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‘No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable’.¹

What constitutes violence against children is well described in article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):

Article 19.1: States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Violence is therefore not restricted to acts of physical violence, but includes psychological or emotional violence, sexual violence and neglect as well.

In its General Comment No. 13 (2011) on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence,² the Committee on the Rights of the Child defines violence based on article 19 of the CRC.

Moreover, addressing violence against children has been recognized as a development issue through its inclusion in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where target 16.2 states “End abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children”.³

In 2004, then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, launched the *UN Study on Violence against Children*, the first comprehensive global attempt to document the scale and impact of all forms of violence against children. The Government of China was among the 130 States that took part in this important study and submitted an official response to the UN questionnaire.

As part of this global initiative, in 2005, UNICEF supported a *Retrospective Survey on Childhood Violence Experiences Among Young People in China* which used the WHO definition of violence against children.⁴ Although it did not use the method of probability sampling therefore could not be generalized to the population,⁵ the survey together with a number of small scale studies have shown that violence against children is prevalent in China. A meta-analysis of 68 studies commissioned by UNICEF in 2015 on child maltreatment in China found that an estimated 26.6 per cent of children aged 0–17 suffered from physical abuse, 19.6 per cent suffered from emotional abuse, 8.7 per cent suffered from sexual abuse, and 26 per cent suffered from neglect.⁶

Yet, a lack of nationally representative data makes it difficult to determine the scale of the problem, becoming one of the key barriers to making significant investments in developing a comprehensive and integrated child protection system.⁷ UNICEF is, therefore, working with the

Government to strengthen data collection and analysis through a Violence against Children Survey. The survey will start in one province as a first step towards a national survey that could generate authoritative national level data on internationally comparable household-based estimates that demonstrate the prevalence of violence against children in China. This type of national survey will also contribute to measuring progress against target 16.2 in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Violence against children is a global problem. It cuts across age, sex, race, religion and class, and many children experience violence routinely in everyday settings – within their families, in communities, in institutions, in schools, and increasingly online. Studies have established that violence not only has an immediate and negative impact on children’s physical health and education, but more importantly, it has long lasting effects on their social emotional development. Beyond its impact on individual victims that prevent children from reaching their full potential, violence has far-reaching consequences and costs for society.⁸ For example, research commissioned by UNICEF in 2014 found that violence against children is costing countries in East Asia and the Pacific around US\$ 209 billion per year, equivalent to 2 per cent of the region’s GDP, with the percentage of GDP lost due to violence against children being highest in upper middle income countries, at 3.45 per cent.⁹

The main challenges identified in protecting children from all forms of violence in China include:

- Traditional norms dictate that what happens in the home is a family matter, and harsh disciplining of children is largely tolerated by the public. These social norms and traditional views towards violence hamper people’s recognition of abusive practices, lead to reluctance of reporting abuse, including by professionals, and therefore hinder interventions by government authorities to prevent violence from occurring, to respond to violence when it occurs, and to punish the perpetrators.
- Although child maltreatment is prohibited under the law, the laws and policies lack practical enforcement and implementation measures, leading to varying interpretations and practices, with most children experiencing violence not receiving the appropriate response they require and are entitled to.
- Current public spending on prevention and response to violence against children remains very low. There are limited systematic, regular and sustainable social

services and protective measures to address child protection risks and issues. In addition, the number of qualified professionals to deliver such services is also limited.

- There is a lack of coordination and clear mandates between the different departments of the central and local authorities engaging in child protection to prevent and respond to violence against children and no organization holding primary authority for child protection.

In the past years, the Government has adopted a number of important laws and policies and introduced reforms in service provision to address gaps in its nascent child protection system. In particular, the *Family Violence Law*, adopted at the end of 2015 and coming into force in March 2016, recognizes that violence is no longer a family matter but a public issue that requires government action. It emphasizes the importance of prevention and provides special protection for children, including explicitly highlighting that parents or caregivers should educate their children through non-violent means. Moreover, it requires mandatory reporting on violence against children for all staff and officials of schools, kindergartens, medical institutions, residents’ committees, village committees, social work service agencies, assistance and management institutions and welfare institutions.

Additionally, the *State Council’s Opinions on Strengthening Protection for Vulnerable Children*, issued in June 2016, includes children who are abused or harmed by perpetrators due to inadequate or improper family guardianship in its definition of vulnerable children. The Opinions spell out the actions needed to prevent and respond to children who are vulnerable, and the need to establish a three-level network covering county, township and village/community levels, as well as a multi-sectoral collaboration mechanism. Meanwhile, significant progress has been made in the development and implementation of policies on the care and protection of children left behind by parents who have migrated. Through the establishment of an administrative database on children left-behind in rural areas, children living on their own have been identified, and subsequent actions are being taken to place these children in the care of adults.

The Government has also increased its role in providing protective services for children, particularly in relation to child guardianship. To this effect, the Government has been working on transforming street children protection centres across the country into child protection centres that provide both prevention and response services to

vulnerable children, down to the village and community levels. The child welfare institutions have expanded the scope of state care by providing care to children who have been removed from their caregivers because of abuse or neglect. Meanwhile, the Government has increased its investment in the provision of social work services to children and their families through purchasing services from social organisations, which also boosted the number of direct practicing social workers. Furthermore, there has been a step forward in setting up a structure in the community to provide services. Through the recruitment of village level para-social workers and setting up of children's places, a range of support services has been provided to children and families – from identifying children in need of services and linking them with social assistance and other services where they exist, to raising community awareness on child protection, including through training on parenting skills.

