

Social Assistance Functions of the Women's Hotline

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On September 1, 1992, the first nationwide women's hotline in China came into use. Its aims are to help women familiarize themselves with the new social environment, recognize and make full use of their superiority, overcome sentimental afflictions, heighten their confidence in solving problems, improve their mental health and living standards, and deal with problems and conflicts that occur in their jobs, marriages and families.

The women's hotline opens in an era when China is making great progress in reforms and opening doors to the outside world. It echoes with the social needs of women, trying to search for new ways to cope with new problems, and for new approaches to carry out assistance to women.

More than three years practice have proved that the women's hotline operates well in carrying out social assistance in solving women's problems in the new era.

Background of the women's hotline: reform and open door practices in China vs. challenges and problems that women have to face.

Since the establishment of China, it has been advocated by the government and law that man and woman share equal rights both in society and the family. More and more women go out of their private spheres and enter into social activities. They produce great material and spiritual values for society while at the same time their own independence and roles have been universally defined by society.

The reforms and open door policy which started in the late 70s and early 80s in China has brought great changes to society. With the shift of the economic system in China from single planned economy to pluralistic and market economy, great changes have taken place in the mode of production. The changes here have far-reaching influences. They "systematically involve the change of social structures, operating process, the shifts of beliefs and readjustment of various interests" (Tong shaosu, 1993: 31). Moreover, they trigger great changes in politics, economy, culture, social structure, moral sense of values and even people's internal psychological features.

If we observe human history, we will find that every social change will trigger shifts in women's position and roles in society and the family. Along with the social changes and the impact of the market economy, the differences between men and women and the gap between them have been widening instead of narrowing. This is caused by "men and women's different social expectation of men and women and different opportunities for man and woman" (Tan shen, 1992: 22). Today's Chinese women have come to realize the problems caused by sex differentiation and the challenges that they have to face in the future. These include:

1. *Challenges and competitions for women in jobs.*

Along with the adjustment of industrial structures and the shifts of industrial process, those unnecessary workers in the companies have to find jobs in other places, or they will lose employment. Women are at a disadvantage in this field due to social, historical and psychological factors. It is reported that in Beijing, around 190,000 workers have to go off sentry duty. In 1,500 companies, there are 110,000 female workers, of which female workers under forty years old occupy 77.4%. The fact that companies treat women's three periods, namely pregnancy, delivery and nursing of infants as a burden also explains why it is difficult for women (including female graduates) to find jobs. The group of women that have to go off sentry duty receive fewer wages but still have to pay for their children's education, pay taxes and medical care, etc. This poses problems for many of them. Some of them tend to feel that they are unfairly treated or they feel deprived. This has a di-

rect influence on women's roles in society and family, which may inevitably bring problems to their marriage and family.

2. Conflicts of women's family roles with their social roles.

Market economy and competition, advocate that "All men are equal." The social expectations of career men and women should be the same (Tong shaosu, 1993: 33). With social development, women come to realize their social roles and exploit their capacity and potential. Women in this period have to act as good mothers and wives while at the same time bearing the burden from their jobs. So naturally more and more women are facing conflicts." They have to work hard to succeed both in their career and home such that many women have been experiencing psychological uneasiness" (Wang Jinlin, 1993: 78).

3. Fragile families

The pressure of double roles on the part of women poses problems of harmonious living between husband and wife that results in broken families. With the reforms in society and the introduction of foreign culture into China, people are inevitably experiencing changes in beliefs and values. Marriage and family have become one of the heated issues that have gathered much attention from women's groups and society.

4. Women's mental health

WHO points out that being healthy not only refers to being physically fit but also refers to being healthy physically and mentally and to being socially adjusted. During the period when society is going through a series of changes, women have to experience spiritual and mental pressure (Wang Xingjuan, 1993: 247). Both competition and unequal treatment from society result in pressure and unbalanced mental situations on the part of women. Sharp competitions bring anxiety to women; double conflicting roles almost drive them mad. Problems from love, marriage and family may also possibly cause diseases to some women. Moreover, indifference among people sometimes makes some women confused. All of the above mentioned factors may affect a person's social adjustment. Inappropriate management of these factors may bring about dangers.

