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MEDIA COVERAGE OF WOMEN IN CHINA DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: REFLECTIONS ON CHINA'S COMMITMENT UNDER CEDAW AND THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

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ABSTRACT

Under Article 5(a) of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, China is obligated to modify gender stereotypes in and through the media. It is also committed to achieve the objectives in the area of Women and the Media according to the Beijing Platform for Action. However, the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in China has exposed an existing lack of gender sensitivity and has sparked heated debate on gender equality. The debate, which largely plays out on social media, indicates a need for further reflections on how to raise gender sensitivity and achieve further gender equality in the Chinese media in line with international human rights treaties and the global agenda for women's empowerment. This paper takes stock of gender equality in the Chinese media through a case study of media reports during the COVID-19 pandemic; and argues that in order to fulfil its commitments and address the issues exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, China should work to further reduce gender stereotypes in the media through measures including gender-sensitivity training and monitoring.

KEYWORDS

CEDAW; Beijing Platform for Action; Gender Sensitivity; New Media; Women and the Media; COVID-19

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1. INTRODUCTION

As COVID-19 continues its spread around the world, its impact on gender equality increasingly attracts attention. Studies show that the pandemic affects women and girls disproportionately and widens gender inequalities.¹ This can be attributed to the fact that women constitute a majority of the health and social-services staff globally, working in environments with high risk of exposure. In many cases, they do so while simultaneously shouldering care-giving responsibilities in their own homes.² Women in times of COVID-19 also face intensified risks of violence and are more vulnerable to the economic consequences of the pandemic.³ In this unprecedented context, a key player able to help address the needs of women and acknowledge their contribution is the media. Gender sensitive news coverage during the pandemic could amplify women's voices and challenge gender stereotypes and misrepresentation of women in the long run.⁴

¹ Titan Alon, Matthias Deopke, Jane Olmstead-Rumsey, Michèle Tertilt, 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality' (March 2020)

<https://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~mdo738/research/COVID19_Gender_March_2020.pdf> accessed 6 October 2020; 'Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women' (*United Nations*, 9 April 2020) <<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf>> accessed 6 October 2020 (Policy Brief).

² "Women represent 70 percent of the health and social sector workforce globally and special attention should be given to how their work environment may expose them to discrimination" from 'COVID-19: A Gender Lens' (*United Nations Population Fund*, March 2020)

<https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf> accessed 6 October 2020 (COVID-19: A Gender Lens); Diana Boesch, Katie Hamm, 'Valuing Women's Caregiving During and After the Coronavirus Crisis' (*Center for American Progress*, 3 June 2020);

<<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/06/03/485855/valuing-womens-caregiving-coronavirus-crisis/>> accessed 7 October 2020.

³ 'Policy Brief' (n 1); 'COVID-19: A Gender Lens' (n 2).

⁴ Nynne Storm Refsing, 'Media, Remember Gender in Your COVID-19 Coverage' (*International Media Support*, 26 March 2020) <<https://www.mediasupport.org/news/media-remember-gender-in-your-covid-19-coverage/>> accessed 7 October 2020.

The recognition of this key role is reflected in international human rights documents and Chinese national policies alike. Overall, gender equality is not a new concern in China. The first law adopted in the People's Republic of China (hereafter the PRC) was the 1950 Marriage Law, which abolished the feudal marriage system and granted women equal rights with men in marriage.⁵ The first Constitution of the PRC enacted in 1954 and all the later constitutions and amendments adopted also affirmed the principle of gender equality.⁶ In terms of media representation, women were encouraged to participate in the socialist construction and were depicted in a "masculine" way on the covers of *Women of China*, a popular women's magazine.⁷ After the "Reform and Opening Policy" implemented at the end of 1970s, images of women in the media became more "feminine" and diverse.⁸ Some gender-based issues, including the right to education and violence against girls, were raised in the media but were not connected to broader gender inequalities.⁹

Although China ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (hereafter CEDAW) in 1980,¹⁰ interest in gender

⁵ Zhang Shanzhen, 'Hunyinfa Ruhe Chengwei Xin Zhongguo Di Yi Bu Falü' [How Did the Marriage Law Become the First Law of New China] *Studies Times* (Beijing, 6 March 2020) A5.

⁶ Zhu Xiaoqing, 'Funü Renquan Falü Baohu de Fazhan yu Bianhua— —Jiyu Guoji Renquan Gongyue he Guoneifa Shijiao de Kaocha' [Development and Changes of Legal Protection of Women's Human Rights: From the Perspective of International Conventions on Human Rights and Domestic Laws] (2015) 06 *Human Rights* 53, 68-73.

⁷ Wang Lei. 'Cong "Nü Laomo" dao "Nü Mingxing— —Cong 《Zhongguo Funü》 60 Nian Fengmian Renwu Kan Guojia Yishi Xingtai Kongzhi xia Meiti Nüxing Xingxiang Bianqian ji Guojia Huayu Zhuanbian' [From "Women Model Worker" to "Women Celebrity": Observe Changes of Women's Images in Media and National Discourse under the National Ideology Based on 60 Years of Magazine Cover of *Women of China*] (2011) 12 *Shanghai Journalism Review* 87, 92.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Bu Wei, 'Girls' Issues, Gender and the Media: Feminist Activisms in China', in Kirsten Drotner, Sonia Livingstone (eds), *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (1st edn, SAGE Publication 2008) 314-315.

¹⁰ The Standing Committee of the Fifth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, *Di Wu Jie Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui Changwu Weiyuanhui Guanyu Pizhun Lianheguo 《Xiaochu dui Funü Yiqie Xingshi Qishi Gongyue》 de Jueding* [Decision of the Standing Committee of the Fifth National People's Congress on Ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

equality grew only in the decade after. It was not until the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (hereafter the Beijing Conference) that women's equality and the role of the media started to attract more attention from the Chinese government and academia. It was at this conference that the Beijing Platform for Action was adopted and gender equality was announced as China's state policy for the first time.¹¹ In the same year, the first national program for women's development, the Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (1995-2000) was published. The Outline aimed to build a social environment conducive to gender equality and women's development. It proposed awareness-raising campaigns to reduce prejudice and discrimination against women and encouraged the media to build confident and self-independent images of women.¹²

Furthermore, the Chinese academic journal *Journalism & Communication*, one out of the five major journals on media and communication in China, published a special edition on "mass media and women" to celebrate the Beijing Conference.¹³ It was the first time that any of the five major journals had ever published anything on

Discrimination Against Women] (29 September 1980). The Decision in Chinese: 第五届全国人民代表大会常务委员会关于批准联合国《消除对妇女一切形式歧视公约》的决定

¹¹ Equality between men and women as a basic state policy of China was first announced at the opening ceremony of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. It was written into the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (2005 Amendment) which states that "Equality between men and women is a basic State policy. The State takes the necessary measures to gradually improve the systems for protecting the rights and interests of women, in order to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women." It was also included into the report to the CPC National Congress (the 18th CPC National Congress) for the first time in 2012, which states that "We should adhere to the basic state policy of gender equality and protect the legitimate rights and interests of women and children."

