

## ▶ Empowering women: Improving knowledge of and access to sexual and reproductive health of garment workers

With the support of the ILO Garment Industry Project (ILO-GIP), between September 2018 and February 2020, Marie Stopes International (MSI) first developed and then delivered various training programmes and awareness-raising activities on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) for factory-level nurses and clinical staff, peer workers/leaders and other workers in participating factories. MSI also delivered training to trainers from the two main trade union federations operating in the garment sector.

Through its collaboration with the ILO-GIP, MSI has acquired in-depth knowledge of the garment industry and is now equipped to continue its training programmes and activities with the industry. Nurses and medical personnel in participating factories have broadened their understanding of their roles and are better able to respond to garment workers' SRH needs.

The Myanmar labour law requires workplaces with more than 250 workers to provide a first aid room or dispensary supervised by a medical officer and nursing staff. In addition, every factory employing more than 250 workers must provide and maintain a clinic. With this in mind, and with the goal to empower women through providing information on and access to SRH, the ILO-GIP SRH training was designed to reach four different groups operating in participating garment factories.

### ▶ Nurses and clinical staff

This group attended an initial five days of training for 22 participants in the 20 ILO-GIP factories, followed by a two-day refresher course. The training included topics such as HIV/ AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, antenatal care, workplace breastfeeding, cervical cancer screening, family planning and basic counselling.

### ▶ Peer workers

A total of 645 workers/leaders in the ILO-GIP participating factories received one day of training designed to enable them to act as a basic resource person for their peers.

### ▶ Factory workers

Approximately 5,000 factory workers in the ILO-GIP participating factories received a one-hour awareness-raising session on the basics of how to maintain their sexual and reproductive health.

### ▶ Trade union trainers

17 trade union representatives from the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFM) and the Myanmar Industries Crafts and Services (MICS) attended one day of training on the basics of sexual and reproductive health, which they can build on as they continuously engage with garment workers.



## ► Learning insights

By participating in the SRH training program, factory clinic nurses said they acquired a wide range of new knowledge and skills.

Some factory clinic nurses said they have acquired a more complete understanding of the different options that are available for contraception; and of the benefits and side effects of using these additional contraceptive methods. Previously, they were only aware of oral contraception methods and contraceptive injections for women. They did not have knowledge of the full range of options for modern contraceptive methods. This lack of knowledge meant that, in the past, they were reluctant to discuss and recommend any modern contraception methods to garment workers. But they now feel they are able to provide better advice to workers and present them with more options.

"I was very proud to participate in this training program. Before I attended training, I only had basic knowledge about contraceptive methods. After training, I deepened my understanding. For example, I learned that certain types of contraception should not be recommended for some people who have underlying diseases such as a cardiac problem. The more I learn, the more I can explain and give helpful suggestions to workers. Because of this, I believe in myself and my confidence level is now much higher."

The factory clinic nurses identified the training content on improving counselling skills as especially valuable. They said this part of the training had improved their self-confidence when communicating with workers about sexual and reproductive health—a topic which can sometimes be difficult to discuss. Thanks to MSI training, they now feel they can empathise with the workers and respond appropriately to their concerns and feelings.

"Before I received the training, I didn't know how to communicate and comfort workers when they told me about their health problems. After the training, I can now provide counselling to workers. There have been some cases where workers have not needed medication for their problems after a health counselling session with me. We can cure some problems simply by listening and showing empathy."



## Changes in attitudes and practices

The factory clinic nurses acknowledged that, before the ILO-GIP training, they were not always welcoming to workers and sometimes even treated them a bit coldly. They confessed that the management in their factories sometimes had to force workers to attend the factory clinic when they were ill. This was not a good situation – the result of a fairly poor relationship between nurses and workers. But the clinic nurses now feel they are much better positioned to ask workers the right questions to establish their medical history and to diagnose the causes of their health problems. This has resulted in significant improvements to the way they are perceived by the workers. And factory workers now turn up at the factory clinic much quicker whenever they have any health problems.

"Before the training, workers were afraid of nurses because we did not treat them very well. Our behaviors and communication style have changed for the better after the counselling training. As a result, workers feel more comfortable to disclose their health problems and feelings to us. Now, we never hear workers complain that 'nurses are bad and not reliable' in our factories."

Thanks to their improved counselling skills and knowledge acquired through the ILO-GIP SRH training programme, factory clinic nurses said they have improved their ability to deliver health information and services that are actually meaningful for factory workers.

"Now, I can explain about various contraceptive methods in order for workers to choose the most suitable option. I have also informed everyone they can come and discuss with me if they would like to know more about birth spacing methods."

The factory clinic nurses said they have noticed how news of the improved quality and reliability of the healthcare services they can provide has spread around the factories.

"After I attended the sexual and reproductive health training, many women came to consult with me. Previously, I used to worry that my words or my actions might turn out wrong for the workers. Now, I am fully confident in myself and can make decisions without any doubts. If I am not sure about something, I can review my training notes and handouts and give them clear and accurate information later."

Prior to the training, factory workers tended to rely on the services provided by outside clinics for minor illnesses like a cough or a runny nose. But now the factory clinic nurses are becoming more trusted and can deliver better quality medical support, nurses are confident this has translated into a better attendance rate at their factory clinics. One of the clinic nurses who attended the ILO-GIP training said proudly that sometimes the clinic space is no longer large enough to accommodate all the workers who want a consultation!