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The problems that women encounter derive partly from the shifts in social development and changes of social structures, partly from the conflicts between social expectations of women and the actual features of women themselves. We start by analyzing women's needs, and then gradually recognize and solve some women's problems while at the same time carrying out social assistance.

Resources analysis of women's needs and needs satisfaction in the new era

Women's problems in the new stage reflect the social and psychological obstacles women's groups face in implementing their normal social functions.

1) *Concepts*

A *need* is that which is indispensable for a person to maintain life and carry out social functions. A person without any need will not satisfy social expectations.

Life cycle refers to a series of stages that every person has to go through in the growing-up process. That is to say, a female starts from infancy, childhood to youth, during which she experiences love, employment and marriage, then finally she grows old.

Life task refers to tasks that society demands a person to perform at different stages in his/her life. A person's life task derives from the person's internal and external demands. Internal demands come from self development while external demands are decided by the person's specific social roles at specific life stages. (Kuai Ming, 1994:12: 16).

2) *Women's general needs and special needs in the new era.*

Females are asked to manage their life tasks at different stages in their life cycle. We have to satisfy females' social and psychological needs in order to ensure their healthy and successful growth and elicit normal social functions from them. Women's general needs include material satisfaction, a sense of safety and the basic factors necessary for the implementation of tasks at every stage in

the life cycle. These basic factors involve education, normal socialization, love, occupation, marriage and raising children. No matter which stage contains needs that can not be satisfied, this stage will inevitably have women's problems occurring from time to time. So actually social assistance belongs to women's general needs. Mental health and high-level spiritual pursuit have already become the needs of ordinary women.

It is of vital importance to satisfy women's special needs in the new era in order to elicit social functions from women, let women play social roles successfully and complete life tasks effectively. Women's special needs involve welfare satisfaction, like family, life education—supplying family members with knowledge about family life; education on parenting—providing women with appropriate knowledge, methods and attitudes in bringing up their children; marriage counseling—helping husbands and wives to solve problems; legal service—popularizing laws among women to strengthen women's sense of law and encouraging them to use laws to protect themselves; professional help—improving women's competitive abilities and providing training for women, etc.

3) *Resources analysis to satisfy needs*

We need resources to satisfy women's needs. Women's resources include resources supplied by individual, family, company, community and society. In a process full of social changes, women are running out of resources, so women are facing dangers of less and less support.

Firstly, we will talk about individual resources. This mainly refers to a person's ability to solve problems and complete tasks. A person's education, psyche, self adjustment and flexibility often appear deficient in coping with the high speed of social changes.

Secondly, women's family support has decreased a lot. Women often find it difficult to receive support from their nuclear family.

Thirdly, mutual assistance in the community has weakened to some degree. Mutual assistance in the community usually forms women's informal social support network. With the process of urbanization, people become indifferent to each other, which weakens women's social support from their community.

Fourthly, welfare support from their companies has decreased. Besides supporting female workers' jobs, companies provide for the material and spiritual welfare of women. Reforms have brought changes to companies. The pursuit of economic values has become the companies' objective, which does not ensure enough support for women at all. *Fifthly*, the traditional management systems of women's unions cannot satisfy women's needs in the new era.

Lastly, our government advocates that social welfare should be managed by society. Though there are laws and policies to protect women's legal rights, effective and quick methods to supply women with enough resources are still not carried out.

From the above, we can see that reform and an open door policy not only brings changes to Chinese politics, economy and social structures, but also have impact on women's mental conditions. The import of foreign culture, conflicts between new ideas and conventional beliefs, a sense of deprivation, competitions and troubles in everyday life all result in women's problems such as increasing burdens, a disordered support network, lack of flexibility, etc. The women's hotline answers the call; it echoes with social needs and will be sure to contribute much to women's problem solving.

Consultative contents and data analysis of the women's hotline.

The women's hotline has answered more than 18,000 telephone calls in two years or so. Statistics show that among these calls, 80% of the customers are females. The callers range from middle school students of 18 or 19 years old to retired female workers. Seventy-three percent of the females are under the age of 30. In regard to the consultative contents, topics about love and marriage are the most frequently covered - they occupy 46.6% of the whole while topics of maternity and child care take up 16.7%; topics on sex, 9.1%; information, 11.8%; job consultation, 6.5%; legal consultation 4.0%; consultation on mental problems.4.1% while topics on sexual molestation take up only 1.2%.

