

# Between the Lines: Listening to Female Factory Workers in China

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## About this Report

This report is based on surveys and interviews conducted by BSR in 2012 and 2013 in southern China with factory workers, managers, and NGOs to provide context on the status and aspirations of female factory workers in the region's light manufacturing sector.

We would like to thank the interviewees and factories that contributed to this report. Please direct comments or questions to Jason Ho at [jho@bsr.org](mailto:jho@bsr.org).

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## Introduction

Women are crucial to China's manufacturing sector. While women comprise more than 44 percent of the overall workforce,<sup>1</sup> they represent about 60 percent of workers who migrate from rural areas to cities to work in factories.<sup>2</sup> These female workers are diverse, with needs and goals in the workplace that vary depending on age, education, and industry experience.



At a time when manufacturers in China have grown accustomed to high workforce turnover rates, there are a number of ways the nation's factories can achieve greater worker retention, job satisfaction, and workplace stability. Some of these strategies include creating paths for development and promotion, based on listening to and responding to workers' needs and aspirations.

Enabling the success of female factory workers will be crucial to the region's future. Women factory workers have varying goals and concerns, reflecting their backgrounds, work experiences and stages in life. This report emphasizes the importance of in-depth engagement with workers to understand their specific challenges and ambitions.

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<sup>1</sup> "Inclusive Growth and Gender Inequality in Asia's Labor Markets," Yana van der Meulen and Joseph E. Zveglich, Jr., ADB Economics Working Paper Series, No. 321, Asian Development Bank, December 2012.

<sup>2</sup> National Bureau of Statistics of China: Present Workers Monitor and Survey Report 2009 (2009 data)

## Why Women Workers Matter

Throughout the world, women are supporting themselves and their families by working in the factories that link global supply chains. Women represent roughly 80 percent of the global workforce in garment manufacturing,<sup>3</sup> and a large percentage of workers in other manufacturing sectors such as home goods and electronics.

In China, the story is no different. According to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the population of female workers from 1988 to the present day has increased by almost 63 percent, and many of these female workers are found in light manufacturing.

Most Chinese manufacturing workers are migrants who come from all over the country to work in coastal factories. Of this population, 26.2 percent are women working in production jobs, according to survey results of 10 provinces including Guangdong and Shanghai.<sup>4</sup>

Female factory workers typically face many challenges throughout their working lives, some of them linked to limited formal education. Chinese women generally have less education than men, and migrant women have less education than urban women,<sup>5</sup> which typically translates into lower wages and job positions. Of the individual women BSR interviewed, most had a middle school education.

Gender inequality is another concern—a 2010 Peking University survey of 3,000 workers revealed rampant workplace gender discrimination in recruitment, compensation, promotion, rights protection, and retirement.<sup>6</sup>

Cultural norms also influence women's roles in the workplace. While China historically has emphasized gender equality more than many other countries in the region, gender is still an important factor determining who does what job. Low-wage women workers in particular have limited access to the training opportunities needed to improve their management and communications skills.<sup>7</sup>

Various factors affect the opportunities of female factory workers to advance in the workplace, but some of the latent potential in the workforce can be addressed through education and training which would improve the ability of women workers to obtain jobs with more responsibility and pay. Factories themselves also should benefit from the development of a more motivated, educated workforce with higher productivity and retention.

“The repositioning of China as a world factory in the new international division of labor provides the bedrock for nurturing a new Chinese working class in general, and a new worker-subject, Chinese Dagongmei (female factory workers) in particular.”

—Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace*

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<sup>3</sup> Investing in Women for a Better World, BSR HERproject, March 2010. [www.BSR.org/reports](http://www.BSR.org/reports)

<sup>4</sup> Rural-Urban Migration in China and Indonesia (RUMiCi) project of the Research School of Economics at Australian National University

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

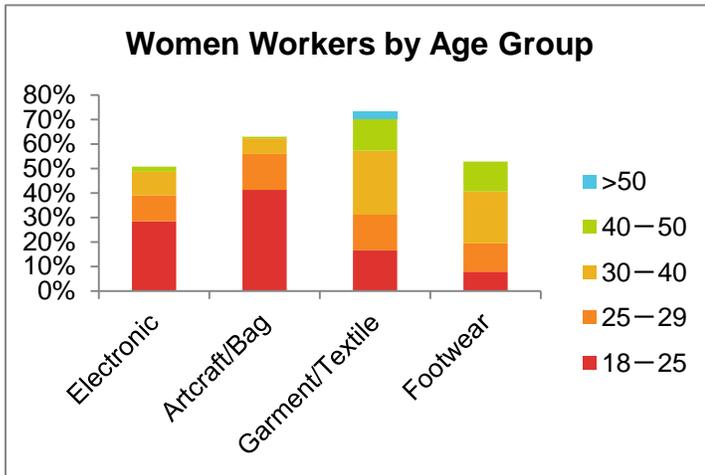
<sup>6</sup> China Workplace Gender Discrimination Research, Shuai Zhang, Women Laws Research and Service Center, Peking University, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

## What Women Workers Want

Not all women workers have the same opinions, needs, or aspirations: these tend to vary by age, education and household status. To gauge the breadth and depth of these varied needs, we surveyed 24 factory managers and human resource managers in seven industries in about workforce composition and characteristics. All factories selected are export-oriented and labor-intensive, and are located in the Pearl River and Yangtze River Deltas. We also conducted interviews with 26 female workers and four NGOs from Shenzhen and Beijing.