¹² The State Council of the People's Republic of China, *Zhongguo Funü Fazhan Gangyao (1995-2000 Nian)* [Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (1995-2000)] (1995). The Outline in Chinese: 中国妇女发展纲要 (1995-2000年)

¹³ Liu Liqun, Wang Qin, 'Hudong Fazhan yu Tiaozhan Fansi— —Meijie Chuanbo yu Xingbie Pingdeng 20 Nian Huigu' [Mutual Development and Limited Reflections: Review of 20 Years' Media Communications and Gender Equality] (2015) 05 Collection of Women's Studies 49, 50. The journal *Journalism & Communication* in Chinese: 《新闻与传播研究》; The research cited here focuses on the five major journals from 1981-1996, the special edition mentioned above was published in 1995.

women and the media since 1981. Since then, more studies were conducted focusing on the field of women and the media. According to research conducted in March 1996, in the eight mainstream newspapers in China, only 7.88 percent of news articles were written by female journalists and only 11.19 percent of the news items were related to women.¹⁴ While traditional media, such as television, radio and newspaper thrived around that time in China, news coverage of women and the percentage of news items reported by females were still low compared to the important role women played in society.

It was also around this time that the concepts of “gender”, “gender equality” and “gender mainstreaming” were introduced into legal academia in China, which led to a series of significant legal changes seeking to integrate gender perspective in the future.¹⁵ These changes happened against the general background of the development of human rights law in China.¹⁶

Issues relating to gender and the media were raised again in the Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2001-2010). The Outline called for cultural and media policy-making with gender consciousness and strengthening of administration of cultural market to remove stereotypes and eliminate degrading images of women in media.¹⁷ The latest Outline, Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020) sets the goals of integrating gender consciousness into media personnel training, improving gender-focused media monitoring and absorbing gender experts into

¹⁴ Feng Yuan, ‘Zhongguo Xinwenjie Chengli Funü Chuanmei Jiance Wangluo’ [Establishment of Media Gender-Sensitive Monitoring System in China] (1998) 03 Xinwen San Wei 40, 40 (the eight newspapers are People’s Daily, Guangming Daily, Economic Daily, China Daily, Legal Daily, Beijing Youth Daily, Workers’ Daily and Farmers’ Daily).

¹⁵ Li Buyun, *Renquan Fa [Human Rights Law]* (1st edn, Higher Education Press 2005) 105.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *Zhongguo Funü Fazhan Gangyao (2001-2010 Nian)* [Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2001-2010)] (2001). The Outline in Chinese: 中国妇女发展纲要 (2001-2010年).

media monitoring.¹⁸ It also calls for evaluation of the cultural and media policies from a gender perspective and women's greater access to media.¹⁹

As China continuously makes progress in promoting gender equality and women's rights, women now play a more important role in the media, both traditional and new. For example, the percentage of women in the media industry has come up significantly over the years. By the year of 2018, 47.5 percent of news publishing employees were female.²⁰ The rapid development of the internet and new forms of media also offers women more chances to be involved and heard, providing them a platform to break away from the male-dominated social discourse in China. According to the data of Sina Weibo, by the end of 2017, 43.7 percent of its users were women.²¹ As Sina Weibo is one of the most popular social media platform in China, with 550 million monthly active users in 2020, this is a significant statistic to assess women's participation in new media.²² Unlike the impression given by traditional media, women internet users are not only interested in topics of cosmetics, family and relationship, but also politics, technology, and military.²³

While there are certainly gains for women's equality in media, some problems remain, and new challenges arise. Objectification and sexualisation of women in media has become a worrisome phenomenon, and the problem of discriminatory and degrading comments on women have started to raise red flags with experts and

¹⁸ The State Council of the People's Republic of China, *Zhongguo Funü Fazhan Gangyao (2011-2020 Nian)* [Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020)] (2011). The Outline in Chinese: 中国妇女发展纲要 (2011-2020年)

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ '2018 Nian Xinwen Chuban Fenxi Baogao (Zhaiyao Ban)' [Analysis Report of Press and Publishing Industry in 2018 from National Press and Publication Administration of China (Highlights)] *China Press Publication Radio Film and Television Journal* (Beijing, 28 August 2019) 7.

²¹ '2017 Weibo User Development Report' (*Sina Weibo Data Center*, 25 December 2017) <<https://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=404&sudaref=www.baidu.com>> accessed 7 October 2020.

²² 'Weibo Fabu 2020 Nian Diyi Jidu Caibao' [Weibo Published First Quarter 2020 Financial Results] (*Sina*, 19 May 2020) <<http://finance.sina.com.cn/stock/usstock/c/2020-05-19/doc-iircuyvi3942770.shtml>> accessed 7 October 2020.

²³ Yang Xia, 'Xin Meiti Shiyu Xia Nüxing Xingxiang Chengxian yu Huayu Jianguo' [Portrayal and Discourse Construction of Women in New Media] (2017) 09 *Modern Communication* 159, 159-160.

policymakers.²⁴ While the media is paying more attention to women’s rights and has played a positive role in promoting legislation and social policies that enhance women’s empowerment, gender perspective is still often left out.²⁵ National news reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed a continuing lack of basic gender awareness and sensitivity among media personnel.

Forty years after China ratified CEDAW and twenty-five years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action at the Beijing Conference, the pandemic is putting China’s efforts on combating gender inequalities to the test, while highlighting problems that remain unsolved. It seems that the current crisis provides a great opportunity to re-assess gender equality in Chinese media. The question then arises: How does the current COVID-19 pandemic expose and play into existing gaps in the implementation of human rights provisions on women’s representation in the Chinese media?

Media can be broadly understood as “the physical or technical means of converting a communication message into a signal capable of being transmitted along a given channel”.²⁶ Its corresponding Chinese character is “媒介”. Sometimes “媒体” is used interchangeably, but the more accurate meaning of the latter is a well-organized and institutionalized communication agency.²⁷ In this article, “the media” mainly refers to media reaching out to the mass public. Mass media or “大众媒介” in Chinese includes television, radio, newspaper, and their news outlets on the internet

²⁴ Liu Liqun, Chen Zhijuan, ‘Wo Guo Meijie yu Nüxing Fazhan Xianzhuang Guancha ji Tuijin Lujing—2013~2014 Nian Meijie yu Nüxing Fazhan Baogao’ [Development Status and Path of Media and Women in China: Report on the Development of Media and Gender in China (2013-2014)] *China Women’s News* (Beijing, 22 December 2015) B1.

²⁵ Liu Liqun, Chen Zhijuan (eds.), *Meijie yu Nüxing Lanpishu: Zhongguo Meijie yu Nüxing Fazhan Baogao (2013-2014)* [Blue Book of Media and Gender: Report on the Development of Media and Gender in China (2013-2014)] (1st edn, Social Sciences Academic Press 2015) 2-5, 13-14.

²⁶ James Watson, Anne Hill, *Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies* (9th edn, Bloomsbury 2015) 184.

²⁷ Bu Wei, ‘Chaoyue “Funü yu Meijie” - 《Beijing Xingdong Gangling》 Huig, Zhongguo Jingyan yu “Beijing +20” Pinggu’ [Beyond “Women and the Media”: Review of the Beijing Platform for Action, Chinese Experience and the Evaluation of “Beijing+20”] (2015) 05 Collection of Women’s Studies 38, 39-40. The author adopted the definition of media/medium from James Watson and Anne Hill, *Dictionary of Media & Communication Studies* (5th edn, Arnold 2000).

through social media platforms like Sina Weibo.²⁸ Social media is a group of new kinds of online media, which share the characteristics of participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness.²⁹ When dealing with the issue of gender stereotypes and the media, social media has been included into the consideration by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (hereafter the CEDAW Committee or the Committee) with other forms of media. For example, the CEDAW Committee has expressed concerns on “the impact of unrealistic images perpetuated in the media, including social media” and “sexism in the media, in particular in online social media”.³⁰ Thus, this paper also includes analysis of the social media, where the news agencies have shared their reports on COVID-19 pandemic and where the heated public debate of the news coverage has taken place.

