



A Business for Social Responsibility Initiative

Healthy Women, Healthy Business: HERproject in China

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Women comprise more than half of the workforce in China's manufacturing industries. Most female workers are rural migrants from impoverished inland provinces, whose rural *Hukou* (residency) status dictates their access to social services, including education and health insurance. These services are non-transferable when they relocate to urban areas to seek work.

Meanwhile, most factory managers question the value of investing in reproductive health programs for their workers because of high employee turnover and a widely held perception that young women are sexually inactive.

On the contrary, female factory workers in China are particularly vulnerable and face unmet critical health needs, ranging from hepatitis B, pelvic inflammatory disease, breast cancer and cancer of the cervix to limited family planning and reproductive health education, lack of awareness of HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention, and poor nutrition.



HERproject in China

Led by BSR and funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, [HERproject](#) (Health Enables Returns) is an initiative that strives to improve women's general and reproductive health by providing health education and services to female workers in the factory setting.

In partnership with international brands and participating factories, HERproject creates pilot projects to improve women's health and to demonstrate the financial return on investment from doing so.

For example, BSR partnered with **Nordstrom** over the last year to address health issues in five factories in the Guangdong province in China. The pilot projects educated female factory workers through peer awareness training on general and reproductive health, with a focus on HIV/AIDS prevention. The project was supported by BSR's Guangzhou office and implemented by local partner Professor Qu Ning, Director of the Training Project on Migrant Women Workers in the Pearl River Delta, at the Guangdong Women's Professional Technical College in Guangzhou.

Peer education programs seek to utilize existing peer networks to share information in a cost-effective, scalable and sustainable way. Workers trained as peer educators reap additional personal benefits, including leadership skills and health knowledge. From a factory management perspective, the peer education method enables flexibility and minimum production impact; factories arrange training times, venue and attendance based on their own schedules.

Impacts: Power of Peers and Partners

Within three months, four of the five participating factories successfully completed the female worker peer education training program, with 29 female workers trained as peer educators and approximately 5,000 female workers impacted through information sharing and awareness raising.

Three factory managers expressed strong support for the program, saying that not only would they continue the program after the pilot phase ended, they would also contribute financial resources to it. In addition:

- 97 percent of female workers surveyed reported that they were grateful for the ability to gain knowledge from their peers that they previously had limited access to
- Respondents demonstrated significantly improved knowledge of HIV/AIDS infection and prevention. (For example, in baseline surveys before the pilot launch, only 22 percent of women knew that sharing a syringe could result in infection, and 21 percent knew that sexual intercourse could result in infection. In exit surveys, those numbers increased to 96 percent and 90 percent, respectively)
- 82 percent of respondents reported that they had attained enough knowledge to protect themselves, and 99 percent said they would share what they had learned with their co-workers and friends

We are pleased with the results so far, but challenges remain. The length of the program was limited and peer educators require further training to develop additional knowledge. Many female workers continue to approach issues of reproductive health with shyness. In addition, the pilots demonstrated the importance of support from senior management; one factory manager discontinued participation, and women in that factory were no longer able to attend trainings.

However, there is no question that this initiative is increasing both the health awareness of workers and businesses. In addition to the positive quantitative results listed above, factory managers have expressed in exit interviews that workers' collective knowledge on health issues has improved. One noted that the peer health educator training improved workers' organizational abilities and presentation skills. Another said having the training improved manager relations with the female workers. Most importantly, all the factory managers were pleased with increased employee engagement.

To learn more about HERproject, including its other pilot projects in Pakistan, Vietnam and India, visit www.HERproject.org.

BSR is seeking to work with other BSR member companies to promote similar projects in China and other countries. Our intention is to create enduring linkages between factories and local NGOs, bolstered by strong company support. Such support will be reinforced by metrics that clearly uphold the business case for women's health training and services. For questions and comments, contact [Racheal Yeager](#).



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