

## PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT MIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS



### THE ASIA FOUNDATION'S WORK IN GUANGDONG, CHINA

Since 1999, The Asia Foundation has provided services for migrant women factory workers in China. Through the continued support of the Levi Strauss Foundation, The Asia Foundation has developed programs in education and training, preventative health services and counseling, and legal aid services, which now are available free-of-charge for migrant women workers in the industrialized belt of southern Guangdong province, China.

Migrant women workers receive little, if any, guidance or institutional protection in the communities where they work because China's household registration system ties social services and other benefits to a person's original place of residence. Upon arrival in Guangdong province, migrant workers who have moved far away from their home provinces suddenly find themselves with a "second-class" status that does not allow them access to benefits such as public health and education services. Millions of young, poorly educated workers find themselves without the security of social services or legal aid. The Asia Foundation's services often are the only support for these migrant workers.

According to the 2000 China national population census, approximately 60 percent of the 10 million migrant laborers in Guangdong province are women. Most of these female factory workers in

Guangdong are between 18 and 25 years old, unmarried, and obtained their current jobs through the labor bureau in their home provinces. They typically have only primary or secondary-level education, and work on the assembly line for up to 12 hours a day in labor-intensive export sectors such as toys, garments, or plastics. Female workers usually come to Guangdong from poorer provinces situated within the Yangtze River region such as Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangsu, or Jiangxi in order to work for wages of approximately US\$40-US\$65 a month; wages that are exponentially higher than wages they would be able to earn in their home provinces.

#### INDUSTRY INTEREST

Improving working conditions and living standards for migrant workers is an issue of critical importance for companies that source (manufacture their products in factories owned and managed by another party) in factories located in Guangdong province. To ensure that the factories comply with the workplace and worker standards that sourcing companies require, it is common for sourcing companies to hire third-party monitors to police the factories and conduct audits to ensure that health and safety standards are being met.

There is a growing view that factory improvements are most likely to be successful and sustainable



#### CHINA

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The Asia Foundation sponsored a workshop in 2003 in Guangzhou, bringing industry and the NGO community together to exchange information, ideas, strategies, and opinions on activities to improve Chinese workers' conditions.



when the manufacturing factories ‘own’ compliance regulations, rather than being policed into compliance. The Asia Foundation’s migrant worker project has progressed with sound results for five years by successfully engaging

factory managers and factory workers. The movement toward positive engagement, acknowledged need for a better understanding of workers’ concerns, and a need for worker education of their rights are all positive results of the program.



**THE ASIA FOUNDATION-LED WORKSHOP**

In order to bring industry and the non-governmental (NGO) community together, The Asia Foundation sponsored a two-day workshop in the fall

of 2003 in Guangzhou, China. This workshop was the first opportunity for representatives from more than 30 multinational corporations, trading companies, and international NGOs to meet with Chinese NGOs and Chinese academics in order to exchange information, ideas, strategies, and opinions on activities aimed at improving Chinese workers’ conditions.

The “Workshop on Direct Labor Service Programs” provided an opportunity for companies, NGOs, and academics to discuss efforts to better identify and prioritize worker needs and potential joint programs. Breakout discussions enabled NGOs and academics to hear directly from companies about the type of projects companies are keen to support. These discussions also allowed company representatives to hear the opinions of NGOs and academics of how labor services are progressing in China. NGOs explained that more needs assessments of migrant workers are needed, and that involving migrant workers in projects that concern them through interactive training methods such as peer to peer training, is very beneficial.

Participants concluded that partnerships between companies, local government, NGOs, academics, workers, and unions are necessary, and that they need to work collaboratively to raise local government awareness of corporate social responsibility issues, encourage links between local governments of workers’ origin and destination localities, encourage the development of civil society, and involve the local community, including student volunteers, in tackling labor issues.

Workshop participants came to a consensus on the following recommended next steps:

- The Asia Foundation will facilitate an information exchange network to collect and circulate information about existing labor-related projects. The Asia Foundation will also maintain a database of service projects that support migrant workers to help avoid program overlap or replication.
- It was also proposed that The Asia Foundation act as a broker and a coordinator between NGOs, academics, and brands that would like to work together.
- Participants agreed that they would like to see an annual roundtable, and that future roundtables should involve workers. Government officials should also be invited for selected sessions.
- It was suggested that interim roundtables should focus on more specific topics, such as HIV/AIDS education or occupational health and safety rights education.

**SUPPORT SERVICES FOR MIGRANT WORKER PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS**

Over the past four years, The Asia Foundation and Levi Strauss Foundation have supported projects and program partners that have reached well over 200,000 women workers in more than 200 factories in 22 cities and districts along the Pearl River Delta. Program highlights include:



- The Women’s Department of Guangdong Labor Union has reached more than 40,000 women

workers through street fairs and other educational and counseling sessions. The Women's Department works through local labor union branches and health and sanitation stations to monitor the working conditions and women's health, and to provide on-site counseling, check-up services, and health education to migrant women workers.



- The Guangdong Women's Federation produced and distributed 30,000 copies of "Learn to Protect Yourself," a handbook covering women's basic rights; 25,000 copies of "How Much Do You Know about the Rights and Interests of Migrant Women Workers," a handbook on the labor and personal rights of migrant women workers; and 25,000 copies of "Healthcare and Protection Handbook for Migrant Women Workers," a handbook covering occupational health and safety and prevention of occupational diseases, reproductive health, sexual diseases and prevention, and AIDS/HIV prevention.
- The Center for the Study of Contemporary China at Tsinghua University and the Research Center for Women's Education of Guangdong Women Cadre Training School established four education and counseling centers for migrant women, which to date, have reached more than 30,000 migrant women workers. These centers conduct classes on various topics including self-esteem, legal rights and protection, healthcare and occupational disease prevention, public safety, gender relations and AIDS/HIV awareness, female hygiene, psychological health, social norms and interpersonal skills in the workplace, and other issues encountered by migrant women workers.

- The Guangdong Women's Federation established a Legal Aid Group to organize and manage professional legal aid for needy migrant women workers. A total of 245 legal aid cases have been accepted to date. In late November 2003, the Guangdong Women's Federation has organized a case-study seminar on typical cases of labor rights violation and disputes for labor arbitrators, lawyers from Provincial Legal Aid Center and Rights Department of Women's Federation, judges, etc. Based on the seminar, the Women's Federation produced, "A Selection of Typical Cases on Labor Disputes of Migrant Women Workers." The selection also includes theoretical analysis on each typical case the Women's Federation has handled and can be used for teaching students in law schools and as a guide for lawyers and arbitrators who provide legal aid services to migrant women workers.



- The Asia Foundation recently has initiated a new three-year program with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and with provincial and local labor bureaus throughout China. This program will help improve the capacity of Labor Bureaus in labor law and legal aid for workers, enhance workplace compliance with existing labor regulations, and promote better collaboration between government and civil society. Project activities include the development of a national training system for labor law enforcement, provision of resources for training at the national and sub-national levels, and the development of training materials for labor inspectors. This program is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

## ABOUT THE ASIA FOUNDATION

The Asia Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, and open Asia-Pacific region. The Foundation supports programs in Asia that help improve governance and law, economic reform and development, women's participation, and international relations. Drawing on 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

With a network of 17 offices throughout Asia, an office in Washington, D.C., and its headquarters in San Francisco, the Foundation addresses these issues on both a country and regional level. In 2003, the Foundation awarded more than \$44 million in grants and distributed over 750,000 books and educational materials valued at almost \$28 million throughout Asia.

For more information about The Asia Foundation, visit [www.asiafoundation.org](http://www.asiafoundation.org).



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