### DIFFERENT INDUSTRIES = DIFFERENT WORKFORCE



Across the factories we surveyed, the majority of the workforces were composed of women, but age and skill profiles varied by industry. Among electronics factories, for instance, 56 percent of female workers were aged 18 to 25, and had the higher educational levels required by their jobs. In contrast, apparel industries require more manual skills in sewing and stitching and less formal education, which tended to correlate with an older female workforce.

Different age groups of women also stated different preferences for their workplace selection. Younger workers reported that they selected electronics factories for the clean and comfortable environment, shorter working hours, and greater training opportunities. Workers in their 40s said they preferred the apparel industry because of the piece-rate system for wage payment.

### TURNOVER FACTORS

According to the managers we surveyed, workers in their 30s tended to stay in the same job for a longer duration of time, with nearly 90 percent of management-level survey respondents reporting a low turnover level for this group.<sup>8</sup> Survey data and information from the NGO interviews indicated that women in their 30s were more likely to be married and have children, therefore demonstrating less interest in leaving a stable job. Managers indicated that younger workers worry less about familial obligations, and therefore have much higher turnover rates.<sup>9</sup> These patterns link to industry-specific variations in turnover rates: workers in the textile/garment industry tend to be from an older demographic segment, and those factories tend to have less turnover.

### THE NEW GENERATION

Factory managers recognize that younger workers are part of a new generation that has new expectations from their workplace. Unlike previous generations of workers who migrated between rural and urban areas and worked in factories with the primary goal of sending their earnings home, the new generation is more

“Workers born after the 90s cannot endure as much hardship as we do. They are not used to the long working hours and quit easily.”

—Female factory worker from Shenzhen

<sup>8</sup> 21 percent or more of all factory workers leaving an industry or factory is a high rate of turnover. A low turnover rate was defined for the purposes of our survey as between eight to eleven percent of the workforce.

<sup>9</sup> NGOs interviewed include: The Sunflower Women Worker Centre (Shenzhen), Hand-in-Hand Women Worker Centre (Shenzhen), Times Women Worker Centre (Shenzhen), and Nongjianv Migrant Worker Centre (Beijing).

concerned with career choices, gaining experience and learning skills, according to sociologist Lie Wang.<sup>10</sup>

This new generation consists of workers born after 1980, the year that marked the beginning of China's transformation to a more market-oriented economy. These workers tend to be more autonomous, independent, and confident, and they have an average of nearly two more years of education than their older counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Han Dongfang, director of the NGO China Labor Bulletin, has written extensively about this new generation of workers. In a 2012 article for the *New York Times*, he wrote:

*“Young workers have greater expectations and higher aspirations than their parents’ generation. Simply getting by is no longer good enough, and they are increasingly demanding a lot more than the subsistence wages that have been the norm for so long.”<sup>12</sup>*

### PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT VERSUS STABILITY

To better understand how priorities and challenges vary by age group, we interviewed representatives from four NGOs that have extensive experience with female factory workers.<sup>13</sup> Here's what we found about women in each group:

“If ‘leaving, remitting, and returning’ are the three key words that define the old generation, then ‘leaving, searching, and becoming’ are the main themes for the new generation.”

—Wang Lie, U-Mass Amherst researcher



Generally speaking, this data indicated that while women in the youngest group of workers are concerned with personal development and learning new skills, as women grow older they take on additional responsibilities for partners and family. After women workers reach the age of 35, their priorities shift toward finding and

<sup>10</sup> China's New Generation of Migrant Workers: Seeking Independence Through Working in Factories, Lie Wang, thesis presented to the Graduate School University of Massachusetts Amherst, September 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> China's Workers Unit, Han Dongfang, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com), Nov. 8, 2012: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/opinion/chinas-workers-unite.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/09/opinion/chinas-workers-unite.html?_r=0).

<sup>13</sup> The Sunflower Women Worker Centre (Shenzhen), Hand-in-Hand Women Worker Centre (Shenzhen), Times Women Worker Centre (Shenzhen), and Nongjijianv Migrant Worker Centre (Beijing).

retaining a stable job and there is less ambition and motivation for learning new skills.

### **WORKER VOICES**

Women workers are often unaware of the benefits of training or promotion, with many reporting that they haven't considered or sought these kinds of opportunities. Still, when we asked female workers about what they would like to be doing five and 10 years in the future, 50 percent said they would like to have a higher position or start their own business.

One 27-year-old garment worker said she wants to move to a management level and wants training in computer skills, and that her long-term goal is to run her own business. A 25-year-old knitting worker said she wants to get a management position, and positions that offer learning opportunities. Her long-term goal is to be a manager or own a small factory.

Meanwhile, several textile workers in their 40s said they had no interest in training or promotion, and had no thoughts about their future five or ten years from now. A 40-year-old worker at a handbag factory, who had already been promoted to line manager, also said she had no interest in further promotion. In total, around 40 percent of workers we interviewed were interested in being promoted or changing positions.

