



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
17 November 2015

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixtieth session

14-24 March 2016

**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 Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, 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

Founded in 1966 by the venerable Dharma Master Cheng Yen, a Buddhist nun living in the rural, impoverished eastern coast of the Republic of China, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation is a prime example of how the empowerment of women through taking action can help to achieve global egalitarian and environmental consciousness rooted in compassion and strengthened by Buddhist philosophy. Despite leading a simple and austere monastic life, Master Cheng Yen saw how the poor in her neighbourhood suffered from lack of food, medicine, and shelter; and with that, she and her 30 disciples, all of whom were female homemakers, began the simple grassroots campaign of saving just 2 cents per day for the sake of helping those who are less fortunate by providing them their most basic human needs; water, food, shelter, medicine, and most importantly, their dignity.

These small, minute, and ostensibly trivial matters and applications when added up, or even when taken apart from one another, can make a significant impact in not only safety and security, but also in the empowerment of women and other marginalized groups. Though just saving 2 cents a day everyday seems small and insignificant, the intention and prolonged faith and hope can make an insurmountable difference. What began as a small grassroots campaign initiated by the good will and compassion of just a few women, turned into a global organization, community, of more than 10 million volunteers and donors in 50 countries; and with the leadership and initiative of local — mostly female — volunteers, humanitarian aid, community programs, and relief from disasters in more than 85 countries around the world was accomplished.

To this day, the Tzu Chi Foundation continues to make great strides in female empowerment. The Jing-Si Rice, developed by Tzu Chi's nuns in the Republic of China, holds great significance and weight in terms of the protection of human dignity and basic human rights. It is a food resource that does not require fire or cooking fuel to make, rather, only the addition of either heated or room-temperature water to enjoy this nutritious rice, which, like the act of saving 2 cents a day, may seem small and insignificant, but has the potential to safeguard life and dignity. Women and girls, particularly refugees and Internally Displaced People, must face a series of day to day obstacles that many in the developed nations and cities may not consider such as cooking, or more specifically, the requirements for cooking. As stated by the Women's Refugee Commission, "Women and children, especially girls, are typically responsible for cooking family meals, and their health and safety are threatened every day as they search for cooking fuel, often traveling up to 10-20 kilometres into the bush to find firewood." The introduction of the Jing Si Rice eliminates the need for heated water for food, and thus reduces the necessity of such a gruelling and time-consuming chore that is expected from women in patriarchal communities. It is the very simple and easily neglected qualities of the Jing-Si Rice that can mean life or death to these women and girls. But before empowerment can even begin to have effect, the people or specific populations must have a decent education.

Confucius once said that "If your plan is for one year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; but if your plans are for a hundred years, give education." A truly free society, one that is governed for the people by the people, cannot exist if the people are not educated. Moreover, a free society cannot exist if the people are not in a position to receive education, and subsequently, empowerment. It is with this belief, one that Tzu Chi places in conjunction with

Buddhism, that Tzu Chi has initiated education programs and built schools in countries such as Haiti and South Africa. Although the development of the rice stemmed from the goal of providing victims of disasters who are put into positions of insecurity with instant meals, the value and significance of the rice is that it does not require hot water and can be used as a promotion of vegetarianism, a sustainable and more ethical way of eating and consuming. This promotion of ethical eating and vegetarianism while empowering women with education is extended throughout Tzu Chi's various humanitarian programs around the world. For example, in South Africa and Haiti, women in rural, often dangerous, communities are taught in Tzu Chi educational programs to farm and cultivate their own vegetables. The harvested vegetables are often enough to provide for their families and communities, and in some cases, the women sell their produce in exchange for cash. In the Zulu communities in Durban, South Africa, the Zulu women are empowered with the practical and necessary skills, thereby obtain self-sufficiency. Over 5,000 of these Zulu women have since become Tzu Chi volunteers themselves. By helping to eradicate hunger and poverty through improving living standards, promoting social participation, and strengthening skills for a more sustainable life with human security, Tzu Chi has empowered communities such as the Zulu and allowed them to become more self-sufficient.

Like Tzu Chi's initiatives in South Africa, the foundation's projects in Haiti also enable its citizens to become more self-reliant, except on an even larger scale. With the support and collaborative efforts of Tzu Chi's Catholic partners, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Anne, Tzu Chi built and rebuilt 3 different schools in Port-au-Prince as a show of not only faith and inter-faith based determination, but also the determination of volunteers. In order to attain a free, equal, and environmentally sustainable society, schools must be built and provided, children must be able to receive education that will help shape not only their own futures, but that of their community as well.

Reflective of the commitment of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women — human life has the right to realize her potential to benefit others — Tzu Chi volunteers spring into action whenever they discover someone in need, working through the existing welfare system and filling in gaps. Recipients of charity gradually become economically secure, and like the Zulu women who became volunteers themselves, discover that by being rich in love and compassion, they too can help others in difficult situations and realize the joy of giving and helping others, particularly in their own communities. It is this realization that empowers both women and men.

Buddhist philosophy is one that lies in compassion and egalitarianism, where all things, man, woman, and beast are treated with the utmost respect and compassion; every living being is to be treated with dignity and kindness as man and beast both experience the same suffering, the same fears, and the same joys; all feel pain, love, and loss. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny," is a statement, belief, and idea expressed in King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail". Similarly, Master Cheng Yen states that "the actual purpose of 'deliverance' is to commit great ambition, pledge great vows and extensively dedicate great love to all sentient beings," that the deliverance, or in some sense, the realized awakening, is Great Love, or universal love, which through the lens of Buddhism and Tzu Chi, means indiscriminate compassion for all, animals, our environment, and all of humanity.