

Nursing Rooms as an Indicator of Demographic Change among Migrant Workers in Guangdong Province, China

The 1990s have witnessed a boom in export-oriented industrial growth in China, especially in Guangdong Province, which borders Hong Kong. The growth rate of Guangdong Province exports in the four-year period from 1998 to 2001 alone reached 40%.

A common assumption is that the workforce of approximately five million migrant workers consists primarily of young women between the ages of 16 and 22, and that these migrant workers from distant provinces work for two to four years, saving money until such time as they return to their villages to marry and start a family.

Reebok International Ltd. has purchased footwear from independently-owned and operated footwear factories in Guangdong Province since 1989. During this time, Reebok staff have witnessed a demographic shift in the worker population. While the majority of workers in light industry remain young and female, a significant number of these women are marrying during their tenure as factory workers, having children during this period, and continuing their factory careers.

To study this phenomenon, Reebok human rights staff* interviewed 60 workers who had recently given birth and were utilizing the nursing rooms available in two footwear factories in Guangdong province.† Both of the nursing rooms are relatively new, with the facilities in Factory A established in April 2002, and the facilities in Factory B established in August 2001. Factory A has approximately 5,500 workers, while Factory B has approximately 9,000 workers. Reebok estimates that an average of 1% of the female worker population of the factories utilizes the

nursing rooms. This represents a small subset of the total workforce that is married with children.

Survey Results

- The 60 workers interviewed spanned the ages of 21–34 years, with 73% falling between the ages of 23 and 29 years.
- 73% of those interviewed were production line workers, not supervisors or staff, thus assembly-line workers are having children during their factory careers.
- All of the 60 workers were migrants from other provinces. In one factory, more than half of the workers (20/35) had given birth to their children in Guangdong Province. In the other factory, only 3/25 had given birth in Guangdong Province.
- The majority (82%) had married during the period of working away from home, and over half (57%) had met their husbands in Guangdong Province.
- All but one of the 60 workers live off site, not in factory dormitories, and about half of the workers (45%) live in apartments or boarding houses where other migrant workers also live with their children.
- The lengths of service with the current employer varied widely, with 42% serving four years or less, 43% serving between five and seven years, and 15% serving eight years or more. However, a full 85% of the interviewed workers had spent five years or more away from their hometowns (not necessarily with current employer), with 23% (14 workers) having spent ten years or more away from their villages as migrant workers.
- 15% of the interviewed workers did not live with their husbands. In Factory B the majority of the workers' husbands (18/25) worked at the same factory, while only 9/35 workers in Factory A worked with their husbands.
- The grandmother was the caretaker of the child in the great majority of cases (87%), with a significant minority of children from one factory (14%) being cared for by their fathers.

*Reebok International Ltd. maintains a staff of professional monitors to assess workplace conditions in the independently owned and operated factories that make the company's products. Human rights staff assess conditions through worker interviews, site inspections, records reviews, and management reviews. The staff work with factory management and workers to put necessary improvements in place.

†Article 9 of the Regulation on Labour Protection for Female Workers and Employees, dated June 1988 provides for two paid nursing periods of 30 minutes each per day; however, in practical terms most factories in Guangdong Province do not fulfill the law's requirement.

- While the majority of workers intended to send their children back to their home villages between the ages of 8 and 12 months to live with grandparents, close to 17% planned to keep their children with them in Guangdong Province. While nine of the children were the second children in their families, the 83% of these workers' children who were to return to their parents' villages would have no siblings and would be cared for by grandparents.
- While 72% of workers reported family incomes (consisting of husband's and wife's incomes) of rmb 1,500–2,000/month (US\$180–\$240), over half (53%) still reported that they could save money, even after the birth of their children.

Discussion

Nursing rooms in Chinese factories today are rare, but exist in greater numbers than in the past. While under Chinese law new mothers shall be compensated for two nursing periods per day,† even the few factories that provide nursing rooms do not always provide for proper compensation during nursing periods. However, when compensated properly, workers seek more than the government-required two nursing opportunities per day.

When asked to comment on problems at their factories, 40% of the workers at Factory A, which does provide compensation for periods away from the production line, commented on the desire to add nursing opportunities or to allow their children to be brought to the factory freely during the lunch period.

In Factory B, which provides no compensation for periods away from the production line, workers nurse only at lunchtime to avoid loss of wages.

Likewise, if facilities are provided that enable workers to keep their children with them during their periods of factory employment, workers will avail themselves of these facilities. Factory B has a pre-school that can be used by workers' children from the age of two years. 32% of the workers interviewed at this factory stated their intention to bring their children back to Guangdong Province when they become eligible to enter the pre-school. Factory A has no such facility.

One commonality between the factories was the mention of controlled working hours as a benefit.

When asked about the positive aspects of conditions in their factories, 70% of the workers responded that the limit imposed on working hours was a significant benefit of their employment.

Conclusion

While at the beginning of Guangdong Province's economic boom it may have been unusual to find workers marrying and having children in Guangdong Province, Reebok's observation is that it is becoming more common for workers to stay longer in factory jobs, making careers out of factory work.

One of the problems this poses for workers is that under China's population registration system, the "Hukou system," social services such as public schooling for children are generally not available to children of workers whose Hukous are outside the provinces where they reside. However, if such services, such as factory-sponsored pre-schools, are provided, migrant workers will use them and prefer to keep their families with them.

Workers who are provided opportunities for nursing and compensated as required by law will likely avail themselves of this benefit and attempt to seek more related benefits.

Factories in Guangdong Province should take notice of the trend of workers staying longer in their jobs, marrying, and starting families during this period. Factories that provide support services such as pre-schools and nursing rooms with appropriate compensation will meet an emerging social need and benefit their operations through enhanced worker loyalty and reduction in turnover. Factories that fail to take steps to respond to the changing nature of the workforce may find themselves with more limited pools of skilled and semi-skilled workers.

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