This article seeks to answer this question by taking the case study of several controversial Chinese news reports relating to women in the COVID-19 pandemic and examining the stereotypical images of women portrayed therein. It commences with an analysis on China’s commitments under CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action to remove gender stereotypes in and through media. It then discusses some of the controversial media coverage of COVID-19 in China, the debates that this coverage triggered, as well as its impact. The article concludes that, in order to avoid similar media coverage in the future and achieve gender equality in the long run, China should take further measures to fulfil its international commitments, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to put a strain on its recent gains towards the representation of women in the media.

²⁸ Hu Zhengrong (ed.) *Chuanboxue Gailun [Introduction to Communication Studies]* (1st edn, Higher Education Press 2017) 171-198.

²⁹ Antony Mayfield, *What is Social Media?* (ebook from iCrossing 2008) 5 <[Anhttps://www.icrossing.com/uk/sites/default/files_uk/insight_pdf_files/What%20is%20Social%20Media_iCrossing_ebook.pdf](https://www.icrossing.com/uk/sites/default/files_uk/insight_pdf_files/What%20is%20Social%20Media_iCrossing_ebook.pdf)> accessed 10 October 2020.

³⁰ The CEDAW Committee, CEDAW/C/BGR/CO/8, 5; CEDAW/C/AND/CO/4, 6.

2. CHINA'S INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS AND COMMITMENTS

This section attempts to analyse China's commitments under CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. Both documents address the issues of women and the media, including stereotyped portrayal of women.³¹ China is obligated to fulfill these commitments even in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1. OBLIGATIONS UNDER ARTICLE 5(A) OF CEDAW

Adopted on the 18 December 1979, CEDAW gives the definition of "discrimination against women" and sets out a comprehensive set of women's rights.³² The vast majority of UN member states have ratified or acceded to CEDAW, including China. As a State Party, China has legal obligations under CEDAW, especially Article 5(a), to eliminate damaging gender stereotypes, including stereotypes expressed in the media. According to Article 5(a) of CEDAW:

"State Parties shall take all appropriate measures (a) to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women."³³

³¹ The CEDAW Committee, 'General Recommendation No.3: Education and Public Information Campaigns' (6th session, 1987) UN Doc. A/42/38; The CEDAW Committee, 'General Recommendation No.23: Political and Public Life' (16th session, 1997) UN Doc. A/52/38, para. 12; The Fourth World Conference on Women, 'Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action' Chapter IV. J. (September 1995).

³² UN General Assembly, 'Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women' (18 December 1979) 1249 U.N.T.S. 13. According to Art.1 of CEDAW, the term "discrimination against women" shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

³³ CEDAW, Article. 5(a).

The social and cultural patterns of conduct, prejudices, customary, and all other practices, and ideas about the inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes, mentioned in Article 5(a) may be comprised in the single term ‘gender stereotypes’.³⁴ A gender stereotype is a generalised view or preconception about attributes, or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by women and men or the roles that are or should be performed by men and women.³⁵ Gender stereotypes lie at the basis of discrimination against women, and at times, they are discriminatory in themselves.³⁶

State Parties are bound to implement their obligations under Article 5(a) and these obligations are not subject to derogation during the COVID-19 pandemic, as CEDAW does not allow for derogation in times of public emergency. The commitment to women’s equality under CEDAW is also not subject to ‘claw-backs’ such as the protection of national security, public order, public health, morals, or the rights of freedoms of others.³⁷ In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women are making critical contributions but are faced with exacerbated inequalities and heightened risks of discrimination,³⁸ which makes eliminating gender stereotypes and upholding

³⁴ Marsha A. Freeman, Christine Chinkin, Beate Rudolf (eds.), *The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women: A Commentary* (1st edn, Oxford University Press 2012)142.

³⁵ ‘Gender Stereotypes and Stereotyping and Women’s Rights’ (*United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, September 2014)

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/OnePagers/Gender_stereotyping.pdf> accessed 10 October 2020; the term “gender” refers to socially constructed identities, attributes and roles for women and men and society’s social and cultural meaning for these biological differences resulting in hierarchical relationships between women and men and in the distribution of power and rights favouring men and disadvantaging women, see the CEDAW Committee, ‘General Recommendation No.28 on the Core Obligations of States Parties Under Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’ (47th session, 2010) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/28, para. 5; a “stereotype” is a generalized view or preconception of attributes or characteristics possessed by, or the roles that are or should be performed by, members of a particular group, see Freeman (n 34)147.

³⁶ Freeman (n 34)144-145.

³⁷ *ibid* 28.

³⁸ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Guidance Note on CEDAW and COVID-9’ (*United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, 22 April 2020)

<https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT/CEDAW/STA/9156&Lang=en> accessed 10 October 2020.

women's rights more important than ever. By fulfilling their obligations under Article 5(a), State Parties can ensure that women's voices are heard, their contributions appreciated, and their needs addressed.

Though Article 5(a) does not define the measures that should be taken by States Parties to combat gender stereotypes, the *travaux préparatoires* of Article 5 and the practice of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (hereafter the CEDAW Committee or the Committee) indicate that extensive information campaigns may be one of them, with media and education being the two most important sectors.³⁹

During the drafting process, the proposal made by the Philippines on the final treaty text of Article 5(a) in its draft Article 4 provided that:

“State Parties undertake to adopt immediate, effective appropriate measures, particularly in the field of teaching, education, culture and information, with a view to educating public opinion and to directing national aspirations towards the eradication of prejudice and the abolition of customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women”.⁴⁰

This version “explicitly limited the article’s scope to media and education campaigns”, whilst the final version adopted broadened the scope.⁴¹ It was not adopted mainly due to the debates on the second paragraph of its draft article which prohibited “incitement to discrimination against women”.⁴²

The CEDAW Committee’s general recommendations also demonstrate the media’s important role in initiating gender equality changes in social and cultural mentalities and practices. General Recommendation No 3 (1987) “urges all States parties effectively to adopt education and public information programmes” to

³⁹ Freeman (n 34)161-162; Noreen Burrows, ‘The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women’ (1985) 32 *Netherlands International Law Review* 419,428-429.

⁴⁰ Lars Adam Rehof, *Guide to the Travaux Préparatoires of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1st edn, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers1993) 78.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Sepper, ‘Confronting the “Sacred and Unchangeable”: The Obligation to Modify Cultural Patterns Under the Women’s Discrimination Treaty’ (2008) 30 *U.Pa.J.Int’l L.*585, 593-596.

