

Who Be the Protector for Abused Children in Indigenous Tribes?

In the traditional culture of the Paiwan, an indigenous tribe in the southern side of Taiwan, genitals are symbolic of inheriting a lineage. When an elder touches or kisses a child's genitals, it is often regarded as a blessing. However, it gives a chance to people with bad intentions to take advantage of this custom. Sometimes, the elder moves ceremonies that normally should take place in public to other secret places, turning a time-honored tradition into a crime scene of sexual assaults.

Deep in the mountains of Pingtung, a 60-year-old Paiwan elder invited 13 local children, including 11 boys and two girls, to his place to "play on the computer" between 2010 and 2014. He sexually harassed and assaulted those 13 children, and the youngest child was just seven years old. The elder was eventually sentenced to 18 years in prison in 2016, but his actions had already left indelible scars in the hearts of the young victims.

At the end of August 2021, the Control Yuan published an investigation report on the government's effectiveness in preventing child sexual abuse. The report indicated that indigenous children are only 3.5% of the total population of children in Taiwan, but they have accounted for more than 12% of sexual abuse victims in recent years.

According to another victim background investigation from the Ministry of Health and Welfare, 525 indigenous youth had been sexually abused in 2019, which is 0.38% of the total indigenous youth population. Shockingly, this percentage is 288% higher than that of the non-indigenous population. Control Yuan member Yeh Tahua pointed out, in addition to getting social workers higher pay, having more social workers with an understanding of the sophisticated tribal culture into the community could pose a much bigger challenge.

Sexual Assaults under Asymmetrical Power Children's ignorance of acquaintances' actions

What makes indigenous youth more vulnerable to sexual assaults? Yeh Tahua, who has long been involved in the rights and welfare of children, suggested that sexual assaults often arise in asymmetrical power. That is to say, a person whose position is dominant to another exerts his authority through sexual conduct. When it comes to indigenous tribes, elders in church, teachers and other older acquaintances can get close to children easily when they have educational purposes, with no clear rules or

restrictions, and especially when the children's guards are down, some may cross the line.

Yeh pointed out, many indigenous parents leave their villages to work in cities and leave their children to grandparents or close elders in tribes. If the children are not taught to be aware, they may not know which actions are culturally appropriate and which clearly cross the line. It leaves children with no parents around at a higher risk to become victims of sexual assaults.

Gao Xinjie, a social worker with ten-year experience in the Department of Social Affairs, grows up in the Paiwan community himself. He provided a different perspective on why indigenous tribes have a higher rate of sexual assault among the young. In his observation, indigenous teenagers yearn for the exciting urban life and are keen on making friends online, and that makes them more easily fall into traps and become victims when they encounter people with bad intentions.

No matter what the causes are, the higher rate of sexual assault among the young in the indigenous community is an indisputable fact. The more important question is: how to lower the number of cases and how to let social workers get into those cases to minimize the physical and mental harm afterward? Both the government and the front-line workers are dealing with this problem.

A High turnover rate of social workers makes early assessment even harder

The report of Control Yuan indicated, since sexual assault perpetrators are mostly acquaintances, it is harder for social workers from outside to intervene. Worse, sexual assault prevention campaigns are not enough, especially in a remote community like the Paiwan tribe. The report suggested increasing the number of community outreach sessions on sexual assault prevention to strengthen community awareness. More specifically, organizing themed activities such as parent-child playgroups and games designed to let children know better about bodily autonomy.

However, from the perspective of front-line social workers, it is impossible to stop sexual assault incidents just by "raising awareness." The focus should be put more on assessing risks for early prevention and observing subtle changes in everyday behavior to facilitate prompt intervention before it is too late.



(Pingtung County Government Department of Social Affairs regularly holds themed activities for children.