Among women who use the hotline, city dwellers make up more than 80% while women in the countryside constitute only 0.6%. This shows that the range of social assistance of the hotline

has not reached the vast countryside yet. The reason is that in the countryside the availability of telephones is very low and the media such as newspapers are not widely used. With respect to the professional distribution of these women callers, they are from all walks of life, with physical laborers, cadres and intellectuals in the majority.

Sixty percent of these women are married. Women's consultations on love and marriage take up 50% of all the calls, which is the largest percentage among all kinds of consultation, whereas the total number of consultations by women on these problems are 87.5% and those by men are 82.1%. As to problems of love, the consultation rate of the age group of 20 to 25 is 61.3%. This group has the highest rate on problems of sex, sexual molestation in employment, psychological problems, information, and health care for women and children. There is no other age group with as many problems as this age does. Among the consultations on marriage, women of age 31 to 40 have the largest proportion—39.5%. Also, they are the group with the biggest number of legal consultations, i.e., 31.5%. Actually, it is this age group which confronts the predicament of husbands' shifting their emotions to other women with the concomitant tendency to divorce. This correspondence shows that the hotline is very helpful to this group of women. The hotline assistance helps to alleviate their depression and mediate their marriage relations. Meanwhile consultations on law play the function of helping women protect themselves and fight for their just rights.

The relevant data reveals that most phone calls for assistance are on problems of marriage and family regardless of who the customers are. Consultations by the unmarried are mainly on problems of love; the married are firstly interested in marriage, then in health care for women and children; the divorced often consult on problems of love and law; the remarried ask about marriage problems. How should we treat this phenomenon? Ms Wang Xingjuan, the founder of the women hotline, believes that, in the course of modernization, the greatest part of women's mental pressure lies in the psychology of marriage (Wang Xingjuan, 1993:249). She analyzed the causes of women's psychological problems in marriage, the sense of crisis brought by the expectation of the change of roles in the family; the perplexity caused by the conventional

view of the wife's following her husband for her entire life, marrying no other men; the mental pressure brought on by the thought that divorce is disgraceful, and the contradiction between society's leniency regarding the husband's love affairs outside marriage and the wife's self-esteem. In my opinion, the intersection of relations between man and woman is the family. The marital relation is the manifestation of society's development and of changes in the family. Both women's social status and society's trends of thought may be reflected in the family. Marital relations can embody social problems. All the problems that women confront in the course of society's transformation can be shown in problems concerning the family and marriage. Such problems as women's perplexity in employment, society's unequal treatment of men and women in income distribution, the clash between the conventional concept of value and exotic culture, the decline of women's social status, and the pressure of women's dual roles are regarded in Chinese traditional culture as personal problems. Therefore, most women who come across such problems bring them into their families. Thus these problems will take the form of the problems of family and marriage. That is to say, they are manifested through conflict in the family.

With regard to the cause of divorce and contradiction between husband and wife, the situation that the husband has another woman makes up as large as 67.6% of reasons given. It is not a negligible reason for the break-up of marriage. This phenomenon reminds us that it is of great importance to teach people to establish healthy concepts of marriage and good relations between man and woman.

The percentage of health care for women and children is next only to problems of love and marriage. This illustrates that today's Chinese women have begun to realize the significance of health and that social services are insufficient and cannot meet the needs of millions of women in China.

Problems of sex make a fairly large percentage. Although 67.7% of callers about sex are men, 32.3% are women. From this we can see that women have realized the importance of sexual relations in marriage. They have begun to pay more attention to the quality of marital life—from being "passive" in the past to actively showing

their sexual needs and from obedience to their husbands to pursuing equal relations with their husbands. It is a historic progress of Chinese women, though it may be only a beginning.

Problems of employment account respectively for 20% and 41% of calls from women under 20 and between 21 to 25. In the age group of under 20, these problems make up the largest proportion, and in the group of 21 to 25, the second largest proportion, next only to problems of love and marriage. Most of the problems deal with the difficulty of finding a job and the problem of dealing with other people.

Among consultations on problems of law, the most are from divorced women who want to protect their rights. And many are from those who ask for instructions in law and concrete assistance on their rights of bringing up their children.

