels.

Greater vigilance and attention to rural girls by schools and educational boards

These organizations ought to pay more attention to left-behind girls, who are often lonely and lack adult care and guidance. However, unwanted attention by sexual predators can sometimes be welcomed and even be misconstrued as a sort of kindness because many left-behind girls cannot differentiate between potentially dangerous attention and needed attention.

The greater vigilance and attention should, therefore, come in the form of more social, outdoor and recreational activities for young girls. During these events, greater awareness of self-protection, gender equality, and female empowerment can also be reinforced in these young girls.

Tougher penalties for offenders and greater supervision of teachers' conduct

Current policies in China tend to be too lenient on sexual predators on the pretext that it is hard to obtain concrete evidence for sexual violations. In rural areas, there is the additional factor of shame and disgrace experienced by victims, making it difficult for them to come forward to report any assaults against them.

Apart from changing the mindset that victims must come forward to report sexual violations, tougher penalties should be meted out to offenders in order to act as a deterrent. These include longer jail sentences, and even the possibility of chemical castrations. In addition, the conduct of male teachers in the presence of female students must also be better regulated and supervised. Strict guidelines ought to be spelt out on behaviour and conduct, such as making it mandatory for male teachers to open the classroom or staff room door whenever they are alone with female students. Male teachers should also not be allowed to meet female students alone either within the school premises or outside, unless special approval has been obtained. These measures will go a long way in ensuring that teachers should be the best protectors of children, instead of being the perpetrators.
