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GENDER, THE GLOBAL GARMENT INDUSTRY AND
THE MOVEMENT FOR WOMEN WORKERS' RIGHTS

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CLEAN CLOTHES
CAMPAIGN

Made by Women

**Gender, the Global Garment Industry and
the Movement for Women Workers' Rights**

Clean Clothes Campaign

Made by Women

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Editors: Nina Ascoly & Chantal Finney

The editors are grateful for input from the following women who participated in the voluntary international steering committee for this publication:

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The editors would also like to thank Anneke van Luijken (IRENE) and Irene Xavier (TIE-Asia) for their support of this publication.

This publication was made possible due to the financial support of the Netherlands Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Mama Cash.

Design: Annelies Vlasblom, www.anneliesvlasblom.nl

Printing: PrimaveraQuint

We regret to report that as this publication was going to print we learned of the death of **Angela Hale**. Angela helped shape this publication, by providing feedback as a steering committee member, by co-writing one of the featured articles (see page 75) and by agreeing to be profiled (see page 110). Her support for this project was just one example of the work she did to support justice for women workers. Angela opened up spaces within which the voices and concerns of Southern women workers could be heard. Within those spaces, women activists from all over the world gained energy and confidence from each other. We dedicate this publication to Angela, in celebration of her unique contribution.

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Two garment workers reading *Sweet Words Among Sisters*, a magazine published by CWWN and distributed free of charge to migrant workers at lunch time by CWWN outreach staff

CWWN

The Chinese Working Women Network

by Jenny Chan¹

“On 19 November 1993, a fire engulfed a factory in Shenzhen, China, run by a Hong Kong subcontractor to [a brand of toys] famous in both the US and Europe. The blaze killed over eighty workers, all but two of them female. Fifty others were seriously burned and another twenty injured. The tragedy shocked Chinese society as well as the international community.”²

It was this fire at the Zhili toy factory in Southern China which inspired a number of Chinese activists and scholars to found the Chinese Working Women Network (CWWN) in Hong Kong in 1996.

CWWN aims to promote better lives for Chinese migrant women workers—by raising gender awareness among Chinese women and empowering women workers so they can “fight for their rights in a collective and effective way” and become more independent, both socially and economically.

In contemporary China, limited educational opportunities (especially for women), enormous difficulties earning a living from farming (due to low

prices for agricultural products, shortages of arable land and heavy farm taxes) and lack of village employment prospects continue to push girls in their late teens out of their home villages. Some of these young women also aspire to escape arranged marriages, family conflicts and patriarchal oppression, whilst others simply want to widen their horizons and experience urban modernity. In the fast developing Chinese economy, millions of internal migrant workers are working in foreign-owned enterprises in the coastal special economic zones. In the labour-intensive manufacturing industries of the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong, the gender ratio between male and female internal migrant workers is said to be about 1 to 4. Most employers favour recruiting young girls from the countryside, whom they believe to be docile, hard working and easy to control.

Due to the political situation, there are very few individuals and non-profit organisations providing help to these migrant communities. CWWN is a membership, non-profit organisation with an elected executive committee responsible for strategy and policy. The six executive committee

CWWN

Migrant workers at New Year Festival organized by CWWN, 2004

members for 2005-06 are university professors and postgraduate students from Hong Kong, and give their time voluntarily. CWWN currently employs three coordinators (from Hong Kong) and nine mainland Chinese organisers who are former migrant workers. All twelve workers are full-time. Each year, CWWN helps hundreds of thousands of workers in Shenzhen City and the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong. Most of them are newcomers: job turnover is high and women migrant workers return home after just a few years in the factory.³

The workers themselves are actively involved in CWWN activities, in particular legal education, gender awareness groups and cultural activities. Workers for example share what they have learnt in the course of legal training sessions with other workers in their dormitories. Others have helped design questionnaires about a new formula for calculating compensation following industrial accidents. One group wrote a play about gender and work, performed on International Women's Day and other special occasions at CWWN's Cultural Centre. Another group participates in the rotating editorial board of *Sweet Words Among Sisters*, a bi-monthly magazine distributed free of charge among workers by CWWN.⁴

CWWN uses a renovated bus to facilitate outreach work in three industrial towns in China

In the course of its outreach work, CWWN takes on board a whole range of issues, from health and safety to exploring—with women wanting to return to their villages—options for making a sustainable living.

CWWN offers women workers:

► A cultural space

The “home-like” women workers’ cultural centre, close to Shenzhen airport in Guangdong province,⁵ has the support of progressive health department officials, academics, lawyers, medical practitioners and the general public. It provides women workers with a space away from the factory floor and the dormitory. There

the women read, sing, dance, write, watch movies, take up crafts and photography, and so on; they discuss worker and women’s rights and health and safety, prepare for re-integrating themselves into their rural areas or take up leadership training. Put simply, women migrant workers get together there and learn from each other. The cultural centre is open seven days a week.

► Dormitory-based support networks

CWWN also meets with women workers in the dormitories of ten garment factories. These meetings take place after work, as late as 10 or 11 p.m., with groups of eight to ten women. The topics for discussion—worker and women’s rights, health and safety, rural re-integration, etc.—are agreed beforehand with participants. Training is given to the volunteers willing to be involved in these networks. The network coordinators, though volunteers, take on important responsibilities such as facilitating discussions and building up self-help networks. Two outstanding dormitory coordinators have become full-time, paid CWWN staff. Both have three to four years’ working experience in factories.

