

# **The Role of the Women's Hotline in Protecting Women's Mental Health**

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## **Introduction**

The promotion of mental health in China began in the mid-1980s, aiming at improving the therapeutic effect upon the mentally disordered so that they could return to society gradually. The mental health of some social categories such as the only child, middle-aged intellectuals and leaders attracted the extensive attention of psychiatrists. Women as a basic social group not only share common mental features with other groups but also have their own unique characteristics. Their mental health, however, has not aroused due attention from psychiatrists and it has not entered into the women's health program.

At present, women's health mainly refers to child-bearing health. In a white book "the Conditions of Chinese Women", there is a chapter on women's health, which presents the establishment of various health centers and stations for women and children. "By the end of 1992, there have been alrerady 346 health centers for women and children and 2,841 maternity and children health-care stations. . . At present, 98% of pregnant and lying-in women in the city and 70% in the countryside receive antenatal examination." Important as child-bearing health is, women's mental health should also be put on the agenda in the new historic period.

The beginning of the 1990s witnessed deeper reform and opening-up. The keen competition and change in concepts made people feel consciously the psychological burden they bear. Nowadays,

the mental pressures of women are even greater than that of men. The reasons are as follows:

1. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Chinese women have been playing the double role of "career women" and "housewives". In the period of the planned economy, "eating in the same pot" and "equalitarianism" gave women the confidence to feel that they were contributing in the same measure as their husbands to the family income. Although they were busy and had to divide their time and energy between housework and job, they had good reason to ask their husbands to share the household chores. Nowadays, people face fierce competition in getting work. Women find themselves in a disadvantageous position compared to men. As men have more access to well-paid jobs, they demand that women remain as housewives. As a result, women feel that they face tough tasks both at home and in the office.
2. In the process of rationalizing big and medium-sized state-owned enterprises, some women workers have to quit their jobs and become the new group of people waiting for employment (or the jobless). Statistics show that 70% of the dismissed are women. The loss of jobs and lack of income make them more dependent on men, which results in the deterioration of their family and social status.
3. Today's career women are confronted with more complicated interpersonal relations. Whether they take charge of a department or they follow others' orders, they have to bear various troubles and tests imposed upon them by their sex.
4. The inflow of western ideology and the revival of traditional feudal ideas greatly challenge people's original morality. The rise of the divorce-rate and of extramarital affairs, together with the increase in the number of single mothers make women feel abandoned and helpless.

Against such a social background, the Women's Hotline, the first hotline for all women in China, opened in September, 1992. Its purpose is to help women adapt to a new social environment;

recognize and give full play to their advantages; free their mind of depression; remove their mental crisis and strengthen their ability to overcome difficulties. It helps to improve women's mental health and the quality of their lives so that they can handle properly the contradictions and problems in their work, marriages, families and lives. In the past two years, the Hotline has been enjoying popularity with women in all walks of life. Since the opening, it has received more than 10,000 calls. As the first special hotline for women, it plays a prominent role in protecting women's mental health.

### **I. The Women's Hotline functions as a channel for women to pour out their mental depressions**

Psychocatharsis is a method of psychotherapy. Generally, people give vent to their personal feelings either through physical activities such as contests and sports or through spiritual enjoyment such as reading and watching plays. But if those who are mentally hurt can not find ways to pour out their depression, they need the help of psychiatrists to free them from their suffering. Most people call the hotline just because they "feel oppressed and want to talk with someone".

#### *What kind of problems have driven women to despair?*

Since the opening of the hotline, love and marriage have been the problems the Hotline is most frequently consulted about. Women are quite sensitive to emotion and regard love as their life. Once the problem arises, they easily fall into depression. For instance, once a 23-year old girl dialed the hotline, crying "How unlucky am I? Why did such things happen to me?" The story is that the girl got to know a boy three weeks before. Both of them were favorably impressed with each other and they soon became lovers. The girl told the counselor that she was clever, competent and serious and that she had not fallen in love with other boys before. But she learned just a few hours earlier that her boyfriend was a married man. "What shall I do? What shall I do?" She asked the counselor as well as herself loudly. "He has touched me! I hate him. What shall I say to my family? How shall I face my future?" "How can I lead a peaceful life again? I will warn him not to de-

ceive other girls." After she had poured herself out, the counselor made a suggestion in a soft voice, "I understand you. You are too excited now and it is not the time to make a decision. It is quite common to encounter troubles and difficulties in daily life. The key is how to overcome them. Please calm down and call us a few days later. At that time, we can work out a solution together." A lot of girls with similar problems are anxious to have someone to confide in. As they find it embarrassing to discuss such things with their family, they call the Women's Hotline. In the above case, it took the girl more than one hour before she got through.

