

Protecting Life Against COVID-19¹

An interview with Mme. Zhang Haidi, President of Rehabilitation International

Editor: The COVID-19 outbreak is a public health crisis never seen before. Every one of us is a witness of this crisis. What are your main concerns as RI president?

Haidi: Our fellow people and their situations worry me most at this moment. The epidemic broke out at a time when we Chinese people were celebrating our lunar New Year. All of a sudden, our bustling life quieted down. We were seized with fear at first, but gradually we calmed down, and followed the call of social distancing. Staying at home, we felt like living on isolated islets. The virus made us apart, but we were even closer at heart.

The distance between China and the rest of the world also seems shortened. I have received many emails from around the world. I'm moved by the care shown by the RI EC members to my fellow people in China.

In times of emergency, persons with disabilities face even greater difficulties. This worries me very much. I feel relieved that, persons with disabilities and debilitated elderly are included in the epidemic control plan of our government. This means they will receive proper care and assistance. My colleagues at China Disabled Persons' Federation and I have mobilized local disability organizations across the country to help our fellow people. One day late at night, when we learned a disabled child needed urgent help, we called the local disabled persons' federation to help him at once. We also call on the whole society to ensure disease prevention for our fellow people.

Whether persons with disabilities can live in peace depends on how much assistance we provide to them. They must not be neglected in the epidemic containment, nor shall they have passive treatment if infected.

Science is a sword to protect us against illnesses, and humanitarianism is a shield to defend human beings. With these two combined, hope and light will be with us. Under the shadow of the virus, we need all the more to provide humanitarian aid, and bring warmth, confidence and strength to numerous people haunted by illnesses.



Zhang Haidi, President of Rehabilitation International; foto: Rehabilitation International.

¹ Protecting Life Against COVID-19, Rehabilitation International, May 2020, <http://www.ri-global.org/covid-19-disability-resources/>

Editor: What has RI done as the whole world is fighting the virus that is spreading in over 200 countries and regions?

Haidi: I have sent emails to the RI EC members and all RI members, and called for solidarity to help our fellow people against the virus. RI should play a bigger role at this special moment. On behalf of RI and CDPF, I have written to President of the UN General Assembly Prof. Bande, UN Secretary General Guterres, ESCAP Executive Secretary Dr. Alisjahbana, Chair of the Bureau of the Conference of State Parties to the CRPD Mr. Gallegos, and heads of other international agencies. In these mails I called on the international community and all countries and regions to show more care to persons with disabilities in this anti-virus fight.

President Bande replied that he will continue to work with, and call on Member States to take measures to halt the spread of the disease, while mitigating its social and economic impact, particularly on persons with disabilities, who are among those disproportionately affected. Secretary General Guterres called on the governments of all countries to protect the rights of and interests of persons with disabilities, and guarantee their equal access to healthcare and lifesaving procedures during the pandemic.

On May 15, I took part in the ESCAP webinar themed “Protecting and Empowering Persons with Disabilities in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.” I briefed the webinar audience what RI and CDPF have done against the virus, and made proposals for protecting our fellow people’s equal rights and interests.

I have also written to WHO Director General Dr. Tedros. I proposed that WHO convene a video conference for its member states and international disability organizations such as RI, and urge proper protection of persons with disabilities in the global anti-pandemic campaign.

I have exchanged views with people from other international disability organizations, and invited rehabilitation experts to give guidance to persons with disabilities by video on how to fight the virus. Our members from many countries have shared their policies, measures and experiences.

RI has decided to allocate US\$ 200,000 on joint programs with ESCAP to help persons with disabilities against the virus. We will strive to earnestly protect the rights and interests of the 690 million residents with disabilities in this region. I hope RI can deliver tangible benefits to those in need.

Editor: While bringing disasters, the virus also opens a window for everyone to observe the outside world. What do you see through this window, as Chairperson of CDPF and a writer?

Haidi: For centuries, humans have never ceased struggling against diseases. In China we have a story about a legendary herbal master who tasted all kinds of plants to look for useful ones to treat diseases. Our ancestors found the first medicinal herb in the wild, and gradually established a grand sys-

tem of traditional Chinese medicine. The progress of western medicine has expanded the vision of researchers to the microcosmic world. From the discovery of bacterium to that of penicillin, human beings have kept moving on with exploration.

The human struggle with diseases is a war without smoke of gunpowder. The 1918 flu infected nearly half of the world's population and took the lives of millions. That was during World War I, and it grew into a disastrous global public health emergency due to lack of cooperation among countries. It was a horrible memory to human society. It made the world realize that fighting virus is not an issue of any individual country, region or nation. We have to shelve our bias and disputes, and face it together.