⁴² *ibid* 595.

eliminate discrimination that hinders the implementation of Article 5 of CEDAW.⁴³ General Recommendation No 19 (1992) further states that “effective measures should be taken to ensure that the media respect and promote respect for women”.⁴⁴ Media is also included in other general recommendations on issues like eradication of female circumcision and other harmful practices that affect women or children.⁴⁵

The concluding observations made by the CEDAW Committee on the reports submitted by State Parties provide more specific guidance on the measures that should be taken to eliminate gender stereotypes in and through media. For example, the Committee recommended Andorra to adopt “the road map on a guide to equal treatment and non-discrimination in the media and the establishment of a self-regulatory body for the media” in 2019.⁴⁶ It recommended Latvia to “raise awareness among media enterprises of the need to combat gender stereotyping and encourage them to portray positive images of women as active participants in political and economic life, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged groups of women” in 2020.⁴⁷ The Committee also recommended Moldova to “provide the media and relevant public officials with capacity-building on the use of gender-sensitive language” and urged Bulgaria to “provide training to journalists on gender equality, the protection of women’s rights and the forms of coverage of gender-based violence and gender stereotyping by the press” in 2020.⁴⁸

⁴³ The CEDAW Committee, ‘General Recommendation No.3: Education and Public Information Campaigns’ (6th session, 1987) UN Doc. A/42/38.

⁴⁴ The CEDAW Committee, ‘General Recommendation No. 19: Violence against Women’ (11th session, 1992) UN Doc. A/47/38, para. 24(d).

⁴⁵ The CEDAW Committee, ‘General Recommendation No.14: Female Circumcision’ (9th session, 1990) UN Doc. A/45/38, para. (a); The CEDAW Committee and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘Joint General Recommendation No.31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/General Comment No.18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on Harmful Practices’ (2014) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18, paras.34, 64,73,75,81.

⁴⁶ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Andorra’ (2019) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/AND/CO/4, para.24.

⁴⁷ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Concluding Observations on the Combined Fourth to Seventh Periodic Reports of Latvia’ (2020) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/LVA/CO/4-7, para. 22.

⁴⁸ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Concluding Observations on the Sixth Periodic Report of the Republic of Moldova’ (2020) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/MDA/CO/6, para.21; The CEDAW Committee, ‘Concluding Observations on the Eight Periodic Report of Bulgaria’ (2020) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/BGR/CO/8, para. 2.

The periodic reports delivered by China demonstrate that China is aware of its obligations under Article 5(a) and is, in its own words “attaching great importance of the role of the media in promoting gender equality and overcoming discrimination and prejudice against women”.⁴⁹ In the 1997, 2004, and 2013 reports to the Committee, examples are given on how different newspapers, periodicals, publications, radio and television programmes are encouraged to promote gender equality by expanding their coverage for women and depicting women in a positive light.⁵⁰ Women in different professions and fields, like successful female entrepreneurs and scientists, are set as “positive role models for women” in order to combat traditional stereotypes and prejudices that women belong in the home or that some jobs are simply not suitable for women.⁵¹ Awareness-raising campaigns, such as the “Care for Girls” campaign have been launched through media to eliminate discrimination against women and girls, including the deep-seated preference for having sons over daughters.⁵² Media is also instructed to observe, and encouraged to disseminate, relevant laws, regulations, and policies relating to women’s rights and gender equality.⁵³ Its contents are monitored by both the government’s review agencies and media monitoring network set up by NGOs.⁵⁴ Despite the progress made, the reports admit that due to its relatively recent move away from a feudal society, it is hard to completely change the negative cultural pattern of discrimination and prejudices

⁴⁹ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Report of States Parties (China)’ (2004) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/5-6, 16.

⁵⁰ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of States Parties (China)’ (1997) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/3-4, 11-12; The CEDAW Committee, ‘Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Report of States Parties (China)’ (2004) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/5-6, 16-17; The CEDAW Committee, ‘Combined Seventh and Eighth Periodic Report of States Parties (China)’ (2013) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/7-8, 22.

⁵¹ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of States Parties (China)’ (1997) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/3-4, 11-12.

⁵² The CEDAW Committee, ‘Combined Seventh and Eighth Periodic Report of States Parties (China)’ (2013) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/7-8, 22.

⁵³ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Report of States Parties (China)’ (2004) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/5-6, 16

⁵⁴ *ibid* 16-17.

against women in China. As such, according to the government, achieving gender equality in and through the media will take more time.⁵⁵

As a State Party, China is obligated under Article 5(a) to take measures to ensure that there are no damaging stereotypes in the media immediately after ratification, even when the stereotypes are presented by private actors.⁵⁶ The Committee has explicitly called upon China

“to put in place a comprehensive approach to overcoming traditional stereotypes regarding the role of women and men in society, in accordance with articles 2 (f) and 5 (a) of the Convention. Such an approach should include...the use of different media, including radio, television and print, and encompass both specialized and general programmes.”⁵⁷

Although CEDAW has plays an active role in encouraging the Chinese government to work through other actors, including media, to eliminate gender stereotypes, Chinese society still remains patriarchal in a certain sense and more efforts are needed to modify traditional stereotyped customs.⁵⁸ By better implementing the substantive obligations under Article 5(a), in and through the media during the COVID-19 pandemic, China can move one step further towards gender equality and strengthen women’s voices in the future.

⁵⁵ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Report of States Parties (China)’ (2004) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/5-6, 17. The report provides that “At present, women’s participation at the decision-making level in the media is still low; elements of gender discrimination and stereotyping persist in media content; some movies, TV programmes, advertisements and print media still distort, derogate and even insult the image of women; and the public lacks sensitivity to or critical awareness of gender discrimination in the media.”

⁵⁶ Freeman (n 34)162.

⁵⁷ The CEDAW Committee, ‘Concluding Comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: China’ (2006) UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CHN/CO/6, 4.

⁵⁸ Zhang Xiaobing, ‘Zhongguo Dui 《Xiaochu Dui FuNü Yiqie Xingshi Qishi Gongyue》 de Pizhun yu Shishi’ [The Ratification and Implementation of CEDAW by China] (2016) 06 Human Rights 69, 77.

2.2. COMMITMENTS UNDER THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were adopted by delegates from 189 governments. Though these instruments are not legally binding, they provide a powerful framework for promoting gender equality both at the national and international levels. The Platform for Action covers 12 so-called ‘Critical Areas of Concern’ including “women and the media”, where the Platform calls upon governments, media systems, NGOs and other actor, among others, to increase the participation of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media; increase access for women to new technologies of communication; and promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.⁵⁹ There is a correspondence between the Critical Areas of Concern on the one hand, and the articles of CEDAW on the other.⁶⁰ While CEDAW defines women’s rights in broad and vague language, the Platform for Action is both comprehensive and specific, defining problems, objectives and actions to be taken in great detail.⁶¹ The Commission of the Status of Women (hereafter CSW) takes a leading role in monitoring and carrying out review of the progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.⁶² China has reported its implementation by responding to the questionnaires prepared for CSW’s review and

⁵⁹ The Fourth World Conference on Women, ‘Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action’ Chapter IV. J. (September 1995).

⁶⁰ Dubravka Šimonović; with the support of OHCHR, ‘25 Years In Review of The Beijing Platform for Action’ (*United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*) 14
<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/SR/Booklet_BPA.pdf> accessed 10 October 2020.

⁶¹ Elizabeth L. Larson, ‘United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women: Action For Equality, Development, and Peace (Beijing, China: September 1995)’ (1996) 10 *Emory Int’l L. Rev.* 695, 720.

