

Improving Women's Working Conditions in the Pearl River Delta

*Administrative Support from The Asia Foundation
Funding provided by the Levi Strauss Foundation*

In cooperation with and with generous funding from the Levi Strauss Foundation, The Asia Foundation supported the design, preparation, and implementation of a series of projects targeting at-risk and in-need women workers in the Pearl River Delta. Begun in 2000, the program established a baseline for improving women's health and hygiene in factories and set out to improve women's health through on-site health services. This report describes the initial situation of a number of factories selected as 2001 participants.

Through the Women's Department of the Guangdong Labor Union, Levi Strauss Foundation funding supports the improvement of factory conditions in 13 factories. The Women's Department works through local Labor Union branches and health and sanitation stations to investigate and analyze the relation between working conditions and women's health and to provide on-site counseling, check-up services, and health education to women workers. The two case studies below provide information on the current status of a medium-sized factory producing wooden jewelry boxes for export to the U.S., and a large factory complex supporting six different factories that produce a vast array of consumer items.

Factory Reports

Jewelry Box Factory, Jiangmen: This Taiwan invested factory builds wooden jewelry boxes for export to Europe and the United States. The factory employs 300 workers, fifty percent of whom are women. Migrant workers at the factory are from numerous provinces including Sichuan, Hunan, and Hubei. In 1993 the factory was not doing well; safety standards and the working environment worsened which resulted in water supply problems. Factory workers are still subjected to high temperatures, severe dust, and poisonous paint fumes. Poor

air circulation continues to exacerbate health issues caused by air pollutants.

The factory manger describes his workers as being in their twenties, and most having completed junior high school. Workers work eight hour days and make a monthly salary of 560 yuan (USD \$68). Employee benefits include accident insurance and maternity leave. But, in general workers do not collect maternity leave. If a worker becomes pregnant she usually quits her job to go home and raise her child. Each year the factory sees a high rate of

The Asia Foundation is a private, nonprofit non-governmental organization working to advance mutual interests in the United States and the Asia Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S. and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.

THE ASIA FOUNDATION

HEADQUARTERS

465 California Street
14th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel: (415) 982-4640
Fax: (415) 392-8863
info@asiafound.org

HONG KONG

9th Floor, Shun Ho Tower
24-30 Ice House Street
Central, Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 2971-0889
Fax: (852) 2971-0773
choate@asiafound.org.hk

BEIJING

Suite 1905, Bldg. 1,
Henderson Center
18 Jianguomennei Avenue
Beijing, China 100005
Tel: (86 10) 65183868
Fax: (86 10) 61583869
beijing@asiafound.org.cn

www.asiafoundation.org

July 2001

employee turnover, about 20-30 percent. At most a worker remains at the factory for two years.

With support from the Levi Strauss Foundation and in cooperation with the Occupational Disease and Prevention Center, the Workers Union has conducted a health survey and provided physical check-ups for the women workers. While many problems still exist at this factory, the managers' willingness to participate in this program will result in better working conditions for the workers. Matching funds from the Guangdong Labor Union allowed the factory to install a new water tank and exhaust pipes to increase air circulation. Coupled with visits from the Workers Union, visits from Asia Foundation representatives continue to apply pressure, encouraging factory managers to make significant changes.

Overseas Chinese Agricultural Farm, Huizhou:

Six factories operate under this Overseas Chinese Agricultural Farm. The factory complex was originally intended to employ Chinese citizens returning from Burma and Vietnam and was set up with the assistance of the United Nations. Among others, the complex supports ceramic, electrical, garment, and handicrafts factories. The cluster of state-owned factories suffered economic failure as a result of the 1990s economic reforms. Most have become foreign invested companies though some remain state-owned or privately operated by Chinese owners. Working conditions, however, remain poor. Sixty percent of workers within these six factories are women. The complex supports the related schools and medical clinics and must also support 800 retired workers. Unable to collect tax revenue as all taxes must go to the government, the complex has been unable to pay its management staff for the past five months. The only benefit the complex provides factory-wide is accidental insurance.

Handicraft Factory: One of the factories within the Overseas Chinese Agricultural Farm complex is a Hong Kong joint venture that produces handicrafts for export to Japan. Half of the women employees are migrant laborers; the other half come from the local area and have worked at this factory for many years.

Among the migrant women laborers turnover is high and the longest working employees have been at the factory for two years. Workers earn between 400-500 yuan monthly (USD \$49-68); compensation is determined by piece rate. Since 1993 the piece rate has increased five fold and is now 2.3 yuan (USD \$.28) per unit. The factory manager reports that the labor is not heavy and workers do not work any overtime hours. Worker benefits include free housing, subsidized food, accident insurance, and paid maternity leave. However, as in other factories women do not claim maternity leave but usually quit to raise their children at home. Many workers are introduced to the factory through the Labor Bureau. The Labor Bureau charges each worker a finder's fee for securing employment. The most serious problems within this factory relate to housing, air circulation, high temperatures, and unsanitary eating areas and bathroom facilities.

In 1998, the Guangdong Labor Union independently provided physical check-ups for 305 women workers. One hundred of these workers received treatment for various ailments. In 2000, Levi Strauss funding allowed physical examinations for 1023 workers; following the second set of physical examinations, 558 women received medical treatment. Ailments included breast lumps and ovarian and uterus tumors. Factory personnel explained that as this was the first time medical check-ups had been carried out, it was impossible to determine whether these conditions resulted from factory work.

With Levi Strauss Foundation support, the Guangdong Labor Union conducted a survey to determine the current status and satisfaction of women employees at the factory. Seventy-six percent of the 2000 women surveyed claimed to be relatively satisfied. Complaints describe the most serious problems as severe pollution and a poor working environment. Funds also supported a workshop on personal hygiene and sanitation and a lecture on current laws relevant to women workers. Future projects will include physical check-ups for workers working under hazardous conditions and health classes to cover multiple topics including AIDS awareness.