As RI president I call for solidarity, mutual support and mutual help. Let's work together to beat the disease!

Editor: During the war against the pandemic, we have read news about inadequate protection of the disabled people, which at times challenged the bottom line of morality. These are happening in both developing and developed countries. Could you share with us your views on the protection of this disadvantaged group?

Haidi: Whether you treat persons with disabilities equally: this is an indicator of civilization of the people in any country and region.

There are 1 billion persons with disabilities around the world, and 85 million of them live in China. They are a group with special difficulties. When an emergency occurs, they are the most vulnerable and face the biggest risk.

This is true with COVID-19. The case fatality rate among the elderly, including persons with disabilities, is the highest. So the government must pay due attention to the persons with disabilities, take targeted measures, care for them, and ensure their basic needs are met. They must increase community services, home care and nursing of those with severe disabilities.

I have one good example in China. There are 2,000 persons with disabilities living in over 100 care centers in Zhumadian, a city in Henan Province, and none of them have been infected so far. This proves that proper protection brings safety.

Editor: An epidemic often worsens the inequality faced by persons with disabilities and poses lasting threats to them. What shall we do to prevent or mitigate such negative impacts?

Haidi: When an epidemic breaks out, it is very important that we respect persons with disabilities and protect their life and health. The COVID-19 has brought great shocks to the global economy, and this will remain so for a long time to come. They are having grave problems with their living conditions, rehabilitation and employment. I have three proposals to make:

First, we should treat every life equally with due respect. We must ensure that persons with disabilities, the elderly, women and children in particular,

have equal access to treatment and other services against the virus. We should meet their needs for basic living conditions, rehabilitation, education and employment.

Second, all States Parties must fully carry out the CRPD, and incorporate its implementation into their development policies and legislation. We need to set up long-term mechanisms against the virus, and build networks of cooperation among governments, societies and disability organizations, so that we can provide persons with disabilities whole-process protection, treatment, recovery services, as well as jobs in the course of the pandemic response and recovery. When countries make plans for recovery of the economy, they should consider the special problems and needs of this disadvantaged group, and give them special care.

Third, the international community should work to build a global community of health for all, and improve the international governance system for public health security, so as to enhance the capability to address current public health challenges and potential risks.

Editor: As an almost century-old organization, RI used to play a leading role in the global disability movement, and stand out as a pioneer among the world's disability organizations, but its influence seems declining today. How can RI reveal itself from many international disability organizations, and play its unique role?

Haidi: RI has a glorious history that I feel proud of. Disabilities are a social cost to be borne by society in the process of human development. Protecting, caring and helping persons with disabilities are a consensus of modern society. But 100 years ago, this group had suffered bias and discrimination and was regarded as “social problems.”

RI was founded, and like a ray of sunshine, it lit up the world of persons with disabilities. As one of the earliest international organizations for persons with disabilities, it has greatly promoted humanitarianism and social progress. For instance, the Paralympics was originally a proposal of the RI World Congress in 1951. RI first raised the concept of community-based rehabilitation. It designed the universally applied Symbol of Access and donated it for free use around the world. It was one of the initiators of the UN Decade of Disabled Persons. It has also played an important role in the formulation and implementation of the CRPD and the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons.

Since I assumed RI presidency in 2016, I have made progress with the concerted efforts of all our members. The Global Disability Development Fund and Africa Fund set up by RI are warmly welcomed. We held our EC meeting in autumn of 2017 in Africa. In a nursery courtyard, we listened to a disabled woman telling the miserable life of her and her child, who was also disabled. Her tears dropped on our hearts. It was the first time for many of the EC members to visit

such a poor country and find there were so many women and children that need help. I will do my best to lead RI and enable it to play a better role in enhancing the well-being of our fellow people.

In 2019 RI set up the RI Award for Outstanding Achievements at my proposal. The award conferring ceremony was held in Moscow and the winners were Mme. Maria Espinosa, President of the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly, Sri Lanka Eye Donation Society, and Ethiopia's Alpha Special School for the Deaf. They each received a prize of US\$ 200,000. I wish this award can inspire more people to pass on the spirit of love, convey the idea of peace, bring more hope to persons with disabilities, and motivate more people to care for this disadvantaged group.

The year 2022 will mark RI's first centenary. Together with my colleagues, we will raise the torch of love and light up the road toward happiness for our fellow brothers and sisters around the world.