► A mobile support unit

CWWN uses a bus converted into a mobile support unit to reach thousands more women workers in the Shenzhen and Pearl River Delta special economic zones. Its outreach team provides free resources on health and welfare, including books and magazines, leaflets, and has a TV, and video and broadcasting equipment on board. It also carries simple equipment to conduct medical check-ups. Coordination of the work of this unit is mostly by migrant workers themselves. It visits three industrial towns a week and is supported by occupational health and safety and other health officials.

► An occupational health and safety centre

This centre, set up in 2002 next to CWWN’s cultural centre with funds raised for occupational health and safety projects, provides a

hot-line on health and safety issues, but focuses primarily on awareness-raising and prevention. It provides education kits and resources to organise support groups. Support groups enable participants to learn about their legal rights to medical insurance and raise awareness about dangerous machinery and other potential hazards in the workplace, and facilitate the assessment of basic safety conditions at shop-floor level. Industrial accidents and occupational diseases are common in small workshops as well as big enterprises, where there is too little education about potential workplace hazards. The centre receives guidance from academics from Sun Yat-Sen and Shenzhen universities. The aim in the long term is for workers to educate each other.

► Social events

The work carried out both in and outside the above structures is consolidated through larger social events on, for instance, Chinese New Year’s Day, International Labour Day and International Women’s Day. While regular group activities (at the centres, in workers’ dormitories, even in hospital wards) are usually limited to 15 persons or less, events during festivals, in the form of outdoor activities or debates for example, can bring together

CWWN-organised training inside a factory, 2004. Labour law, women’s rights, and occupational health are popular topics.

more than 100 workers from different factories. New friends are made and stronger solidarity is built.

► Expressing themselves through worker committees

Since 2004, CWWN has been providing training for workers—on labour rights, corporate social responsibility, health and safety, collective bargaining and communication skills—in an effort to promote worker committees. The training aims to enhance worker confidence, improve worker participation in negotiations (on overtime, fringe benefits, etc.), in the monitoring of codes of conduct implementation and the promotion of better communication with factory management. CWWN starts by getting factory management to agree to training sessions for workers and promoting the idea of worker committees as a platform for workers to express their opinions in relation to work. CWWN then guides workers through the nomination and election process. Every worker has the right to vote. CWWN believes that the elections for the worker committees are fairly and openly conducted. The committees are usually 12 to 14 workers strong, each member having precise responsibilities.

Garment worker at a factory in Bao'an district, Shenzhen, reading a novel at CWWN cultural center, where she is a volunteer

Following an evaluation of this system of worker representation, CWWN concluded that the negotiating powers of worker committees need to be stronger and that workers are not yet involved in key areas of decision-making. Despite the difficulties, worker committee members have demonstrated a certain degree of worker solidarity at shop floor level.

► Campaigning

CWWN is disseminating the campaign for a living wage initiated by the Committee for Asian Women (CAW). On International Labour Day 2005, CWWN agreed to support a campaign in which nine Asian countries are taking part (Bangladesh, China,

Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Korea, and Thailand)—advocating “living wage” policies. When asked what a living wage consists of, migrant women workers told CWWN that their needs include: basic daily needs (food and accommodation; clothes and toiletries), personal savings, sending money to their parents and siblings in the villages, healthcare, planning for marriage, part-time study and emergency fund. They collectively demand a living wage of 800 yuan a month (USD100).⁶

CWWN reports that labour problems are becoming increasingly complex in China in the era of globalisation. Exploitation is intensifying as fewer and fewer companies dominate global markets. Collaboration is needed between a variety of actors—student activists, labour and human rights groups, religious organisations, progressive academics and consumer communities—as the only effective way to address the interlinked problems of social injustice and environmental degradation among others. CWWN’s contribution is to facilitate bottom-up, community-based, worker-oriented organising and so empower Chinese migrant workers.

Workers singing a labour song at a forum organised by migrant workers to discuss global working conditions, 2005

- ¹ From material originally written by Pun Ngai, Merina Fung, Rebecca Lai and other CWWN staff.
- ² Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Duke University Press, 2005).
- ³ Because of state laws dictating that those born in the countryside cannot permanently leave their villages (China’s “household registration policy” means that rural migrant workers do not have urban citizenship rights), because young women are under pressure from their families to marry by their late twenties, and above all because these young women undertake physically exhausting work, migrant women workers are transient labour, staying an average of four or five years before returning home.
- ⁴ The magazine is downloadable in Chinese from www.cwwn.org.
- ⁵ Guangdong province, in southern coastal China, is the industrial hub of the country. In 2004, according to the Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, the country attracted US\$60.6 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) of which Guangdong alone absorbed US\$10 billion. Guangdong province is China’s largest production base for garments. It is the most populous of Chinese provinces with over 110 million inhabitants, including more than 31 million migrant workers.
- ⁶ The legal minimum wage was raised from 480 to 580 yuan a month (US\$72) on 1 July 2005 in the Bao’an and Longgang districts of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone.

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