

HERproject Vietnam

Participating company in HERproject: Abercrombie & Fitch, Clarks, Columbia Sportswear, Li & Fung, Marks & Spencer, Talbots, and Timberland.

Key industries: Apparel and footwear, and electronics

Anemia—a persistent problem

Between 20 to 39.9% of the non-pregnant women of reproductive age suffer from anemia.

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

Female Factory Workers' Health Needs Assessment: Vietnam

July 2010

Country Context

High economic growth rates in a small handful of Southern and Northern provinces in Vietnam have forced male and female rural migrants to move to large cities in search of work. Manufacturing industries in particular attract young unmarried women, mostly aged 18-25, from all over Vietnam to large metropolises such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Dong Nai Province.

Vietnam has performed better in the last decade on delivering health and education services to both sexes. Vietnamese women are guaranteed generous maternity benefits under law (five full months for most factory workers). However cultural norms still put women at greater health risk than men as women still put their families' needs above their own health. Domestic violence, prostitution and trafficking remain persistent problems affecting women in the country.

Key health issues for women workers in Vietnam¹

The major issues affecting women workers health in Vietnam include:

- » **Anemia:** BSR's 2006 report, 'Women's General and Reproductive Health in Global Supply Chains', concluded that the quality and nutritious value of most cafeteria meals in Vietnamese factories were questionable and in need of improvement. About one-third of female workers interviewed for that study were unaware of what constitutes a healthy meal.
- » **Family planning:** Female factory workers sometimes engage willingly or unwillingly in premarital sexual activities in Vietnam. This puts them at risk of unwanted pregnancy. A majority of women workers who took the initial Health Needs Assessment (HNA) survey in factories participating in HERproject Vietnam had limited knowledge of contraceptive methods and consumption of contraceptives was also reported to be relatively low—only 30 percent used IUDs and 30 percent used condoms.
- » **Health-related rights:** Women are unaware of their basic rights such as the right to be assigned easier duties during pregnancy, right to maternity leave and on-site factory child care facilities, and nursing breaks.
- » **HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs):** Premarital sex also puts workers at risk of contracting STIs. A large majority of female workers surveyed had basic knowledge about HIV/AIDS transmission, but only 49 percent were aware of prevention methods. The majority of workers knew very little about other STIs, like Hepatitis B & C.
- » **Menstrual hygiene and myths:** Dysmenorrhea (painful menstruation) was one of the four most common health problems reported by female workers interviewed in participating factories. Myths about menstruation are also

¹ Note: This information is based on Health Needs Assessments conducted in participating HERproject factories in Vietnam by BSR its partner organizations—Life Center and Marie Stopes International, Vietnam, and by BSR's report, *Women's General & Reproductive Health in Global Supply Chains*, October 2006

Business impacts of investing in women workers' health

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

- » Increased condom use—39 percent increase in the uptake of condoms by workers from 59.3 percent to 97.3 percent.
- » Increased knowledge of sexually transmitted and other preventable diseases like HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C and tuberculosis.
- » Decrease in health related “early leave” and absenteeism related to commonly occurring eye strain and headaches at work stations.
- » Better communication channels between production supervisors and peer educators at factories to avoid peak production months for project implementation.

common and harmful. In one HERproject factory, 45 percent of women thought that taking a bath during a monthly period may cause their hair to fall out, dark swollen eyes and body aches.

- » **Occupational health:** Respiratory infections, headaches and tiredness and eye strain are common complaints by women workers because of long hours and dusty workplaces. The inconsistent use of face masks also contribute to respiratory problems. Female workers interviewed in HERproject factories named fatigue, headache, and respiratory tract infections as three of the four most common health problems (fourth was painful menstruation, see above).

General Health care facilities in factories

Most factories only provide basic diagnostic and referral health programs. Factories provide different health care policies and on-site benefits and facilities for workers, such as free lunch, health and safety trainings, regular medical check-ups and four month maternity leave for pregnant workers.

Factory management rarely acknowledges potential sexual health risks of their workers. Likewise services for pregnant workers are also very limited. Few factories provide monthly check-ups for pregnant women.

External Health care facilities

In Vietnam, factories use the Employee Health Insurance scheme where by employers are required to contribute an amount equal to 15 percent of payroll to health insurance, to which workers contribute 5 percent of their salary. Workers are issued health insurance cards and may select the health examination and treatment facility of their choice. Currently, 44 percent of the Vietnamese population has health insurance and this is set to grow under national insurance coverage law that came into effect in July 2009.²

However, even if the employee health insurance has referral services for health facilities near to workers' homes, most prefer private health care facilities. Public services are seen as inconvenient and inefficient, and public health service providers are widely viewed as unfriendly and under-qualified by workers.

BSR's partner organizations for HERproject

BSR has two local partners implementing HERproject in Vietnam—Life Centre and Marie Stopes International, Vietnam (MSIVN).

- » The Centre of Promotion of Quality of Life or **Life Centre** is one of BSR's HERproject partners in Viet Nam. Life Centre works with vulnerable populations, especially women and mobile worker populations concentrated in industrial zones, to improve their quality of life. Life Centre is particularly concerned with the sustainability of their programs, and with funding from the Levi Strauss Foundation, has incorporated Return on Investment metrics into all their standard impact measurement tools.
- » **MSIVN** was one of the first international non-governmental organizations to work in the health field in Vietnam, beginning in 1989. MSI Vietnam works with the Ministry of Health to provide quality family planning and sexual and reproductive health services in the provinces and the cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh through its network of seven centers and its mobile center teams. Outreach activities include visits to factories, markets, and schools.

Other organizations in Vietnam that work on women's health issues

- » [Centre for Consultancy on Health Investment \(CIHP\)](#)
- » [Centre for Reproductive and Family Health \(RaFH\)](#)
- » [Institute for Social Development Studies \(ISDS\)](#)

² BSR, *Women's General and Reproductive Health in Global Supply Chains*, 2006.

» [The Sustainable Health Development Centre](#) (VietHealth)