

# Left-behind Girl Child Safety Problems in Rural China

Najam ul Hasan Abbasi

Jiang Ping

Sheeraz Ilyas Shaikh

## **Abstract**

*In recent years, with the increasing number of migrant workers, the number of girls left behind in rural China has also increased sharply. Due to the lack of necessary monitoring and safe sex education, many of the girls left behind, become an object of sexual assault. Currently, the issue of safety and sex education of these left-behind Chinese rural girls has become the focus of public opinion analysis. The sexual assault cases of left behind Chinese girls show three integrating characteristics: namely diversification of sexual assault, means of sexual assault, lack of awareness about sexual assaults, which reflects a pessimistic security situation for the left-behind girls in rural China. The reasons prominently fall into three aspects: lack of impact of parenting to impart knowledge, lack of safety awareness and education efforts of the guardians, and less importance given to safety and sex education at school; through the integration of three large forces -schools, families and society-more scientific safety and sex education systems can be implemented for the left-behind rural girls, with a view to promoting the harmonious development of their physical and mental health.*

The old saying “*shutting the mouth of people is harder than shutting river’s mouth*”, is a simple phrase but reflects the importance of the people’s opinion. In today’s highly developed information age, the public opinion has turned into a vast ocean from a river. It is in this context that the public opinions stand out as a very important factor. Public opinion analysis is based on the needs of a particular problem, in order to solve the problems, the study of thinking, deep processing and analysis of public opinion are carried out to draw conclusions<sup>[1]</sup>.

Since the China's reform and opening up policy, with accelerating and unceasing process of speedy urbanization and advancements, the surplus rural labor force began to shift to coastal and inland cities on a large scale, which produced a special kind of group - rural left-behind children, they are a group of children who are left over behind because of one or both parents migrate to work outside. Left-behind children are divided into left-behind boys and left-behind girls. Statistics shows that, due to the “patriarchal” thinking and other such influencing factors, the girls are more often left behind to stay at home as compared to boys, and the number of girls left-behind in rural areas has risen sharply in the recent years. Due to the lack of necessary supervision and safety education of rural left-behind girls, many of these girls become the object of sexual assault, which greatly affects the stability of rural society and the healthy growth of left-behind girls. After the incidents of sexual assault of these girls, the masses use various means to know the truth, followed by the never ending remarks. The problem of safety monitoring and safety education of rural left-behind girls has become the focus of public opinion. Public opinion analysis thus become the bellwether of the problem.

## **1. The main characteristics and trends of safety issues of China's rural left-behind girls**

In 2008, the national rural left-behind children research report shows that there are about 58million left-behind children in rural China, and 70% of these children are under 14 years old, more than half among them are girls<sup>[2]</sup>. Most of the migrant parents are more willing to

take the boy along their side, and leave their girls behind for a census register seat. However, in the long run, since the rural left-behind girls stay away from the parents, lack the necessary care, lack of effective family, school and community protection and security education, the girls are likely to be sexually assaulted, and more often fall into the stretched evil hands<sup>[3]</sup>. Since 2007, 62 cases of sexual abuse have been reported in Henan province, a total of 21 cases involving the left-behind girls, accounting to 34% of the total number of cases<sup>[4]</sup>. In 2009, Sichuan Yibin City prosecutors, prosecuted 83 cases of sexual assault of rural left-behind girls, which accounted for 41.9% of the prosecution cases<sup>[5]</sup>. From this analysis, the safety issues of the rural left-behind girls exhibits some of the characteristics as follows:

**a. Diversification in people who sexually assault rural left-behind girls**

Aggrieved problems for rural left-behind girls have become increasingly prominent, subjects show a trend of diversification of sexual abuse, mainly:

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1. ***Sexually assaulted by the relatives:*** Migrant parents often leave the left-behind girls to be raised by relatives, a lot of uncle, or cousins sexually assault rural left-behind girls, a serious concern against the social ethics.
2. ***Assaulted by the neighbors:*** In the rural areas, there is no shortage of unmarried or martially discorded males, or the ones whose wife is not around, or the widowed or divorced, they are long “unemployed” sexually, or are “sex-starved”, so the left-behind girls are an easy target for them.
3. ***Sexually assaulted by the classmates:*** When left-behind girls are in their puberty, it’s really hard for them to resist the psychological impacts of puberty, this marks the age of puppy love behavior, leaving them vulnerable to sexual harassment or sex relations with the same age boys.
4. ***Sexually assaulted by a teacher:*** As the girls’ body starts to grow, the mature female physical characteristics become prominent, some male teachers with bad character find all sorts of excuses to flirt and do obscene behaviors.
5. ***Sexually assaulted by the antisocial youth:*** Due to lack of effective supervision, combined with the feelings of loneliness as a result of parent’s leaving, some left-behind girls staying indulged in internet cafes, Karaoke bars and other places of entertainment, become vulnerable to sexual abuse by drop outs from schools or unemployed youth<sup>[6]</sup>.

**b. Diversification in in the means of sexual assaults concerning rural left-behind girls**

As mentioned above, the sexual abuse of girls in rural areas is diversified, which leads to diversity in the means of sexual assaults. The cases of sexual assaults involving relatives and neighbors, for example, mostly use money, food or toys for tempting girls for creating an opportunity to sexually abuse girls. Relatives still adopt the method of sleeping in the same bed with left-behind girls to get to their miserable desires, while the sinister neighbors ask them to lead the way, take the message across, and other man-made excuses to cheat left-behind girls to a quiet place for sexual assault<sup>[7]</sup>. In the case of same age sexual assaults are done by the way of dating or creating curiosity through porn temptation to have sex with left-behind girls, sexual relations often result after browsing the porn sites as the romantic love of the high school or middle school boys and girls normally doesn’t last more than a month.

As far as the cases of sexual abuse by teachers is concerned, the criminal male teachers find the excuse for a conversation, make up classes or an offer to help with the homework etc., to sexually abuse left-behind girls. In cases involving antisocial youth, unemployed or drop out youth use tricking method and at other times bullying to sexually abuse left-behind girls in rural areas<sup>[8]</sup>.

**c. Lack of awareness regarding sexual assaults concerning rural left-behind girls**

Since most of the sexual assault happening to left-behind rural girls involve known people or acquaintance, and often using kind intentions to allure and seduce these girls, consequently, the violated girls tend to lack the necessary precautionary and protection measures awareness. Especially in the face of sexual assault incidents, left-behind rural girls lack the abilities to self-defense and awareness of legal protection. Even when the offenders use verbal threats or violence to sexually harass, most left-behind girls are easy to get scared, are afraid to resist, also dare not to cry for help. Some parents worried about the discrimination and future prospects of their assaulted girls do not dare calling the police and are willing to submit to the acts of the offender, the psychological humiliation, and rape of their left-behind girls by hiding such incidents<sup>[9]</sup>. As a result, most of the sexually offended girls, lacking timely help from parents or society under the threat or violence, tend to keep silent, and do not dare telling family or report it to police, rather endure it personally. As a parents, after his or her daughter was sexually assaulted, afraid of shame and damaged reputation are great pressures, mostly “settle” the matters in secret. Because of a lot of cases of hidden truths, it results in adding to the arrogances of the offender<sup>[10]</sup>.

**2. Safety problem reflects the failure of education behavior in left-behind girls in rural China**

Rural left-behind girls share the same physical development mechanism, a physiological knowledge, healthcare awareness, and awareness of safe sex as other same age girls which is an important content in the education. The reason why sexual assault is higher among left-behind rural girls is the lack of awareness in the sex education in rural areas' education system.

**a. The lack of effective teaching by parents to impart safety and sex education**

Family is the first living environment for any child, and parents are the first means to educate and enlighten their children. Parents' knowledge, concept and attitude towards sex education directly affects a child's understanding about sex. Migrants workers or parents of left-behind girls, break this very original core structure of the family<sup>[11]</sup>. In such situation away from home, parents rarely talk about sex education with their children, especially the left-behind adolescent girls, under the conditions of highly scientific sex education guidance, parent-child education has gradually become a mere formality.

Zhi-Ping Wu, a researcher at the Chinese rural issues research center in Central China Normal University, conducted a survey involving 100 left-behind girls through questionnaire and discussions. The survey found, many girls saying they were never taught how to protect themselves by their moms. Only 21% of the girls answered "mom educated them about self-defense knowledge", many girls didn't even know what does "sexual abuse" mean, also were unaware of common sense self-defense measures<sup>[12]</sup>. This suggests a highly imbalanced and weakened sex education in left-behind rural girl children often leading to non-understanding of physiological

changes, psychological and behavior problems resulting from such changes. Often overwhelmed with such feelings they feel lost and ultimately this affects their physical and mental health development.