⁶² The UN General Assembly conducted a five-year review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2000, at its twenty-third special session and adopted a Political Declaration and an outcome document “further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action”. In 1996, ECOSOC decided that the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) should take a leading role in undertaking the review. CSW carried out the 10-year, 15-year, and 20-year reviews at its forty-ninth session in 2005, its fifty-fourth session in 2010, and its fifty-ninth session in 2015.

appraisal.⁶³ The response provides that the remaining gaps and challenges under Women and the Media were that, “some media workers have weak sense of gender perspectives, and thus the mainstream media still give a conventional description of the images of women.”⁶⁴ Whereas, in explaining the progress made, the report stated that,

“the media has become more proactive in awareness-raising advocacy on gender equality. A majority of media agencies are able to balance financial considerations with social benefits; with an enhanced awareness of social responsibilities, they have voluntarily refrained from disseminating information and products contradicting the concept of gender equality.”⁶⁵

The Platform for Action continues to apply during the pandemic and China has demonstrated its commitments. The Platform for Action recognizes that many women are particularly affected by serious and infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS pandemic and other transmitted diseases, these factors are considered barriers to gender equality that need to be removed, but not the reasons for derogation.⁶⁶ At the

⁶³The Questionnaires were prepared to compile information from Governments on major achievements and obstacles in implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action(1995) and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000). The Questionnaire for the ten-year review is available at

<<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/QUESTIONNAIRE%20Bplus10.pdf>>;the Questionnaire for the fifteen-year review is available at

<<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/questionnaires/questionnaire%20english.pdf>> accessed 26 November 2020.

⁶⁴The Chinese Government, ‘Report of the People’s Republic of China Regarding the Questionnaire on the Implementation of the *Beijing Declaration*, the *Platform for Action* and the Outcome of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly on Women Issues’ (*United Nations*) 22

<<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/CHINA-English.pdf>> accessed 26 November 2020.

⁶⁵ The Chinese Government, ‘Progress made by the Chinese Government in Implementation of the “Beijing Declaration” and “Program of Action” as well as the “Outcome Document” of the United General Assembly at its Twenty-Third Special Session’ (*United Nations*) 2

<[https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/responses/escap/China_\(English\).pdf](https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing15/responses/escap/China_(English).pdf)> accessed 26 November 2020.

⁶⁶ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 18, 44.

high-level meeting on the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Conference on October 1st 2020, Chinese president Xi Jinping highly praised women's contribution during the pandemic and stressed that "in both containing COVID-19 and promoting post-COVID economic and social recovery, it is particularly important that we address the special needs of women and deliver on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action".⁶⁷ In his speech, he added:

"While posing unprecedented challenges, COVID-19 also presents an opportunity for us to draw lessons from it and reshape the future. We need to eliminate prejudice, discrimination and violence against women and make gender equality a social norm and moral imperative observed by all."⁶⁸

This speech demonstrates that China is committed to carry out the Beijing Platform for Action during and after the pandemic, which serves as a useful guidance for eliminating gender stereotypes. The implementation of China's commitments will not only be assessed by CSW but will also be monitored by independent expert mechanisms like the CEDAW Committee and UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls.⁶⁹

According to the Beijing Platform for Action, the government should encourage gender-sensitive training for media professionals, including media owners and managers, to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women in the media.⁷⁰ Although media professionals, especially the news reporting and editing personnel in China, are required to receive training on professional skills and ethics, gender sensitivity is usually left out.⁷¹ The Chinese

⁶⁷ 'Full Text: Xi's Speech at UN Event Marking 25 Years Since Beijing Women Conference' (CGTN, 1 October 2020) <<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-01/Full-text-Xi-s-UN-speech-25-years-after-Beijing-women-s-conference-UeVN8o9iBa/index.html>> accessed in 10 October 2020.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Šimonović (n 59)3.

⁷⁰ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 102.

⁷¹ In order to pass the exam for Qualifications of Broadcasting Editors, Journalists and Anchors, applicants need to acquire professional skills and knowledge and also "comprehensive knowledge" including political theories, related laws and regulation, etc. See National Radio and Television

government and other actors have organized gender awareness training courses on local, provincial, and national level, but most without consistency.⁷² According to a survey conducted in 2015, 92.9 percent of the 591 respondents from various types of media organizations in China answered they had never attended gender-related training or workshops, although 71.4 percent of the respondents agreed that journalists should improve their perceptions about the ideas of gender equality.⁷³ Researchers have proposed including gender-related courses in media and communication studies in higher education in order to increase students' gender awareness before they enter careers in the media.⁷⁴ However, the number of universities that provide gender-related courses is still limited and not all the courses cover women and the media. Gender-related courses are important for education but cannot replace training for media professionals. Also, as social media platforms gain more popularity, people can share their information and thoughts through different modes of communication without any certificate or professional training. Starting from September 2019, China Human Resources Training and the non-governmental organization Chinese Culture Promotion Society have launched voluntary training for

Administration, '2020 National Qualifications of Broadcasting Editors, Journals and Anchors Exam Outline' (*Zhong Bo Wang*, 28 August 2020)

<<https://www.gzstv.com/a/067393f653ab412981855b4b5f07dcfb>> accessed 15 October 2020.

⁷² On the national level, National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council, Ministry of Culture (now the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China), State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of China (now the National Press and Publication Administration), and the State Council Information Office of China organized gender awareness training for media in 2014, provincial and local publicity department, committee on children and women and other agencies have also organized gender sensitive courses for media personnel. See Liu, Qin (n 13); Yang Fuquan, 'Wo Sheng Jiaqiang Chuanmei Lingyu Shehui Xingbie Yishi Peixun' [Strengthening Gender Awareness Training for Media in the (Guizhou) Province] *Guizhou Daily* (8 June 2016) 2; 'Shandong Juban Dazhong Chuanmei yu Shehui Xingbie Yishi Peixunban' [Shandong Province Organized "Mass Media and Gender Awareness" Training] (*Da Zhong Wang*, 15 April 2008) <http://www.dzwww.com/shandong/sdnews/200804/t20080415_3394537.html> accessed 15 October 2020.

⁷³ Chen Zhijuan, 'Perceptions and Attitudes of Chinese Journalists about Gender Equality: A National Survey' (2017) 2(3-4) *Global Media and China* 211, 224.

⁷⁴ Wang Feng, 'Meijie Hangye Tuijin Shehui Xingbie Yishi de Lujing Tanjiu' [Exploring the Path Towards Gender Awareness Promoted by the Media] (2019) 18(12) *Industrial & Science Tribune* 97, 98.

new media practitioners including live-streaming hosts.⁷⁵ The training covers laws and regulations, art and culture, and professional skills; it aims to raise the comprehensive quality and legal awareness of new media practitioners. People who have finished the training can acquire a certificate which may be a plus for their careers. If gender sensitivity can be integrated into the training, it could serve as a positive approach to influence new media and encourage it to play its full role during the pandemic without affecting freedom of expression.

The Beijing Platform for Action also calls for media watch groups that can monitor and consult with the media. At the same time, the mass media and advertising organizations are encouraged to develop professional guidelines, codes of conduct, and other forms of self-regulation to promote the presentation of non-stereotyped images of women, and establish guidelines that address violent, degrading materials concerning women. After the Beijing Conference, Media Monitor for Women Network, Beijing Women Journalists Association (Shoudu Nü Xinwen Gongzuozhe Xiehui), and the watch groups established by academic institutions and local media agencies, have played an important role in building the media monitoring network in China and encouraging gender-sensitive reporting.⁷⁶ Non-governmental organization Equality (Weiping) has also carried out media monitoring in the specific area of domestic violence.⁷⁷ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the big data analytics platform, Antfact (Yi Gongchang), monitored reports on women medical workers and has pointed out that appealing to viewers' emotions

⁷⁵ China Human Resources Training is a national level education training institution organized by the China Training Center for Senior Civil Servants of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China; 'Tongguo Xianshang Kaohe Peixun Zhuli Xinmeiti Zhubo Hangye Fazhan'[Promote the Development of the New Media Live Host Industry Through Online Training] (*Guangming Wang*, 12 September 2019) <https://e.gmw.cn/2019-09/12/content_33155377.htm> accessed 10 October 2020.

