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### Commission on the Status of Women

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

### **The Bonds that Hold The Family Together**

#### **Abstract**

China's vast swathes of "left-behind children" have resulted in a generation of children growing up without their parents' care and guidance. The emotional and psychological void left in the hearts of these children is worrisome and has negative long-term social ramifications.

Even though the problem is massive, small steps can be taken, such as efforts to forge closer emotional and psychological bonds between parents and children by helping each migrant family take a family photograph during the annual Spring Festival (Lunar New Year). Having women seated more prominently in family photographs will also convey a new sense of women's empowerment, which is essential for sustainable development in the society.

#### **Migrant Parents**

China's migrant workers make up half of China's urban workers and have fuelled the country's spectacular economic growth over the past three decades. Almost all of the migrant workers come from the less developed hinterlands. They turn to better-paying urban jobs in the hope of increasing their family fortunes, building a better life and furthering opportunities for themselves and most importantly, their offspring. Unfortunately, most of them have to leave their children behind in order to work in the urban areas because they cannot afford to bring their children with them, given the heavy demands and low wages of their jobs, as well as the high costs of living in urban cities.

Given the hukou (household registration system in China) that registers families as either rural or urban, most migrants cannot change their household registration when they move. This implies that their children cannot attend public schools in urban areas. Since few migrant workers can afford to send their children to private schools, the only choice of leaving their children behind has taken an emotional and psychological toll on these parents. In a recent poll conducted by the All China Women's Federation, 92 per cent of the parents said they believed that raising children is their responsibility, while 80 per cent said they felt inadequate as parents; 36 per cent said they made errors at work due to worries and anxieties about their children.

#### **China's "Left-Behind" Children**

Based on a conservative estimate, there are at least 61 million "left-behind" children in China growing up without one or both parents. They are mainly cared for by their grandparents or other relatives back in their hometowns and villages. Around 30 million children under 18 have no parent at home and two million fend for themselves with no adult supervision. Most of these children see their parents only once a year, usually during the annual Spring Festival, the most important festival in the country.

"Left-behind" children tend to struggle at school, have higher rates of mental health issues, and suffer from a greater variety of behavioural problems as compared

to their counterparts who grow up with both parents. Without the protection of their parents, many of these “left-behind” children are also susceptible to various types of abuse. According to Chinese media and civic groups, “left-behind children” who grow up without parents is a generation lacking security and trust, which is likely to have a potentially disastrous effect on the country’s social development.

As a Non-Governmental Organization that has conducted various educational and poverty-alleviation projects in China’s rural provinces, Thin and High has met and interacted with countless of these “left-behind” children. Apart from the problems mentioned above, these children generally suffer from low self-esteem, are less confident, less disciplined, and more hesitant about taking initiatives. They are also fearful about the future and do not set goals for themselves, let alone aspire to accomplish the best that they can be. Thin and High has also found that these “left-behind” children often have weak emotional bonds with their parents, which hardly comes as a surprise, given that they see their parents only once a year, or sometimes even not at all, as some parents choose not to go home during the Spring Festival either because they cannot afford to or would like to save on transportation costs. Many “left-behind” children also resent their parents for leaving them behind; some do not talk much to their parents and even display hostile behaviour during the annual get-togethers. During their limited telephone conversations with their parents throughout the year, the interactions are usually mechanical and stilted. Parents will ask questions such as whether their children have completed their homework, behaved themselves or if they have listened to their grandparents or guardians. There is usually little or no exchange of real thoughts and emotions during these telephone conversations.

### **Proposal for Strengthening Family Bonds**

Given that parents and children only get to see each other once a year during the Spring Festival, Thin and High plans to organize a yearly project that it hopes other Non-Governmental Organizations in China can also undertake. Thin and High hopes to bring in volunteer photographers who can help each migrant family take a family photograph annually, either during the Spring Festival or during the summer holidays. Having a family photograph may seem like a simple matter but many of these migrant families cannot even claim to have such a photograph in their possession. The project will allow each family member to keep at least one family photograph, taken either semi-professionally or professionally. The photographs will be taken in their homes and natural surroundings, and the photo-taking sessions will be repeated every year, with the same photographer assigned to the same family for as long as possible. The involvement of individuals from Non-Governmental Organizations who express care and concern will give migrant families the extra impetus in forging stronger emotional and psychological bonds; their physical presence during the Spring Festival will also help to break down any initial emotional and psychological barriers between the “left-behind” children and their migrant parents.

The possession of the photographs will enable migrant families to keep memories of each other alive throughout the year, as well as foster stronger emotional and psychological bonds with their loved ones, despite living physically apart. The photographs can also provide solace and even a source of strength during moments of worry, anxiety and stress. Most importantly, the photographs will strengthen each family as an institution and in turn help keep the society stable.

Furthermore, Thin and High plans to have women seated more prominently in the family photographs so that these photographs will convey a new sense of women's empowerment, which is essential for sustainable development in the society.

### **Conclusion**

While the project of taking annual family photographs for migrant families is a modest one that does not involve much monetary outlay, the potential benefits and social impact are expected to be substantial. The existence of a family photograph will lead to the realization of the importance of strong family ties and women's role, which are fundamental in the building of a stable society that supports sustainable development.

### **Case Study**

When Thin and High first met Ma Jiali in 2012, the then 11-year-old was living in Kuangou village in Gansu province. Like almost every child in the village, Jiali's parents were working as migrant workers outside the village. Jiali and her younger sister were looked after by her aging grandparents, who did not have the energy to keep up with the exuberance of the two girls. When Thin and High met Jiali again in 2014, it was during the summer break when her parents returned for a visit back in the village. Since the return coincided with her birthday, Thin and High held a birthday celebration for Jiali. After her birthday cake was cut, Jiali distributed the first few pieces to volunteers of Thin and High whom she had become very close to and fond of, but she was not keen to share the cake with her parents. It was upon persuasion by Thin and High volunteers that she eventually offered a piece of cake to her parents, and it was clearly a common case of children feeling a sense of distance towards their own parents. If the project of taking annual family photographs for migrant families is undertaken, children like Jiali will have an extra impetus to feel closer to and develop closer bonds with their parents.