In addition, the hotline reflects the problem of family violence. From September 1992 to August 1993, 27 calls asking for assistance were received. They were about husbands' use of violence against their wives.

Through the analysis of hotline data, we can draw the conclusion that the above are women's main problems in the course of modernization and society's transformation, including their general and special needs.

Social assistance functions of the women's hotline.

a) General characteristics of the hotline.

The reason why the hotline is welcome is due to its advantages.

Firstly, its secrecy. The assistants communicate with the customers through telephone. Only the voice is revealed, which meets the requirement of the customers who are unwilling to expose their secrets or to face the assistants. Consequently, the customers' worries can be dispelled and their feelings will pour out. Under the present circumstance where professional social services have not been set up, the hotline is a good way to help them to help themselves.

Secondly, there is no time limit for talking. The service time is from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m., which is long, flexible and convenient for providing assistance. There is no time limit compared to personal consultation.

Thirdly, its efficiency. Customers can ask for help as soon as they have problems. The assistants will provide service immediately. So, it is highly efficient.

The hotline service also contains deficiencies in meeting women's needs and helping them solve problems.

Firstly, as mentioned above, about 80% of those using the hotline are those living in big cities. The low availability of telephones in the vast countryside renders the rural women who need the assistance most unable to use the service. And these women's problems and difficulties are probably no less than those of women in the cities.

Secondly, the time for talking is limited and the talk remains at the stage of mental assistance and comfort. Very often customers need concrete, material assistance. But the hotline cannot step into the community or into the caller's life. Nor can it support and distribute resources. We have to wait for the development of the social welfare system.

Thirdly, the assistance rendered by the hotline lacks consistency. The assistants are volunteers whose working hours are unsteady. So they cannot establish consistent working relations with customers which impedes consistent assistance to customers.

Social assistance functions of the hotline.

Though the hotline has some limitations, it has special assistance functions of its own:

1. *The function to meet women's general and special needs in the era of social transformation.*

According to the theory of the life cycle, the content of the women's hotline shows women's problems, needs, challenges and ability to deal with society which they will meet in the different stages of life. Whether they are able to give full play to their own

social functions, face challenges and accomplish the tasks of life depend on both women's life tasks including love, making friends, choosing a profession, selecting a spouse and entering into marriage, bringing up children, developing an enterprising spirit, and consolidating love. In the process of fulfilling their life tasks, women will often run into difficulties and problems which they cannot solve and which can affect the implementation of their social functions. In the past, women would tend to get help from informal social support networks—their own family members, relatives, colleagues, friends and even neighbors. However, in the modern society where personal relations have become colder, informal social support networks cannot meet women's needs. On the contrary, the women's hotline, as a formal social organization, provides prompt and effective assistance. The hotline plays the function of helping women get out of trouble and gives them instructions regarding their various problems.

Thus women being assisted can fulfill their life tasks and give full play to their social functions.

2. *The function to solve problems and help women mature.*

To solve problems, is, for women as a group, to face challenges and it is also a task they face throughout their entire life. It is very misleading to consider a woman as an incompetent failure if she meets with difficulties. This, in fact, denies women's development and growth. During the process of performing their life tasks, females gain maturity and growth under adverse conditions by meeting constantly new needs, by facing and solving problems. The hotline helps the women having problems by analyzing the [constantly meeting] problems with them and helping them help themselves to find a way out. To sum up, the hotline has the function of solving problems and helping women to mature.

3. *The function of interference in crises.*

If women encounter family violence, sexual molestation, rape or have inharmonious relations with others; when they feel depressed or even when they are thinking of suicide, most of the women will use the hotline to pour out their feelings. Assistants will listen to them with real love, help them to get rid of their

mental burdens and get out of trouble. In this way, these assistants help many women to gain confidence and courage and even help save their lives. The hotline has the very important function of intervening in a crisis. In present-day China, there are only a few social services. Thus the hotline may function as a lifeline for women in crisis situations.