Although these initiatives have been instrumental in laying a foundation for building a child protection system in China, much room and demand for improvement remain. This includes focusing on and allocating resources to preventing violence against children from occurring in the first place, including through raising awareness amongst parents and community members to protect children from violence, improving positive parenting skills and enhancing their demand for protection services when needed. Another

area is ensuring early identification of children at risk as well as children who have already experienced violence, by establishing clear protocols for handling violence against children that ensure clarity about the roles and responsibilities of health, education, civil affairs, social worker and other professionals who are in contact with children; and effective detection, reporting, assessment and response to abuse and neglect of children, while guaranteeing the inclusion of the most vulnerable children. Other measures include further substantiating laws and policies; boosting dedicated public funding to child protection and welfare services to ensure their availability and quality across the country; improving coordination and collaboration among sectors of central and local authorities and designating one entity with primary authority for child protection; and strengthening professional standards and capacity building for a wide range of professionals, such as in health, education, civil affairs, the police and judiciary sectors, as well as social workers. Meanwhile, there remains a need to further the collection of specific and precise data, in particular, nationally representative data, and conduct in-depth primary research on the different forms of violence against children, to better understand the scale of violence, the root causes that sustain and perpetuate violence against children, and the effectiveness of intervention measures. This in turn will support advocacy to influence government decisions on the critical investment in child protection.

Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of China by the Committee on the Rights of the Child related to violence against children (2013)¹⁰

16. The Committee recommends that the State party ... ensure[s] that information concerning children, particularly regarding violence against children, ... is systematically collected, made publicly available and discussed and used for the development of policies and plans on children's rights.

46. The Committee urges:

...

(b) The State party to systematically collect data on sexual exploitation and abuse of girls and boys, on the number of investigations and penalties against perpetrators, and on redress and compensation offered to the victims;

(c) Mainland China, ... to establish effective and child-friendly procedures and mechanisms, including free helplines accessible to children, to receive, monitor and investigate complaints; and to undertake awareness-raising activities among children, including among boys, to encourage the reporting of sexual violence and abuse in schools and communities;

47. Recalling the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children (A/61/299), the Committee recommends that the State party prioritize the elimination of all forms of violence against children. The Committee further recommends that the State party take into account its general comment No. 13 (2011), and in particular:

(a) Develop a comprehensive national strategy to prevent and address all forms of violence against children;

(b) Adopt a national coordinating framework, including mandatory reporting of all cases and the follow-up measures necessary to address all forms of violence against children;

(c) Pay particular attention to and address the gender dimension of violence;

(d) Cooperate with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on violence against children and other relevant United Nations institutions.

Data sources and references

¹ United Nations General Assembly, 'Report of the Independent Expert for the United Nations Study on Violence Against Children', A/61/299, 29 August 2006. (<https://undocs.org/en/A/61/299>, accessed February 2019)

² Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'General comment No. 13 (2011): The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence', CRC/C/GC/13, 18 April 2011. (https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/CRC.C.GC.13_en.pdf, accessed September 2018)

³ Target 16.2 has three corresponding indicators of which two are related to violence against children: 16.2.1 Proportion of children aged 1–17 years who experienced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caregivers in the past month and 16.2.3 Proportion of young women and men aged 18–29 years who experienced sexual violence by age 18. In addition, target 5.2 focuses specifically on violence against women and girls: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.

⁴ WHO defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.” (WHO, *World Report on Violence and Health*, 2002)

⁵ Undertaken by a research team led by Professor Chen Jingqi from Peking University, the survey was conducted among a convenience sample of students enrolled in colleges and technical secondary schools in five provinces (Guangdong, Zhejiang, Hubei, Shaanxi and Heilongjiang) and Beijing in March and April of 2005. The questionnaire was given to 4,327 students and completed by approximately 83 per cent of these participants. For more details of the survey results please refer to chapter 12 on 'Violence Against Children' of NWCCW, NBS, UNICEF, *Children in China: An Atlas of Social Indicators*, 2014. (<http://www.unicef.cn/en/atlas>, accessed February 2019)

⁶ FANG Xiangming, et al., 'The Burden of Child Maltreatment in China: A systematic review', *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, vol. 93, 2015, pp. 176–185C

⁷ Currently the only nationally representative data in relation to violence is domestic violence against married women, based on the Third Survey on Chinese Women's Social Status conducted by the All-China Women's Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics in 2010. Although data on violence against children was not directly included in this survey, it was found that domestic violence affected nearly one-fourth of all women in China during their marriages ('Report on Main Data of The Third Survey on Chinese Women's Social Status', <http://www.wsic.ac.cn/staticdata/84760.htm>, accessed September 2018). This means domestic violence affects one-fourth of families in China, impacting children within these families.

⁸ UNICEF, *Ending Violence Against Children: Six strategies for action*, 2014. (https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_74866.html, accessed September 2018)

⁹ UNICEF, *Estimating the Economic Burden of Violence Against Children in East Asia and the Pacific*, September 2014.

¹⁰ Committee on the Rights of the Child, 'Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of China', adopted by the Committee at its sixty-fourth session (16 September–4 October 2013), CRC/C/CHN/CO/3-4, 29 October 2013. (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2fC%2fCHN%2fCO%2f3-4&Lang=en, accessed February 2019)