## Demand for family planning

Most workers in the garment industry are young women. A key responsibility of factory clinic nurses is to provide these workers with advice about family planning methods. This information is not easily accessible in Myanmar. Female workers who have recently married are particularly interested in understanding better how to control if, when and how to start a family with their partner.

Factory clinic nurses also give advice to many workers who are single women. These workers often come to them for advice and help after they have had unprotected sexual activity. Following the SRH training programme, factory clinic nurses now know the criteria for prescribing emergency contraceptive medication in order to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. The nurses said they feel confident when explaining to workers how to take this medication and can now provide them with additional advice if necessary.

“Some single women also come and discuss with me about reproductive health. I am always very patient and thorough during these discussions. I encourage them to consider family planning methods. For sexual abuse cases, I help to prevent unwanted pregnancy by supporting them to obtain emergency contraceptive medication.”



This is an important outcome of the training the nurses received. Given the demanding working schedules of garment workers, their limited disposable income and the prevailing traditional culture in place in Myanmar, should factory nurses not be able to provide these services and advice, the garment workers would struggle to access quality SRH support. And without access to SRH services, female garment workers could find they are later burdened with the various personal, social and economic consequences associated with unwanted pregnancies.

The nurses trained through the ILO-GIP and MSI training programme said they now share their mobile telephone numbers with many female workers so they can provide confidential counseling on SRH issues. They have also begun sharing their newly acquired knowledge and skills outside of the workplace with the people in the communities where they live.

## Perceived strengths of the project

- ▶ As factory clinic nurses have to support thousands of workers, they normally find it difficult to share information with each worker individually. They found the information and educational materials provided during the MSI training to be very effective in helping them to reach a larger number of workers. Nurses now encourage workers to read this educational material by themselves and provide additional information when asked to do so.
- ▶ Factory clinic nurses said they are now providing more counselling services than before. They also noticed that even some of the foreign workers now use their services, with the assistance of an interpreter, when they feel unwell.
- ▶ The nurses appreciated that the MSI trainers were qualified, patient and communicated very well with training participants. They were also grateful that MSI arranged transportation for them as this made it easier for them to attend the training sessions.
- ▶ As the training was designed to bring together factory clinic nurses from all of the ILO-GIP participating factories, nurses were able to expand their professional networks. Following the training, they actually created an online group and continue to discuss and communicate with each other through this medium.

## Perceived gaps in the project

- ▶ Over a period of a few months, factory clinic nurses first attended five days of training on SRH, followed by a two-day refresher course. Some nurses felt the refresher training was too short, as it did not allow enough time

to discuss topics in sufficient depth. They suggested to allocate five days for the refresher course, saying this would allow them to get through all the questions they had collected since they had started delivering improved SRH services to workers in their factories.

- ▶ The nurses observed that when they referred workers to existing MSI clinics for more advanced medical support, many of them did not attend due to the difficulty and cost of arranging transportation. They suggested that MSI look into setting up clinics in every industrial zone to alleviate this problem.
- ▶ Some factory clinic nurses suggested that MSI should supplement the current information pamphlets with stickers and posters – materials that would be more visible and easier to distribute to workers in the factories.



## Looking to the future

### Family planning sessions

Factory clinic nurses were convinced of the importance of educating factory workers about contraceptive methods to help these workers better manage family planning and their family income. They noted that if workers have many children without any family planning, their income will be less than their expenses; and this would cause a lot of financial hardship for them. In the future, the nurses would like to see factories implement more health education sessions on family planning to reach as many workers as possible.

### Reaching more workers

Based on their experience, factory clinic nurses believe it would be useful for factories to arrange a fixed timetable for workers to visit the clinic and receive a consultation. They recommended, for example, that workers should be allocated a monthly consultation with them.

“Workers only get thirty minutes to be in the factory clinic. And it is only for important cases. They cannot stay over thirty minutes in the clinic. This is not enough time for some workers to receive treatment and for us to have a proper discussion with them. If this factory policy can be changed, employees who need it would have more time to consult and discuss during their visit.”

### More training on medications and sexually transmitted diseases

Factory clinic nurses said they would like to attend further refresher training courses to learn more about medications. They also want to learn more broadly about sexually transmitted diseases, treatment and prevention methods.

### Breastfeeding rooms

Although there are childcare rooms in some factories, the nurses said these rooms were practically unused. They observed that workers do not normally take their children to the factory. Some factories provide refrigerators to keep breast milk, but many do not have breastfeeding rooms. They suggested that it may be in the best interest of factories to look into addressing the needs of young mothers and father a bit more.

“There is no breastfeeding room in my factory. Now that I have some knowledge about the benefits of breastfeeding, I understand the importance of having a breastfeeding room. If every factory had such a facility, lactating mothers would not need to leave their jobs.”



“Improving labour relations for decent work and sustainable development in the Myanmar garment industry” project (ILO-GIP). The ILO-GIP aimed to reduce poverty and empower women in Myanmar by improving labour relations, social dialogue and gender equality in the garment industry. The project received funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), H&M and Marks and Spencer. The project ran from July 2016 to May 2020. For more information, please visit <http://bit.ly/ilo-gip>