⁷⁶ Bu Wei, 'Meijie yu Renquan Jiaoyu — — Tanta Cong Renquan Kuangjia Jinxing Xinwen Baodao de Keneng Lujing' [Media and Human Rights Education: Exploring the Possible Approach of News Reporting under the Human Rights Framework] (2013) 06 Contemporary Communication 4, 6.

⁷⁷ 'Haiyou Duoshao NüxingZaoshou de Baoli, Wuren Zhixiao'[How many cases of violence against women remain unknown] (*The Beijing News*, 24 November 2018) <<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1618006390844147147&wfr=spider&for=pc>> accessed 10 October 2020.

by reporting women's sacrifices stirred controversy on the Internet.⁷⁸ It suggested that media agencies reflect on their way of reporting and focus more on women medical workers' actual needs and professional performance. Guidelines and codes of conduct have also been gradually developed, including the Professional Guidelines on Reporting Domestic Violence (Baodao Jiating Baoli de Zhuanye Zhunze) drawn up by members of the China Law Society Anti-Domestic Violence Network together with a group of journalists. Similarly, UNICEF and journalists from Qinghai Province, Guangxi and Ningxia autonomous regions of China have created The Media and Gender Institute of Communication at the University of China.⁷⁹ This Institute has been instrumental in translating into Chinese the Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM) and has published China's Media and Gender Development Report (2013-2014).⁸⁰ Using a monitoring system combining the GSIM, a research on five local Chinese television news programs in 2013 has demonstrated that the media still needs to raise the level of gender awareness and sensitivity in order to better promote gender equality.⁸¹ These professional guidelines serve as helpful tools to remove gender stereotypes, special codes can also be established to address the COVID-19 pandemic coverage.

The Outline for the Development of Chinese Women (2011-2020) includes the goals of raising media personnel's gender consciousness through training, improving gender monitoring, and supporting the media to self-regulate away from gender stereotyping. The Chinese government should take further steps to fulfil its commitments under the Platform for Action and the Outline through measures

⁷⁸ Antfact, 'Yiqing Dangxia Xuyao Shenmeyang de Guanyu NüYihu Renyuan de Xinwen Baodao?' [What kinds of News Reports on Women Medical Workers Do We Need In the Context of the Pandemic] (*Sina*, 21 February 2020)

<<https://t.cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/2194035935/82c654df01900psnp>> accessed 15 October 2020.

⁷⁹ Bu, 'Meijie yu Renquan Jiaoyu' (n 70)6.

⁸⁰ 'Amidst Launch of Publications, UNESCO, Communication University of China Celebrate 10th Anniversary of UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender' (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 9 October 2015) <<https://en.unesco.org/news/amidst-launch-publications-unesco-communication-university-china-celebrate-10th-anniversary>> accessed 15 October 2020.

⁸¹ Liu, Chen (n 25) 232-249. The research monitored 1010 pieces of news from the five local news programs in year 2013 and analyze the contents with an indicator system combing the UNESCO's GSIM.

including organizing gender-sensitivity training at all levels, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese government should also support the development, dissemination and implementation of professional guidelines and codes of conduct and other forms of self-regulation of media. In this process, it is important to take China's national conditions into consideration. It has been proposed that China needs to reflect upon and summarize its own experience and make sure that the actions taken are accessible to Chinese women and are suitable for achieving the objectives in the Chinese context.⁸²

3. COVID-19 & CONTROVERSIAL COVERAGE OF WOMEN IN THE MEDIA IN CHINA AND ITS IMPACT

This section discusses some of the controversial media coverage of COVID-19 in China and how the public debates they caused led to a series of actions taken by women's federations and other actors.⁸³ This media coverage exposes the existing gaps in the implementation of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action on women and the media.

Women have been playing a crucial role in the battle against COVID-19 in China. Among 42,600 medical staff that have been sent to support the efforts in Wuhan, two-thirds of them are women.⁸⁴ Women intellectuals, including 73-year-old epidemiologist and one of China's leading scientists Li Lanjuan, have gained

⁸² Bu, 'Chaoyue "Funü yu Meijie"' (n 27)47.

⁸³ Women's federations refer to All-China Women's Federation and federations on local and primary levels. All-China Women's Federation is a people's organization under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, it serves as a bridge linking the party and the government with women and as an important social pillar of the state power. Its fundamental tasks are to establish links with and serve women, while its main responsibilities are to represent and safeguard women's rights and interests, and to promote gender equality and women's all-round development. See 'About the ACFW' (Women of China) <<http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/about/1503/2333-1.htm>> accessed 20 October 2020.

⁸⁴ '364 Zhi Yiliao Dui 4.2 Wan Ren Dida Hubei Kangyi' [More than 42 Thousand People in 364 Medical Teams Have Arrived Hubei to Join Fight Against Pandemic] People's Daily Overseas Edition (9 Mar 2020) 2.

nationwide respect.⁸⁵ Chen Wei, a military medical scientist was credited the national honorary title, the “People's Hero” for her major achievements in COVID-19-related basic research and development of vaccine and protective medicine.⁸⁶ Contributions made by female hospital construction workers, police officers, delivery drivers and women in other traditionally male-dominated fields have also been acknowledged. Realizing the risks and challenges faced by women, the Chinese government has paid special attention to the protection of women's rights, especially their right to life and right to health. Special policies and measures were taken to protect pregnant women, including development of differentiated treatment approaches.⁸⁷ The National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council of the PRC coordinated with the National Health Commission of the PRC and other ministries to respond to the needs of women during the pandemic and make tailored solutions for their problems, including providing protection for female medical workers at the frontline and looking after their family members.⁸⁸ As Chinese President Xi Jinping said, “We need to pay special attention to the health, social and psychological needs and working environment of frontline women medical workers...Efforts must be made to enhance benefit for women, address their concerns, and deliver results for their well-being.”⁸⁹

⁸⁵ ‘Li Lanjuan Yuanshi: 73 Sui Zaifu Kangyi Zuiqianxian’ [Academician Li Lanjuan: Reach Pandemic Frontline at the Age of 73] (*Womenvoice*, 10 February 2020)

<<http://www.womenvoice.cn/html/report/20030582-1.htm>> accessed 21 November 2020.

⁸⁶ ‘China Honors People Fighting COVID-19 with National Medals’ (*CGTN*, 9 September 2020) <<https://www.cgtn.com/special/China-holds-awards-ceremony-for-role-models-in-COVID-19-fight.html>> accessed 20 October 2020.

⁸⁷ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *Fighting Covid-19 China in Action*, (June 2020) < http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/07/c_139120424.htm> accessed 21 November 2020.

⁸⁸ ‘Guowuyuan Funü Gongwei Renzhen Guanche Xi Jinping Zongshuji Zhongyao Zhishi Jingshen Cong Yuantou Shang Cujin Jiejue Yiqing Qijian Funü Ertong Jinan Wenti’ [National Working Committee on Children and Women under State Council Earnestly Implements the Spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Instructions, Solving Urgent and Difficult Challenges Faced by Women and Children During the Pandemic from the Source] (*NWCCW*, 12 March 2020) <http://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2020-03/12/content_281245.htm> accessed 21 November 2020.

