

## HERproject South India

Participating companies:  
Abercrombie & Fitch, Columbia Sportswear, Levis Strauss & Co., and Timberland

Key industries:  
Apparel, Footwear and Electronics

### Iron deficiency among workers

40% of non-pregnant women of reproductive age in South-East Asia (India as part of this region) are anemic. This was also a key health need recorded during the HNA in two HERproject implementing factories.

Source: [Worldwide prevalence of Anemia 1993-2005: WHO Global Database on Anemia.](#)

# Female Factory Worker's Health Needs Assessment: South India

July 2010

## Country Context

Most female factory workers in South India are in their early to mid-twenties and many are the first of their families who leave their homes to seek employment. They tend to have little schooling and are often untrained when they begin working in factories. Unskilled female workers begin in the 'Helper' category and pick up skills on the job. Female workers generally get married in their early to mid-twenties and usually have two or three children. These women typically work until the age of 45 and then retire.

Female factory workers often do not have the time to care for themselves as they are burdened with long working days and commutes as well as home responsibilities. HERproject Health Needs Assessments among 226 female workers in two factories found tiredness and fatigue to be common.

## Key health issues for women workers in South India<sup>1</sup>

The major issues affecting women workers in South India include:

- » **Family planning:** Very few female workers use family planning methods and the most common method among those that do is an Intra-Uterine Device (IUD). Most women opt for permanent contraception through a tubectomy operation after the birth of their second child.
- » **HIV/AIDS:** HIV/AIDS is relatively well understood but methods of transmission and prevention are not widely known.
- » **Health-related rights:** Such as the right to move less strenuous work during pregnancy, right to maternity leave and on factory child care facilities, nursing breaks. Female workers are less likely to assert themselves than their male counterparts, including about health-related rights.
- » **Malnutrition:** A majority of female factory workers interviewed mentioned that they rarely have the time for breakfast before leaving for work and tend to take long breaks between meals. Their diet comprises mostly of rice with few sources of vitamins. Often the only protein they eat is green vegetables. Long working hours without a break for meals or a snack results in gastritis and dizziness in the workplace.
- » **Menstrual hygiene:** Female factory workers interviewed explained that they were uncomfortable asking supervisors for a restroom break, especially during peak production periods. Workers also said they struggled with personal and menstrual hygiene, and most did not use sanitary napkins. A

<sup>1</sup> Note: This information is based on Health Needs Assessments conducted in participating HERproject factories in India by St. John's Medical College, and by BSR's report, *Women's General & Reproductive Health in Global Supply Chains*, October 2006

### Business impacts of investing in women workers' health

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HERproject is currently being implemented in 5 factories in South India. Initial results show the following business impacts in the participating factories.

- » Improved nutrition among workers has resulted in better concentration and higher productivity
- » Improved awareness of menstrual and personal hygiene has led to reduced absenteeism
- » Reduced turnover rate in current worker population
- » Workers are happier since they started practicing ergonomics exercises at their work stations.

subsequently high incidence of reproductive tract infections was recorded among factory workers interviewed.

- » **Occupational health:** Long working hours at work stations contribute to muscular skeletal problems such as hip, lower back pains and other health issues related to poor ergonomics. Some female factory workers interviewed said they suffered from respiratory problems such as wheezing, colds and other skin allergies because of the dusty workplaces.
- » **Preventative and communicable diseases:** There is a proliferation of endemic fevers such as Chickungunya and dengue fever during the annual monsoon season. Women workers are not culturally inclined to practice preventative health and thus are highly vulnerable to health problems such as fevers, common colds and coughs. A majority of the workers in a HERproject participating factory requested a separate health awareness session on eye problems such as conjunctivities, a commonly occurring eye problem in India.

### Health care facilities in factories

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Most factories only provide basic diagnostic facilities and referral programs. Factories with more than 500 employees are required by law to have full-time trained medical staff. Most factories of this size invest in nurses rather than doctors.

In-house factory health facilities tend to be extremely basic and few factories have basic refrigeration facilities to store injections. As a result, only the most basic treatments can be taken care of onsite.

### External health care facilities

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Workers are covered by the Employee State Insurance (ESI) service though workers tend not to use poorly equipped and inadequately staffed government hospitals. The administrative hassles to procure medical benefits are so cumbersome and long that female workers often prefer to use more expensive services in private hospitals.

### BSR's partner organization for HERproject

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**St. John's Medical College, Department of Community Health, Division of Workplace Programs.** SJMC is a well respected medical college and hospital at a local and national level. SJMC has conducted many health programs with female factory workers, including general women's health education and an iron deficiency reduction program.

### Other organizations in and around Bangalore that work on women's health issues

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- » [Abhaya Ashram](#)
- » [Directorate for Women and Child Welfare](#)
- » [Indian Social Institute](#)
- » [Inner Wheel](#)
- » [Karnataka State Commission for Women's Health](#)
- » [Regional Vocational Training Institute](#)
- » [Sadhana Trust](#)
- » [Sumangali Seva Ashram](#)
- » [Vimochana](#)