

SOCIETY

REGISTER / LOGIN



HOME CHINA HK ASIA WORLD COMMENT BUSINESS TECH LIFE CULTURE SPORT WEEK IN ASIA POST MAG STYLE .TV ≡ ALL

News / China / Society

China Society

HOME TOURISTS CRIME CULTURE FAMILIES EDUCATION HEALTH

The public education project that targets the ‘taboo’ subject of child sexual abuse in China

Project HOPE aims to mobilise the public against a serious issue that parents and authorities ‘often try to sweep under the carpet’

PUBLISHED : Saturday, 25 August, 2018, 10:00pm
UPDATED : Saturday, 25 August, 2018, 10:52pm

COMMENTS: 2



15 SHARES





Laurie Chen



Watching a film rarely had been so disturbing for Wang Xueying.



THIS WEEK IN ASIA

Get updates direct to your inbox

Enter your email



By registering you agree to our T&Cs & Privacy Policy

RELATED TOPICS

- China Society
- Sexual harassment and assault
- China education
- Education
- Children in China


“I was extremely angry [afterward] and couldn’t sleep for the whole night,” the 18-year-old student from the eastern province of Jiangsu recalled of viewing the 2011 Korean film *Silenced*.

The groundbreaking film, which is based on accounts of real-life systemic child sexual abuse at a deaf school in South Korea, helped raise awareness of a taboo subject in the traditionally conservative country.

Around the same time in 2016, her classmate Yang Xihang, 18, came across numerous news reports of children being sexually assaulted by their teachers and could not stop reading about the victims’ ordeals.

Inspired to move others against a serious and prevalent issue that parents and authorities in China often try to sweep under the carpet, Wang and Yang decided to set up an anti-child sexual abuse education programme in their hometown of Changshu.

The pair said they were deeply moved by the testimony of abuse survivors found on Chinese social media.

 Project HOPE is the result of a collaboration between Wang Xueying and Yang Xihang, shown leading an anti-sexual abuse class for primary schoolchildren in Changshu. Photo: Handout

“I was reminded of the time when, as a child, I felt really scared going home after school, in case a wicked man would jump out at me,” Wang said.

When she first started researching the issue, Wang said she found very few high-profile Chinese experts on the topic. Moreover, there was little reporting on the subject by the news media.

“It almost seemed like child sexual abuse wasn’t an issue in China,” she said.


However, such stories have made headlines more frequently in recent years, with a child sexual abuse scandal involving

teachers at an upscale Beijing kindergarten last November among the highest-profile cases.

Why China should point the finger at America's 'predator priests' →

But Wang said she initially faced resistance from parents and teachers who believed that sexual abuse was not widespread. Even her own father was puzzled over her desire to make this issue her cause, she said.

“The scariest part is not that nobody is aware of the problem; it’s that nobody thinks it’s a social problem,” she said. “So when children seek protection and want to speak up, nobody is willing to listen.”

 Poster for the 2011 film *Silenced*, which dramatised systemic child sexual abuse at a deaf school in South Korea. Photo: Handout

Luckily, the pair discovered Girls' Protection, an NGO set up by former women journalists that provides lesson plans and other invaluable resources for raising awareness of child sexual abuse and how to prevent it.

“Xueying initially suggested [we] create a website and an official account on WeChat to propagate knowledge on anti-child sexual abuse,” Yang said. “I then recalled that our school’s peer counsellor programme had professionals train students to be student counsellors and help other students.

“So we contacted Girls’ Protection in order to get trained by them.”

With a group of close friends, the duo organised weekly screenings of *Silenced* at their school, United World College Changshu China, to raise awareness of their project. They also mass-emailed the student body to recruit new members for their cause.

India imposes death sentences for rape of young girl →

They have whittled the respondents down to 50 people through interviews, and divided them into five “departments”: volunteer teachers who give anti-sexual abuse classes at local schools, publicity, external relations, finance and lobbying.

“We and our friends took almost half a year to successfully form our organisation, because we encountered a lot of obstacles,”

she said, explaining that some members had to leave because they did not share the project's values.