⁸⁹ ‘Full Text: Xi's Speech at UN Event Marking 25 Years Since Beijing Women Conference’ (n 64).

However, at the same time, news reports around the COVID-19 pandemic have triggered controversy in the public debate, either by neglecting women in their reports or eagerly praising women's sacrifices in a way that is perceived to overlook women's rights and dignity. These reports have sparked backlash on Chinese social media and have attracted heated discussions on gender equality and the protection of women's rights. These discussions eventually led to a series of concrete actions by the Chinese government, women's federations and other organizations aimed at supporting women at the forefront of the pandemic battle. As China Women's News puts it, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us "a lesson about gender equality" and has led to "a highlight moment for Chinese women", it proves that adhering to gender equality as a constitutional principle and basic state policy will not only benefit women, but also men and the whole society.⁹⁰

One of the most controversial news items was published by the Meiri Gansu Wang (gansudaily.com) on Sina Weibo, and showed nurses having their heads shaved.⁹¹ On February 15th, the Gansu Provincial Maternity and Childcare Hospital sent a 15-member team to Wuhan, including 14 women. In the video uploaded by local media, female medical workers had tears in their eyes while having their heads shaved before joining frontline pandemic fight.⁹² The video soon triggered heated debates, as many on social media expressed discomfort or even anger. The hospital explained that the shaving of the women's hair was voluntary, and that they had implemented this measure in an effort to protect the women from unnecessary infection. Still, some viewers believed it was disrespectful and unnecessary to encourage female medical workers to make this kind of sacrifice and, in their eyes, use

⁹⁰ Mo Lan, 'Zhuanye Shuizhun Chengjiu Zhongguo Nüxing Gaoguang Shike' [Professionalism Led to the Highlight Moment of Chinese Women] *China Women's News* (24 February 2020) 4.

⁹¹ 'Yong "Gei Nüxing Yihu Renyuan Ti Guangtou" Zuo Xuanchuan, Heshi Ma?' [Is It Appropriate to Use "Shaving Heads of Women Medical Workers" as Publicity?] (*Sina*, originally from *Guandian Toutiao*, 18 February 2020)

<http://k.sina.com.cn/article_5617179120_v14ecf59f001900q0zs.html?from=ent&subch=oent> accessed 20 October 2020.

⁹² 'Jianqu Xiufa Zhengzhuang Chufa' [Cut the Beautiful Hair, Set Out for the Battle] *Lanzhou Chenbao* (16 February 2020) A01. Video posted by *Lanzhou Chenbao* is available on Sina Weibo <<https://weibo.com/tv/v/Iuja4nVOi?fid=1034:4472234744414239&sudaref=link.zhihu.com&display=0&retcode=6102&sudaref=passport.weibo.com>> accessed 15 October 2020.

it for gaining publicity.⁹³ Another news item that caused controversy was an interview that was first broadcasted on the morning of February 17th 2020. In the original version of the interview, a nurse from Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital said that she felt exhausted as she was having her period while doing heavy lifting and taking care of the patients.⁹⁴ However, in the afternoon rebroadcast, the sentence that mentioned menstruation was removed.⁹⁵ This version was criticized for ignoring the special difficulties faced by female medical workers and a supposed attempt at period-shaming. According to data analysis of the news reports on women medical workers during the pandemic, the news coverage on head-shaving and the need for feminine hygiene products led to the two peaks of people's attention on the internet and started debates on how the media should report women medical workers.⁹⁶

Such media coverage of COVID-19 exposes a lack of gender sensitivity and inclusive gender perspective. On the positive side, the strong reactions of the audience demonstrate that public awareness of respecting and protecting women has been growing, even surpassing some media personnel's perceptions. Based on this, it could be argued that people expect to see women equally represented and respected in the media, especially when women are shouldering heavy burdens and making significant contributions during the pandemic. Issues of gender equality and women's rights have been put in the spotlight. As a result, there are more public discussions on women's dignity, their underrepresentation in media, the importance of feminine hygiene products for nurses and the social taboo on menstruation. Due to the public attention attracted by the news of nurses shaving heads, Gansu Women's Federation looked into this matter. The result of the investigation showed that the nurses were

⁹³ Antfact (n 72); Bao Zitou, 'Nüxing Yihu Renyuan Ti Guangtou Chuzheng: Bei Zanmei de Nixingzhe, Bei Hulue de Nüxing' [Shaving Women Medical Workers's Hair for the Battle: Praised Heroes in Harm's Way, Neglected Women] (*the Beijing News*, 19 February 2020)

<<http://www.bjnews.com.cn/culture/2020/02/19/691616.html>> accessed 1 November 2020.

⁹⁴ The original interview is no longer available at tv.cctv.com, related information and discussion see Chinese Q&A social network Zhihu <<https://www.zhihu.com/question/372639823>> accessed 15 October 2020.

⁹⁵ Li Hongbing, 'Nüxing Nixing, Zunzhong Bi Zanmei Geng Zhongyao' [Women in Harm's Way, Respecting is More Important than Praising] (*People's Daily Online*, 18 February 2020) <<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0218/c223228-31593179.html>> accessed 15 October 2020.

⁹⁶ Antfact (n 72).

not forced, but the Federation still found that the media's tone of reporting was "inappropriate" and stressed that medical workers should not be forced to do anything involuntarily, as women medical workers deserve full respect and support.⁹⁷ Criticisms on this kind of news coverage are also voiced through other national media. In the opinion article of People's Daily "Women in Harm's Way, Respecting is More Important than Praising", the author Li Hongbing points out that "broadcasting women nurses getting their heads shaved shows a lack of empathy" and "only when we can openly discuss the menstrual hygiene needs of women at the COVID-19 frontline, our society can be a normal society where people can find safety and warmth".⁹⁸ By openly addressing the controversial media coverage and period-shaming, this article sets a good example for other national media. It also sends the message that media needs to remove gender stereotypes and be more gender sensitive during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the negative backlash, media reports in China have started focusing more on women in a gender sensitive way. They have been covering topics including the protection of women's rights in the pandemic; the rights of female workers and women in poverty due to unemployment; paying respect to women on the pandemic frontline, including social workers, airport workers, and other women facing the greatest risk of exposure; raising gender awareness and advocating for gender equality, etc.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ 'Gansu Hushi Bei Ti Guangtou Yin Zhengyi Sheng Fulian: Ying Zunzhong Guanai Yixian Nü Yihu' [Gansu Nurses Shaving Heads Triggered Controversies, (Gansu) Women's Federation: Frontline Women Medical Workers Should be Cared For and Respected] (*The Beijing News*, 19 February 2020) <<http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2020/02/19/691789.html>> accessed 15 October 2020.

⁹⁸ Li Hongbing, 'Nüxing Nixing, Zunzhong Bi Zanmei Geng Zhongyao' [Women in Harm's Way, Respecting is More Important than Praising] (*People's Daily Online*, 18 February 2020) <<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0218/c223228-31593179.html>> accessed 15 October 2020 [Author'.