4. *The function of prevention*

The hotline not only has the function of solving problems and offering remedies but also has the function of preventing problems from occurring. With society changing and the network of community and informal support decreasing, the women's hotline, as a kind of support system for women, gives women a sense of safety and cordiality. When they get into trouble or meet with difficulties, they ask the hotline for help on their own initiative, which will prevent the condition from becoming worse. Consultation and provision of a certain percentage of knowledge and information in the consultation over the hotline are duly documented. After the women get the help they need, most of them will grow more mature. The hotline helps them help themselves, strengthen their function in society and improve their ability to solve problems. In this way problems are prevented from occurring again.

5. *The function of development*

The women's hotline provides help for women and meets their needs. At the same time, it serves to improve the quality of the women's group itself and helps women to develop. "The Nairobi Strategy" passed at the Third World Women's Conference which put great emphasis on the development of women underlie the women's hotline. The premises of women's development are to overcome difficulty and to get rid of problems. The process of assistance in women's marriage problems, family violence or other problems will improve and mitigate women's situation, which, in turn, will improve their quality of life, make contributions to creating a harmonious family and community and contribute to women's active development and growth as well.

6. *The function of education*

At a time when society is changing, women face the contradiction between expectations of society and their own abilities, and

that between the pressure of dual roles. When they phone to seek help, assistants take the initiative to be at one with them, teaching them to strengthen and support themselves and to adopt the right ideas to face the pressure and difficulties in their life. As for the women, especially those in trouble, assistants endeavor to arouse their self-consciousness and help them to establish an independent personality and a healthy mentality. Thus the hotline fulfills the special function of educating women. .

7. *The function of providing special welfare services.*

In the process of social reformation and transformation, the social welfare system also undergoes a process of change and re-establishment. The social welfare that is originally undertaken by the national and local organizations or units is now declining or even disappearing. The social welfare that China undertook in the past and the functions that the administration bears can not meet women's needs any more in the new decades. The women's hotline, as a non-governmental organization, functions as a supplement. It is actually an important part of the whole social welfare system. The service that the women's hotline provides shows the whole society's concern for women's life condition and quality and the society's willingness to provide for the welfare of the women sector.

The women's hotline is one way to provide social assistance for women and to work with women. At present, when there are only a few social welfare services, it fills in the gap, performing the unique function of assisting the women sector.

Strategies and Suggestions

In the process of social development, the non-governmental organizations react very keenly to the new social needs of women from the social, political and economic reformation. Non-governmental organizations, like the women's hotline, provide some social welfare service of high quality for the women sector, performing the function of social assistance. Most of the working staff of the women's hotline are volunteers who are highly efficient; the cost of the hotline is very low, thus decreasing many defects of the bureaucratic organizations. The idea of volunteer work will help

develop a social mode. The women's hotline represents the spirit of social welfare as undertaken by society. The non-governmental organizations are very responsible. Therefore the government should set up some relevant systems and policies to support the non-governmental organizations strongly and aid financially the social welfare service set up by these non-governmental organizations.

- *Increase and enlarge the social assistance functions of the women's hotline.*

As the women's hotline becomes gradually known to the people, the number and the scope of those seeking help will be enlarged. This requires the enlargement of the assistance function and also of the crises-prevention and remedial functions. The hotline should establish a close tie with the police station and hygiene/health organization so that quick steps will be taken in time of crises. At the same time, all the organizations concerned should strengthen their ties and form a network and enlarge the scope wherein the women hotline can intervene indirectly so as to provide help for the affected women.

- *Set up the organization to assist women in more detailed aspects and more services.*

According to a certain research study, there is family violence in China as well. What is more, there is an increase in the number of families with only one parent, which is caused by the rising divorce rate and by the fact that there are many wives whose husbands are attracted to other women. It is not enough to depend only on the hotline to help them. To achieve the goal of equality and development of women stipulated by the Nairobi Strategy, it is necessary to set up some family service organizations to help the women sector to develop.

- *The government, society and non-governmental organizations should provide more social education.*

After the foundation of the new China, the idea of equality between men and women has had a profound effect on everyone due to the government's education under the new situation. Women's education should be carried out on a grand scale. To cre-

ate advantages for women's development, education regarding healthy relations between man and women and new ideas about women should be undertaken. It is also necessary to ensure the implementation of the law protecting women and guaranteeing women's rights. The civilized quality of the whole society will be improved through providing all kinds of education regarding family life.

[Note: A list of references has not been provided because the articles cited have not been translated. Readers may communicate with the author for more information.]