**b. Guardian’s lack of awareness about safety and sex education**

Left-behind rural girls are deprived of direct supervision of their parents, and are left under the temporary guardianship of their maternal or paternal grandparents or relatives. Due to variety of reasons, such as old age, and inability to safekeeping, the lack of awareness of left-behind girls’ progressive safety and education, and specially many old people live under the yoke of traditional ideas, ignore the safety awareness and education and protection of left-behind girls<sup>[13]</sup>. Most temporary guardians of left-behind rural girls don’t attend to physiological and psychological changes, and even if sometimes they attend to such changes, they turn a blind eye or rarely take auxiliary scientific methods to provide sex education<sup>[14]</sup>. Even some of the temporary guardians think it is shameful to talk about the sex education, or it is tantamount to spreading obscenity and such education would lead their children to evil ways. The lack of safety education to left-behind girls by their temporary guardians lead this group prone to high incidents of sexual abuse, early sexual behaviors and sex crimes, which has brought a great negative impact to the entire social order and stability.

**c. Relatively less importance given to safety and sex education at schools**

Safety and sex education has always been a weak link in rural schools. The impact of traditional customs and conservative thinking, poor teaching facilities, lack of teachers and access to information, contribute to impeded understanding of safety and sex education among left-behind rural girls<sup>[15]</sup>. Sex education in rural primary and secondary schools to an extent has become a blind spot, although there are physical health classes in the schools, they are mostly elective rather than compulsory courses. Teachers in those classes generally talk about reproductive organs and other sensitive information is usually left for students’ self-study. Schools do not employ hard and fast rules for students to study “Health Education”, and it largely depends on students’ own voluntary efforts to read or skip this knowledge.

The National Survey Report of left-behind Rural Children in Henan, Hubei, and Gansu provinces conducted on girls aging between 11 to 16 years of 303 parents working outside shows that only 109 people, accounting for 36% studied health education, 194 people, accounting for 64% did not study health education<sup>[16]</sup>. Thus, sex education by the family is very weak in left-behind rural girls, and there is a strong need to create an environment to educate about the relevant knowledge about security and sex education at schools. Looking at the unfavorable factors in rural society and schools, safety and sex education in rural schools for left-behind girls is almost close to zero.

**3. Constructing “Three souls one body” safety mechanism for left-behind Chinese rural girls**

The purpose of importance given to understand and analyze the issues with safety and sex education is to put forward a better solution to the problem. In terms of the educational aspect, the key to solving the problem is to strengthen and perfect the safety and sex education in rural left-behind girls. Safety and sex education in schools, family and society is an important element relating to the physical, psychological and social development of people. Rural left-behind girls lack the understanding and education of basic safety

education. Therefore, we should assimilate three strong foundations systems- schools, family and society to implement safety and sex education scientifically to protect the legitimate rights and interests of the left-behind girls, shield them from bad temptation, provide them with a correct view of “sex”, and help them walk through the first step in the course of life.

**a. Full scale implementation of safety education for left-behind girls in rural areas: the dominant school**

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung believed that the school education plays a major role in the formation of personality in adolescents. For adolescents, school as their first exposure to the world, is one of the important positions of the systematic education to them<sup>[17]</sup>. Therefore, school as the main channel for education, the main battle position, the master class, plays an invaluable leading role in implementing the safety and sex education in left-behind rural girls at large scale.

On the one hand, more attention must be paid to the safety and sex education to the left-behind girls. They should be provided with basic school infrastructure, equipped with full faculty, updated content and material, safety and sex education teaching should be provided in general arrangement with universal safety and sex education knowledge to left-behind rural girls. Recommended safety and sex education should start from primary and middle school classroom towards higher grades. Appropriate scientific knowledge about sex education furnished with physiological, psychological and sexual knowledge and sexual health demonstration exercises, should be provided to the left-behind girls.