⁹⁹ Zhao Yaxin, '《Zhongguo Funü Bao》 Xinguan Feiyan Yiqing Fangkong Baodao Zhong Nüxing Gongzuozhe de Meijie Xingxiang Yanjiu' [Research on Portrayal of Female Workers in COVID-19 Coverage of *China Women's News*] (2020) 03 Voice & Screen World 82, 82-83; 'Yiqingqi Nüxing Qishou Yangchengji' [Becoming a Female Delivery Driver During the Pandemic] *Beijing Business Today* (9 March 2020) 5; 'Geng Tiexin, Geng Renxing Hua, Yiqing Qijian Zhexie Nüxing Quanyi Ying Dedao Baozhang' [More Considerate and People-Oriented, These Women's Rights Should Be Guaranteed During the Pandemic] (*China National Radio*, 4 March 2020)

Social media has also played an important role in addressing the sanitary needs of female medical workers and donating sanitary products when this issue was overlooked, or even intentionally avoided, by some hospitals. Since February 2020, netizens on Weibo had already started bringing attention to this problem and called for donations of feminine hygiene products to support all “sisters” on the pandemic frontline. On February 14th, the People’s Daily made a Weibo post about a charitable foundation, China Women’s Development Foundation, raising money for feminine hygiene products. These messages were quickly shared and attracted wide attention. They raised public awareness of the needs of female medical workers on the frontline.¹⁰⁰

The growing public attention on women, especially female medical workers, has also led to a series of actions taken by different actors. At the press conference on the Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism of the State Council, the All-China Women’s Federation (hereafter ACWF) announced that feminine hygiene products were included in the list of epidemic protection supplies and that an extra 210 million CNY had been collected to support female medical workers.¹⁰¹ NGOs, corporations and individual volunteers also participated in organizing and transporting feminine hygiene products to Wuhan and other places in need. Before this issue was openly addressed, some female medical workers were ashamed of speaking of their needs publicly and some hospitals refused donations of feminine hygiene products even

<http://news.cnr.cn/dj/20200304/t20200304_525003205.shtml> accessed 15 October 2020; Xie Feijun, ‘Xiang Yiqing Li de “Tamen” Zhijing Zhihou, Ni Shifou Zhenzheng Dong le “Nan Nü Pingdeng”’ [After Paying “Her” Respect in the COVID-19 Pandemic, Do You Really Understand “Gender Equality”] (*Shanghai Observer*, 8 Mar 2020) <<https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=221380>> accessed 15 October 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Wang Xu Qiu Lin, ‘Yi Chang Wei Nüxing Faqi de Juanzeng Miandui “Shuo Bu Chu Kou” “Bei Hushi” de Kunjing’ [A Donation for Women: When Facing the “Unspeakable” and “Neglected” Dilemma] (*Southern Weekly*, 12 March 2020) <<http://www.infzm.com/contents/179021>> accessed 15 October 2020 .

¹⁰¹ ‘Quanguo Fulian: Xietiao Tuidong Nüxing Shengli Weisheng Yongpin Naru Fangyi Baozhang Yongpin Qingdan’ [All-China Women Federation: Coordinate and Promote Incorporation of Feminine Hygiene Products Into the List of Epidemic Protection Supplies] (*China News*, 8 March 2020) <<https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2020/03-08/9117969.shtml>> accessed 20 October 2020.

though these supplies were urgently needed.¹⁰² The reasons why these products were not supplied include the fact that many male medical workers or heads of hospital did not realize the needs of women or did not consider hygiene products as urgent supplies. Women medical workers stayed silent, as they found it embarrassing to request for hygiene products due to Chinese traditional ideas around menstruation.¹⁰³ As there is a menstrual taboo in public discourse, use of the term “menstruation” or “月经” in Chinese is usually avoided even by women.¹⁰⁴ The reason behind is that menstruation is considered unclean in traditional Chinese cultures and customs, arguably the media and education have not done enough to modify that stereotype and reconstruct discourses concerning menstruation.¹⁰⁵ This has led to an absence of gender perspective in the emergency management system and it also influences people’s and the government’s actions during disaster response and recovery.¹⁰⁶ Due to the gender stereotypes in public discourse and the lack of women in senior level of management, the need for feminine hygiene products as epidemic protection supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic was not recognized and understood by society in the first response.¹⁰⁷

It has been agreed that the media has a strong effect in shaping people’s views, as it can both reinforce and modify gender stereotypes.¹⁰⁸ The controversial COVID-

¹⁰² Wang Xu Qiu Lin (n 89).

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Jiang Yuxuan, ‘Minsu Wenhua Yingxiang Xia de Nüxing Shengli Xianxiang Weiwanyu Tanxi’ [Euphemisms for Female Physiological Phenomenon Under the Influence of Folk Culture] (2016) 3 *Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)* 91, 93

¹⁰⁵ Zhang Hang, ‘Bei Zhebi de “Xuqiu”: Gongzhong Yiti Zhong Nüxing Shengli Jiankang Huayuquan de Queshi’ [“Needs” That Have Been Covered Up: Absence of Female Physical Health in Public Discourse] 4 *Press Outpost* 94, 95.

¹⁰⁶ Guo Lingli, ‘Yingdui Zaihai Shigu Xu Zhongshi Nüxing de Teshu Xuqiu’ [Disaster Response Should Pay Attention to the Special Needs of Women] *China Women’s News* (23 January 2018) 5.

¹⁰⁷ Zhang, ‘Bei Zhebi de “Xuqiu”’ (n 95)96.

¹⁰⁸ Julia T. Wood, ‘Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender’ in Julia T. Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* (1st edn, Wadsworth Publishing 1994) 231-244; Michèle M. Schlehofer, Bettina J. Casad, Michelle C. Bligh, Angela R. Grotto, ‘Navigating Public Prejudices: The Impact of Media and Attitudes on High Profile Female Political Leaders’ (2011) 65 *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 69; Hannah Goodall, ‘Media’s Influence on Gender Stereotypes’ (2016) 39(3) *Media Asia* 160.

19 coverage and the positive role later played by the media in China during the pandemic also demonstrate the power of the media. By portraying women in a non-stereotypical way, serving women's needs and reflecting their concerns, the media can break the menstrual taboo, change the way society responds to crisis and eventually promote gender equality. That is why China should pay more attention to the area of women and the media, thus fulfilling its commitments under CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action.

4. CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global tragedy, but it also serves as an opportunity for China to reflect on the gaps in the implementation of CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. Until 2015, the numbers of women who participate in the media and who hold senior-level positions in the media across the world are far from equal; women's access to technology lags behind that of men; total representation of women in news coverage still remains very low compared to that of men; and women continue to be portrayed in traditional and stereotypical manners.¹⁰⁹ The controversial media coverage of women on the frontlines of the battle against COVID-19 may just be the wake-up call needed for the Chinese government to tackle gender inequality present in the media and promote a gender balanced, non-stereotyped media in the future.

According to Article 5(a) of CEDAW, China has substantial obligations to modify gender stereotyped and discriminatory social and cultural patterns of conduct through the media. China is also committed to achieve gender equality under the Beijing Platform for Action, which addresses "women and the media" as a critical area of concern and proposes detailed actions to be taken. Though China has been making great progress under these international instruments, some obstacles and challenges remain, especially a low level of awareness among some media personnel and a lack of gender-sensitive training and monitoring. China should further the implementation of CEDAW and the Platform for Action, but this can only be done more effectively when the Chinese government finds the most suitable measures tailored to the

¹⁰⁹ The Secretary-General of UN, 'Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Outcomes of the Twenty-third Special Session of the General Assembly' (2015) U.N. Doc. E/CN.6/2015/3, 76-77.

Chinese context, and achieve these objectives together with the media, social organizations and other actors.