However, it is not an efficient way to decrease sexual assault cases. Photo Credit: Business Weekly)

Dai RuDing, head of the Pingtung County Government Department of Social Affairs, said there already exists a set of standard operating procedures for assessing risks. For example, social workers suggest school teachers regularly asking students to share their living habits and environments, such as how many family members they live with, how the rooms are set out, and who sleeps with whom, so as to assess risks.

On the other side, early intervention is much harder and requires assistance from experienced social workers. After a sexual assault case occurs, the social worker has to get the victim to speak up and communicate with them but carefully not to rub salt into the wound. The process is difficult since it has no guidance to follow and relies much on experience.

“Sadly, the turnover rate of protective services social workers who provide crisis care for abused victims is very high,” Dai said helplessly. Social workers are often in high-pressure environments and overworked. Many young people who set out to work on this job with great enthusiasm chose to leave their positions because they were physically and mentally overwhelmed.

The government is aware of the issue. The Executive Yuan designated a budget of nearly NT \$7 billion in 2018 to promote the first phase of a project to strengthen the social safety net. The project aimed to expand the number of social workers and improve their working conditions.

The seven-billion-dollar project indeed alleviated some of the problems. According to Gao Xinjie, in the past, a single social worker had to handle 30 to 40 cases at the same time, whereas now, the number of cases sits within a more acceptable range of 15 to 20. However, there are still many frontline workers resigning simply because they cannot afford to carry the emotions of the victims and their families.

To this end, the Executive Yuan added an additional NT \$40 billion to the budget in July this year, launching the second phase of the social safety net project. Premier of Executive Yuan Su Tsengchang stressed, “It is necessary to set up an advanced evaluation mechanism for social work professionals, increase the number of senior social workers, improve their salary level and encourage long-term tenure,” hoping this helps resolve the retention problem.

Whether the NT \$40 billion can bring improvement still needs time to prove. Yeh Tahua believed the situation indigenous communities are facing is a lot more complicated. Since the community culture emphasizes social harmony, when a sexual assault case occurs, people in the tribe are reluctant to let non-indigenous social workers come in. Even if they really get into the community, a lack of cultural sensitivity and the knowledge of traditional culture may further drive a wedge between the two groups. Yeh added, “Unfortunately, things tend to be handled by internal mechanisms in the community now. Thus, understanding how to play the right role is more critical for social workers since it is the only way to gain trust from the community.”

Gao Xinjie, growing up in a Paiwan community, agreed that people in the tribe have close ties with each other, so once a sexual assault allegation occurs, news spread quickly. The elders may hold a meeting without contacting the authorities and social workers, gathering the relevant people to solve it privately. Therefore, when dealing with sexual assault cases in indigenous communities, seizing the opportunity to intervene is key. Intervention at an early stage can ensure that the children are not injured further or refuse to tell the truth after an inside meeting. Gao believed that

increasing the number of social workers with indigenous backgrounds and cultural sensitivity in each village is the best way to protect victimized indigenous children.

**Control Yuan: Mechanisms must be established as soon as possible
Assemble indigenous social workers and connect with judicial power**

In addition to increasing the number of social workers who understand indigenous cultures, Yeh Taha provided another way to resolve the issue by establishing a special coordination committee for indigenous cultures, members including government officials with public power, and elders in the communities. This way, it can eliminate the tribe's unwillingness to outside interference.

Dai Ruding agrees with the committee's proposal. She believed that indigenous social workers in the committee not only play a coordinating role, but also serve as a bridge between the community and the judiciary, so that a cultural balance can be maintained while ensuring that the victimized children can receive the most appropriate resettlement, protection, and social resources.

Although the first phase of Executive Yuan's Strengthening the Social Safety Net Program has improved the working environment for social workers, the victimization rate of indigenous children and youths has yet not declined in recent years. The urgent question for now is, how to train social workers to have enough cultural sensitivity so that the indigenous communities can accept judicial assistance instead of relying solely on the community structures, which only persuade the children to get over it before a social worker can really approach them.