On the other hand, the guardian interactive information feedback mechanism, timely grasp the situation of left-behind girls, the guardian training in the methods and knowledge of sex education, especially the safe sex education training, should be implemented in order to ensure the healthy growth of left-behind girls. For example, remind migrant parents about the safety concerns of their daughters, to choose a safe and reliable temporary guardian, timely impart knowledge of security-related education, raise awareness among the left behind girls<sup>[18]</sup>. In addition, DVDs of safety and sex education or TV programs or printed material of experts can be distributed to left-behind girls to understand and accept the safety and sex knowledge or seminars and lectures can be conducted to improve their knowledge about self-defense and sex education.

**b. Auxiliary safety and sex education of left-behind girls in rural areas: the family cooperation**

Family education has an irreplaceable special position and important role in a person’s development throughout life<sup>[19]</sup>. However, a lot of parents lack the understanding of the importance of family education. Most parents think that their main task is to prepare their children to enter into schools, leaving everything to schools and teachers. Although this fully embodies the high trust from parents in the teachers and school, but the idea and practice can easily lead to the weakening of the function of family education, and giving the full play to overall effectiveness of education at school is extremely unfavorable. Therefore, the family is one of the important factor to provide an environment for healthy growth of the rural left-behind girls and to familiarize them about safety and sex education to prevent them from safety problems.

- *First of all, strict supervision responsibility of parents.* In order to meet the demands of the safety of the girls, one of the parents should try to stay home or

keep their daughter with them as much as possible. Even when the conditions do not suit such supervision, try to put a lot of care in choosing the temporary guardians by choosing more reliable and safe guardians, male relatives or friends should not be easily entrusted.

- ***Secondly, strengthen the impact of parent-child education for girls.*** Migrant parents should always show concern through phone calls, letters, or internet to talk to their left-behind girls and provide them more safety knowledge, improve their sex education awareness, properly training them to be able to deal with protection problems. Remind the temporary guardian to conscientiously fulfill guardianship responsibilities and obligations.

Maternal and paternal grandparents or other relatives should pay special attention to the whereabouts of left-behind girls, they should educate them not to easily accept things from other people and should not let them go out of their sight<sup>[20]</sup>. At the same time, temporary guardians need to overcome their “son preference”, stop demonizing the sex-talk, disfiguring the bondage of traditional ideas and so on to communicate with left-behind girls about sex education to strengthen their understanding.

**c. Supporting strong safety and sex education of left-behind girls in rural areas: the social sustenance**

One of the founders of social learning theory Albert Bandura thinks that individual action or behavior, the surrounding environment and individual cognition, motivation and other factors mutually work together in decision making<sup>[21]</sup>. For left-behind rural area girls, their special social environment interactions are typical, and long-term deformation of their particular social positions and social roles make them depart from the space of positive factors, easy to form a security anomie social environment. Therefore, to improve the safety of left-behind rural girls, social support is a strong assurance.

Protection and safety of the left-behind girls in rural areas is a shared responsibility and obligation to society as a whole. The whole society should build a strong security system through joint action to build the guardian, school and community (three souls one body) to create a good space for education and social environment<sup>[22]</sup>. First, to strengthen public opinion, the media should use means to promote and propagate enhanced security awareness to change public opinions. Newspapers, television, magazines, radio and other media should create good public opinion atmosphere, endorse the laws to protect the safety and sex education of left-behind girls<sup>[23]</sup>. Medical, technology, health and other departments should organize regular sexual and reproductive health seminars and exhibitions or carry out counseling and guidance services, so that the timely cutting-edge information about security and safety for girls can be provided to the poor in rural areas. Secondly, to strengthen the knowledge of regulatory functioning of the community to fully mobilize the grass-roots organizations for the care and protection of the left-behind girls. On the one hand, rural community and village committee can strengthen the awareness of parents or temporary guardians of the left-behind girls through lawful advertising and education. On the other hand, identify people having tendency of sexual abuse, strengthen their education and supervision, to prevent the occurrence of crime. And introduce increasing penalties for the violators to discourage criminals. For internet cafes, Karaoke bars and other such entertainment venues, timely safety

checks and clean-ups, eradication of “porn”, and purifying the social atmosphere can help in achieving the purpose of crime prevention, sexual assaults to left-behind girls in rural areas by increasing the severe and quick punishment<sup>[24]</sup>. Through the joint efforts of the whole society, we can build a real safe and secure system and create a good social environment for the healthy growth of left-behind girls in rural areas.

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