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Chinese women now make up half the world total of female suicides. A high proportion of these suicides are among young women, in the 16-26 age range.

Guangzhou psychologist Zhan blamed the high incidence of suicide among rural women on lack of education and a lack of controls on lethal pesticides.

"With rural women, they could run into problems with their living conditions. But another major factor is the lack of supervision over pesticides in the Chinese countryside. It's there, ready for anyone to take. So if someone gets very unhappy, the means to commit suicide is right there in the form of a container of pesticide, and they just drink it," Zhan said.

"This problem would be much alleviated by stricter controls on the sale and use of pesticides, so you have to account for what you buy and say what you're going to use it for," he added.

Director Cheng, who heads the mental health department at the Chronic Illness Hospital in the Bao'an district of Shenzhen, said however that it wasn't only rural women who were hard hit by depression and suicide, and that high-flying businesspeople were also vulnerable to these problems.

"Some people keep their anxiety, their depression, whatever their psychological problem, a total secret from everyone around them. Even their wives don't know about it," he said.

"The suicide rate is particularly high among these types of powerful and famous people. They never seek treatment, and therefore their suicides are impossible to predict," Cheng said.

## **A major cause of mortality**

According to a recent paper published by the British medical journal *The Lancet*, China's suicide rate is now 23 in every 100,000, twice the proportion seen in the United States.

Depression ranks fourth worldwide as a major illness affecting people's productivity in daily life.

In the absence of widely available and affordable mental health care, patients with depression can also become a heavy burden on their families, and the disorder is one of the main factors behind suicide.

One former Chinese office worker described her depressive symptoms to RFA Mandarin service reporter Bai Fan:

"I felt that I had no energy at all in the whole of my body...It was very hard for me to enjoy being with my friends, or to take an interest in life. Sometimes I felt faint, unreal, I also had illusions, as if I was living in a dream...I lost a lot of confidence in myself. When I was carrying out tasks I lacked my former energy and confidence, and I couldn't perform as well as I had before."

The woman's relatives said she had already quit her job and now spent her days sitting at home, remaining silent, unable to do anything, not even preparing food with the rest of the family, which she had previously enjoyed.

Psychologist Sun Ping at the Zibo City Psychiatric Hospital in the eastern province of Shandong, said there were a great many people across China who suffered from depression. But she added that most didn't seek professional or medical help for fear of the social stigma attached to such a diagnosis.

"There has been a striking rise in the number of people seeking psychological treatment and counselling in recent years," Sun said.

"But because of the massive social upheavals going on at the moment, there is still insufficient understanding of this sort of problem among the general population," she said.

*Original reporting in Mandarin by Bai Fan. RFA Mandarin service director: Jennifer Chou. Translated and written in English by Luisetta Mudie. Edited by Sarah Jackson-Han.*

## Women's Suicides Reveal Rural China's Bitter Roots

By ELISABETH ROSENTHAL  
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Ms. Xie attributes the problem in part to rural Chinese culture, whose customs and language reinforce women's feelings of worthlessness and helplessness, she said. In the countryside, the traditional saying "nan zhong nu qing" ("man heavy, woman light") still holds sway. Men control family assets, and women do not even eat dinner with them.

There are still older women with names like Zhaodi ("looking for a little brother") and Aidi ("loving a little brother"), reflecting their parents' disappointment with their sex.

"In many rural areas they still think women are useless," Ms. Xie said. "They do field work, give birth, take care of the husband, the children, the in-laws. So to them if there is a family problem they think the sky has collapsed."

Many Chinese scientists attribute the suicide rate to the economic and social changes during the last 20 years, as large numbers of rural men moved to the cities seeking work, further burdening their wives. And with the gap widening between rich and poor, some believe that rural women are increasingly aware of the comforts they will never have.

#### A Social Safety Net Slow in the Making

But others argue that the economic reforms have improved life in many villages -- crammed them full of televisions and washing machines. In Lutou, a relatively well-off township with a per-capita income of about \$350 a year, officials say that increased incomes have helped to defuse their suicide problem.

"I think it's a combination of factors working together rather than any single factor," Dr. Phillips said. "I think it's not considered disgraceful; there are no strong religious prohibitions, and historically some types of suicide were considered honorable."

In those cases where women truly intend to die, he added, "it may be seen as a final avenue of escape for people who have few outs."

Researchers have stressed the widespread availability of pesticides all over central China, making impulsive suicide easy -- the Chinese equivalent of Valium in every bathroom cabinet.

"There is no effective control of pesticides in rural China," Ms. Xie said.

In Chinese cities, social workers and doctors are devising suicide prevention efforts -- hot lines and family counseling services. But there are no hot lines in rural Lutou, said Ms. Wang with a laugh, noting that many people in the surrounding villages do not even have phones.

Instead, in the summer of 1997, the local Woman's Federation and Communist Party cadres tried a more pragmatic solution, beginning with a notice broadcast on local television that urged farmers to guard against pesticide poisoning and suicide, attaching greater stigma to the practice. The newspaper in the nearby city of Zaoyang carried a

similar reminder. In villages without phones or televisions, the message was played over a loudspeaker.

In addition, the local government banned the most poisonous pesticides, and people were taught how to treat suspected victims. And villages now have ombudsmen trained in conflict resolution as well.

Since the campaign started, there have only been eight suicide attempts at the Lutou Township Hospital, and they were divided equally between the sexes. No one died.

"The publicity has made the farmers aware that committing suicide is a bad thing," Ms. Wang said, "that if it works or if it doesn't work it still doesn't help the situation." She added, "And if there are conflicts between neighbors or between husband and wife, the new women know they can consult the legal system instead."