While we found that not every worker may ask for learning or promotion opportunities, many of the statements from workers about their long-term ambitions and plans indicate desires to eventually grow into new responsibilities.

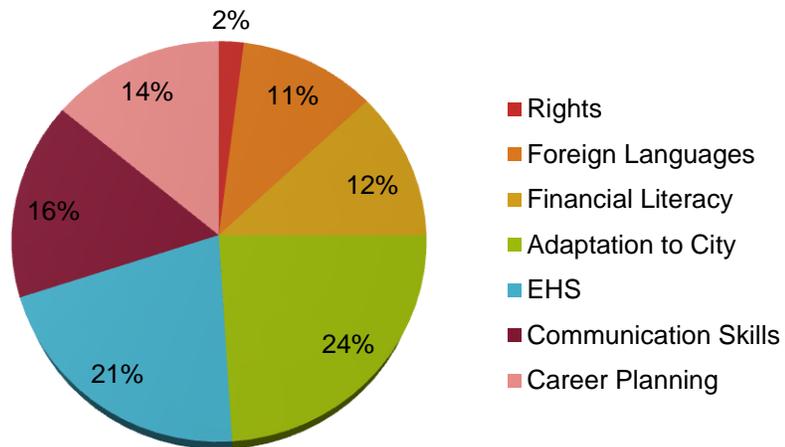
## Knowledge to Advance

An important way that employers can help women workers realize their professional goals is through targeted training. Of the workers we interviewed, most said the training available in their respective workplaces was for new workers, or for programs related to health and safety. Just three workers mentioned the availability of technical skill training at their factories (a few others said they picked up skills outside the factory or in previous jobs). 43 percent of workers said they would like training classes related to technical skills or health and safety.

### WORKER TRAINING NEEDS

An online survey of workers by Inno in 2012 found demand for diverse training content. Overall, basic information on labor rights seems to be less of a priority for formal training, as workers are better informed through social networks such as the micro-blog platform Weibo, worker NGOs and local government institutions. Today, workers are looking more for targeted career planning training, EHS training and help with adapting to their new cities.

Educational needs



Source: Survey of 1,000 workers via QQ questionnaire in the field by Inno Community

“In our factory, men take up all the manager positions. [Factories] like to recruit men as managers because they believe men are more capable and less bound by family issues.”

—Shenzhen factory supervisor who was originally from Sichuan

Shouqianshou,<sup>14</sup> a local NGO that has worked on a variety of worker engagement projects with BSR, surveyed 500 female workers between 18 and 45 years old on International Women’s Day in 2012 to find out what issues women are most concerned about in the workplace.

The resulting report, *Top 100 Concerns of Women Workers*, indicated that female workers are dissatisfied with an absence of good quality work opportunities, and are concerned about sexual discrimination, sexual harassment, and a general disregard for their social value.

- » 52 percent listed sexual discrimination as being what they are most concerned about;

<sup>14</sup> Top 100 Concerns of Women Workers, Shouqianshou, March, 2012

- » 20 percent said they were dissatisfied with the inequality of family roles; and
- » 15 percent stated concern about their working conditions and labor protection processes.

### LEARNING TO LISTEN

At a recent BSR Conference session titled, “[Happiness and the New Generation of Migrant Workers](#),” Yu Manyi from Business Link Consulting in Guangzhou, reported her findings from living among female factory workers for two years. Overall, she said that these workers “desire more personal free time and a workplace that offers them products they are proud to make, opportunities for career training and advancement, and the possibility of having a family.”<sup>15</sup>

Women factory workers want more than one thing, and they don’t all want the same thing: they have varying concerns and goals, and often these reflect their backgrounds, work experiences, and stages in life.

Factories must recognize and value this diversity of experience, and address women’s needs in the workplace. Listening to what workers have to say is the best way to start.

Specifically, BSR recommends that factories:

- Use in-factory **participatory rapid assessment** (PRA) methods to hear from factory workers about what they need and want, both inside and outside the workplace
- Build capacity within community **non-governmental organizations** to support women workers and to foster women’s leadership opportunities within factories
- Institutionalize **peer-to-peer training** programs that supplement the health-related training of BSR’s [HERproject](#) , addressing other needs and goals, including career skills
- Create **women’s committees** at factories to improve communication and knowledge about available opportunities

Furthermore, we suggest that human resources management processes should be adaptive and that factories leverage them to understand and address the different needs of women. Factories also should link the processes explicitly to workforce characteristics, root-cause analysis of turnover rates, and specific professional development challenges.

By listening to women to find out what they want and need, and by establishing peer-training and women’s committees to foster knowledge and communication, we can identify the most effective ways to help women workers continue to contribute to the health and well-being of their workplaces, their households, and themselves.

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<sup>15</sup>Happiness and the New Generation of Chinese Migrant Workers, BSR Conference 2012 Fast Forward, Session Summary: <http://2012-ny.bsr.org/en/sessions/summaries-view/happiness-and-the-new-generation-of-chinese-migrant-workers>