So far, the volunteers have taught thousands of children to be on guard against abusers in the local area.

Wang and Yang hope to expand the project to reach more locations around the country. They are currently training female teachers at a network of rural schools via an online video link, and replicate their organisation's model at other


schools. Guidelines from Girls' Protection state that the teachers giving anti-sexual abuse classes using their lesson plans must be female.

Rural areas are where children are the most likely to suffer sexual abuse, Yang said. Left-behind children whose parents have migrated to urban areas in search of work are particularly at risk, according to a 2017 report from Girls' Protection.

[‘We showed no care for the little ones’, says pope about church child sex abuse →](#)

In July, a 56-year-old male teacher in rural Yunnan province was detained by police on suspicion of sexually assaulting six children at his primary school.

Wang Xiaorong, a teacher at the Changshu Southeast Experimental Primary School, whose students heard a talk by Wang Xueying in April, said seeing “the effective interactions between Project HOPE teachers and students” was extremely satisfying.

 Wang Xueying shows a class of female rural schoolteachers a video of an anti-sexual abuse lecture. Photo: Handout

Student Yuan Siyu, 12, said the lecture increased her understanding of “the importance of preventing sexual abuse” and how to guard against it.

Reliable data on child sexual abuse rates is hard to come by in China, owing to a lack of official nationwide surveys.

However, the largest academic study of its kind, which polled over 18,000 teenagers in urban and rural regions, found that around one in 13 school-age adolescents in China had experienced sexual abuse.


A 2017 Girls’ Protection study found that 1.04 cases were reported in the media per day on average, but the real number of occurrences was estimated to be up to eight times higher.

Officer held over rape of girl, 14, while facing other sex assault cases →

“Confucian culture is strong so it’s awkward to talk about sex,” Wang said. “Parents and teachers will rarely discuss this knowledge with children from an early age.”

As a result, she said, children remain ignorant as to the real definition of sexual abuse – unwanted sexual contact acted upon one person by another.

“Children don’t know how to draw the line between sexual abuse [and other behaviours],” Wang said. “So as a result, if a child experiences sexual abuse, they may not recognise it as serious or as sexual abuse, so they would not tell their teachers or parents.”

 A scene from the Silenced, a groundbreaking film that helped raise awareness of the taboo subject of child sexual abuse in China. Photo: Handout

Under China’s child sexual abuse laws, offenders can be sentenced to between three and 12 years in prison, depending on whether their crimes were classified under rape and trafficking offences affecting girls and women, or indecent assault, which can apply to both genders.

The age of consent in China is 14 years old, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Project HOPE is working with the local government education bureau and the Women’s Federation to reform existing child sexual abuse laws, including the proposed release of sex offenders’ personal information to the public – similar to the convicted sex offenders’ registry in Britain and Ireland.

They are also lobbying the National Congress in Changshu and the nearby city of Suzhou to make compulsory anti-sexual abuse prevention education part of the national curriculum.

US gynaecologist 'groped student, said Taiwan medics have fun with girls' →

Wang is reluctant to discuss the project's links with the global #MeToo movement that is currently sweeping China, since her organisation specialises in child sexual abuse, rather than the issues of rape and sexual consent between adults.

But the two projects share one similarity: both encourage survivors of child sexual abuse to speak out and defend their rights.

"We hope that children will be brave enough to report sexual abuse, when facing it, to their parents and not keep it secret," she said. "In this way, the reporting rate will rise and more children will become braver and speak out."

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: project hope lifts the veil on child sexual abuse

Related Articles

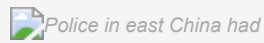


Chinese tabloid Global Times said police have begun an investigation into an "escalating dispute" between the two oil companies. Photo: EPA

SOCIETY

Chinese oil firm workers clash over ownership rights, paper says

4 Sep 2018



Police in east China had to disperse a crowd of looters that gathered after a truck carrying five tonnes of peaches shed its load in a collision with another vehicle. Photo: Handout

SOCIETY

Should these Chinese fruit looters be impeached?

4 Sep 2018