Some women have long been troubled by the extramarital love affairs of their husbands, which may last several years, or even more than a decade. The hotline provides them with a channel to relieve themselves of all their worries, for they prefer to tell their stories to strangers. After several consultations, they express their thanks, "Talking with you makes me feel much better."

There are also some cases concerning domestic abuse. A 32-year woman had been enduring the beatings by her husband for eight years. She said, "He is a doctor and works very hard. He is warm-hearted towards his patient. But at home he easily loses his temper and beats me whenever he is angry. I have never complained to others for I am afraid that they would laugh at me. My husband cares much for his reputation. If I tell my sufferings to his superior, he will beat me harder." She felt unburdened after she revealed all her worries to the counselor. As her family lives elsewhere, she can not find a person to listen to the hardship she has endured since she got married.

In addition, career women are often bothered by delicate interpersonal relations such as sexual harassment from their superiors. An operator at the telephone exchange in a factory once said to the counselor, "I'm 26 years old, married and have a child. Recently, our factory director often found excuses to come to the exchange room, especially when I was alone on the night shift. He dallied with me and even attempted to touch me." The Women's Hotline has received a lot of similar calls. The common problem those unlucky women face is that they dare not offend the male boss for fear that they might be dismissed. But they can not bear the ha-

rassment and often feel humiliated. As they are reluctant to discuss such things with their husbands, boyfriends and parents, they need someone else to give ear to their troubles and make some suggestions. The Women's Hotline offers a big help in this regard. After listening carefully to the account, the counselor usually encourages the caller to tell her boss directly, "I hate your doing that."

A lot of women worry about their pre-marital sexual experience. Some wives are suspected or even ill-treated because they fail to provide evidence of their virginity (i.e. vaginal bleeding from the breaking of the hymen) on the wedding night. They complain, "Why is this world so unfair to women?"

Some young women who have just left school can not adapt themselves to the new environment and find it difficult to relax with their colleagues. A 20-year old girl once called the hotline, "One of my women colleagues is fond of gossiping and always finds fault with me. Today she grumbled behind my back that I made a long distance call to my boyfriend at the public expense. I didn't do anything wrong to her but why does she treat me in this way?" In reply, the counselor asked her some questions: "How do you know that her remarks referred to you since you didn't hear them personally? Did you use the public phone to call your boyfriend? And could you name one or two virtues of your colleague?" Finally, the girl said, "Now I feel much better. I was thinking of quarreling with her before calling you. Maybe I should change my attitude and look at this matter from another point of view. Thank you!"

The Women's Hotline is open from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. every Monday to Friday. Compared with other hotlines it is more likely to enjoy women's confidence for all its counselors are female. On hearing the cordial greetings of "Hello, this is the Women's Hotline", women feel a sense of safety and trust. They tell the counselors, "We are so happy to have the hotline as our intimate friend."

Women used to confide their worries to their family, their colleagues or their friends. But in the present society, everyone is busy with his own affairs and shows little concern for others. Usually, you contact someone only to get such responses as, "I have no

time" or "don't take it so seriously", which keeps you at a great distance. A woman once called the hotline, "Each time I go to my friend's home to discuss my troubles, I would buy her some presents for I know that she is unwilling to be my audience. I don't care about spending some money, but it's a great pity that no one is ready to help others. Without you, I don't know whom I should turn to for help." The All-China Women's Federation does not have the institution available for dealing with women's mental despair. The Reception and Correspondence Department there used to receive a large amount of letters every month from women talking about their grievances, but most of the letters were laid aside for the department is short of hands. The "Heart-to-Heart Talk" column in newspapers and magazines somewhat provides a place for women to exchange their views, but it can not serve all the women for some of them are illiterate. The spread of the telephone has made it possible for every woman, literate or illiterate, young or old, to have someone to turn to for help if she dials 4033383. Undoubtedly, the opening of the Women's Hotline has provided an ideal place for women to pour out their mental depression.

## **II. The Women's Hotline recommends mental health-care centers to women and holds individual face-to-face consultation.**

The Women's Hotline mainly provides voluntary consulting service for women during which some women are found to be mentally unhealthy calling for special psychotherapy. Most of them, however, are unconscious of their mental problems or reluctant to see psychiatrists. The Women's Hotline, therefore, undertakes the responsibility of introducing mental health-care centers to them. In the meantime, it invites the psychiatrists to conduct individual face-to-face consultation.

There are also some problems existing in the service of the Women's Hotline. For example, the lack of continuity. The irregular shift of the counselors makes it impossible for the client to get the same person each time she seeks advice for her troubles. The time limit of each call also creates difficulties for the client who wishes to spend a long time consulting about complex problems. Another problem is lack of comprehensiveness. Although callers

feel free to speak out their troubles to a stranger on the hotline, the counselor finds it difficult to form a judgement only by means of hearing the voice since body language such as facial expression and gesture is of great help in providing information about the client. It has also become clear that the perception or version of only one of the parties may lead to a biased judgement on the marital problem. Experiences at home and abroad show that it is highly advisable for the couple to receive counseling at the same time. Therefore, the Women's Research Institute of the China Academy of Management Science is endeavoring to develop individual face-to-face counseling to better serve the women. As a matter of fact, the Women's Hotline has been performing the role of spreading knowledge on mental health from the very beginning. Although the statistics are not available as to how many callers have taken the advice and gone to see the psychiatrists, the Women's Hotline will continue to remind those women who are unconscious of their mental problems of the importance of consulting the specialists in the modern society.

### **III. The Women's Hotline has trained a group of qualified counselors in a special way.**

As psychological consultation is a new thing in China, there are few qualified counselors. The high demand for qualified counselors of the society, however, has caused a lot of public-spirited intellectuals to study the new subject through practice, a traditional way of learning in China. Basic requirements to counselors on the hotline are: female, having received college education or above; having professional knowledge in the humanities or medicine and mental health; having experience of marriage and marriage research. The Women's Research Institute calls together those warm-hearted women and invites the specialists to give them courses. In the program, trainees not only gain knowledge of mental health but also have chances to take part in case analysis. In such a unique way, a group of qualified counselors are brought into society.

Thanks to the help of these enthusiastic volunteers, the Women's Hotline has achieved success in promoting women's mental health. On the other hand, the opening of the hotline provides an excellent opportunity for counselors to develop their abilities. On top of

the regular counseling, they conduct researches and write down their experience. Under the sponsorship of the Women's Hotline, the counselors have just published "Women's Hotline Series", which will undoubtedly play an active role in improving women's mental health.

#### **IV. The Women's Hotline is a window through which women's problems are discovered.**

Since women's problems are categorized as social problems, the best way to do research is through social investigation. The large-scale statistical survey often takes a long time. The Women's Hotline, therefore, provides a more convenient way to spot women's problems.

Generally, the research work begins with detecting the problem, which focuses the public's attention on the problem and brings pressure on the researchers to solve it. The Women's Hotline has done a good job in revealing the common mental problems existing among women. In this sense, it is of great help to the study of women's psychology and the effort of outlining a women's health program. In the past two years, the Women's Hotline has submitted several papers to conferences held both at home and abroad. It has also published scores of articles in newspapers and magazines. Some of its counselors have been invited to the TV and radio stations to talk on their activities. All these have contributed a lot to the improvement of women's mental health.

From our point of view, the biggest problem for Chinese women is their dependence, which restricts the development of their various abilities.

The Women's Hotline has a long way to go in the future and it will dedicate itself to the effort of improving the conditions of Chinese women.