

Chinese migrant workers suffer the effects of pollution at work and in their living environment.

July 2019

Pollution has become a major health crisis in China. With industrial pollution as a significant contributing factor, many workers, especially rural migrant workers who have been exposed to some of the harshest working and living conditions over many years and denied the same rights and mechanisms to rectify their suffering, face a double burden to their health. This first comes from the risk of direct exposure to harmful chemicals and other substances when they are used in the workplace, and then secondly in the environment where they live, as a consequence of industrial pollutants being released into the wider environment, affecting the land, air and water.

As part of research into the lives of first generation and long-term migrant workers, Globalization Monitor surveyed 651 workers about the pollution they had observed in their living and working environments¹. The migrant workers were living and working in 5 cities, including Dongguan and Huizhou in Guangdong province (27%), Fuzhou in Fujian province (25%), Yangzhou in Jiangsu province (25%) and Chongqing municipality (23%). The majority of the workers were factory workers, working in car and motorbike manufacturing, electronics, shoes, garments and glasses factories; while some worked in logistics, the service sector or as construction workers.

Pollution was found to be an issue affecting the lives of many of these workers. Amongst those surveyed:

- 20% of all workers said that the air around where they were living was either polluted or very polluted.
- 34% of workers said that they did not have access to clean water where they were living.
- Workers who lived in industrial areas and/or factory dormitories were more likely to describe the environment around where they live as polluted or lacked access to clean tap water.
- 27% of workers reported air pollution in the workplace, and many described experiencing adverse effects related to the polluted environment.
- Some of the workers who had contact with chemicals and pollutants in the workplace did not know what the chemicals were and/or were not provided with protective equipment.

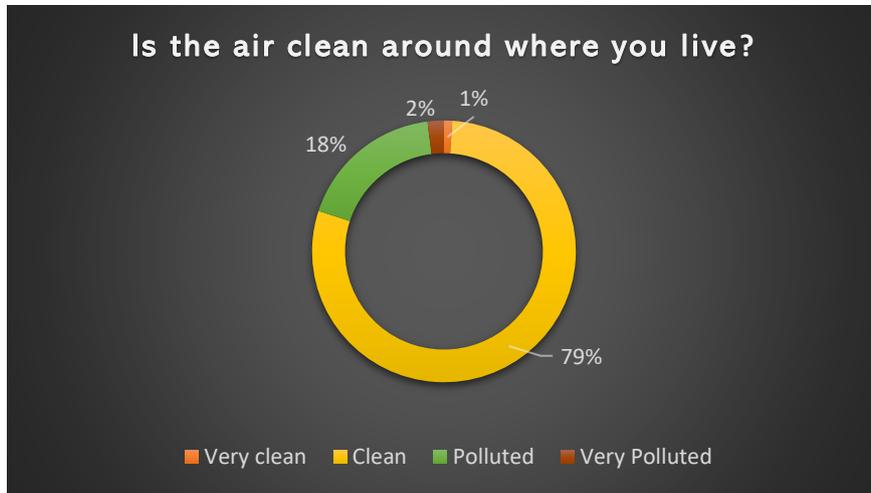
Environmental problems around where workers live.

In describing the air around where they lived workers' comments included:

- “[I] think that the air is not good, sometimes there will be bad smells. I am not sure what it is exactly but it is very strong and the smell makes me feel uncomfortable”.
- “There are factories all around us, the environment is not good....there are often some bad smells...I also don't know what the pollution is but the smell is very bad. It is probably the smell of chemicals”

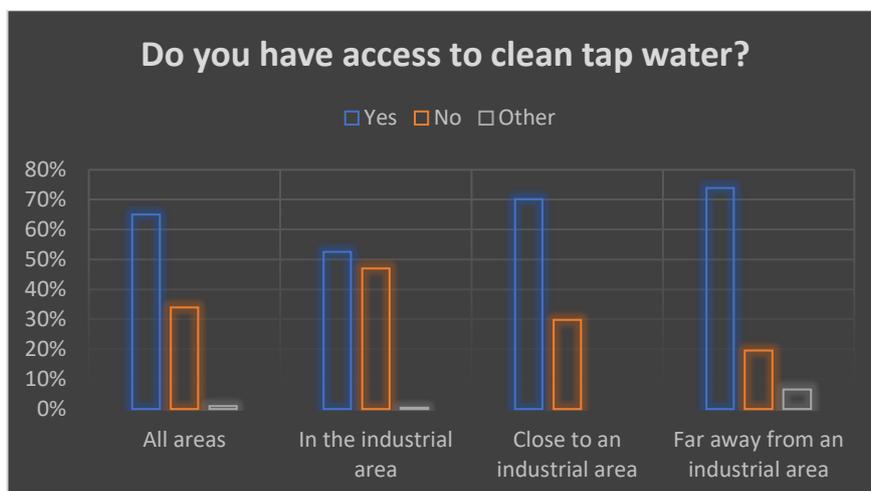
¹ The survey was conducted between June 2018 and early January 2019.

- “The surrounding area is all industrial and it seems as though there is a lot of pollution. The air quality is bad but we can’t do anything about it. It is like this everywhere now”.

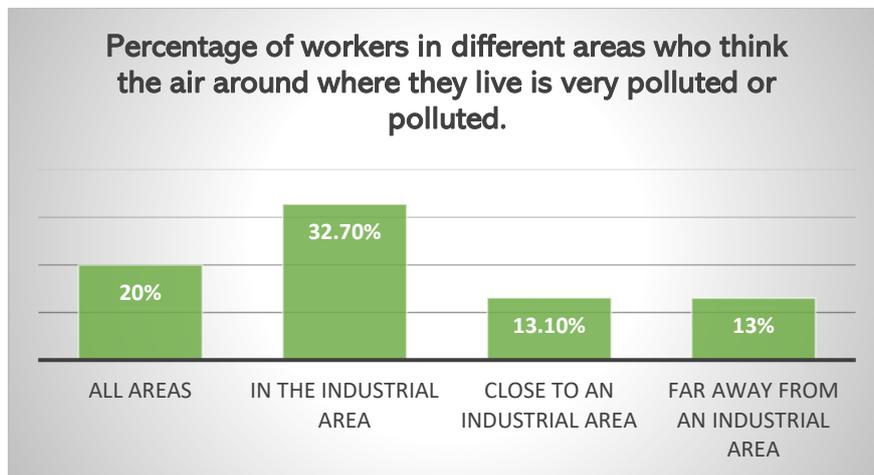


Many workers also reported having to buy drinking water from the supermarket as the water where they lived was dirty or unsafe to drink and sometimes came out of the tap yellow. In discussing the tap water, one 51 year old female garment worker in Dongguan commented that, “I dare not drink it directly. We always go to buy bottled water to drink. There is a strange taste in the tap water, but we still use tap water for cooking.”

While problems were not concentrated in certain factories or regions, proximity of the place where workers were living to the industrial area did seem to reduce access to a clean environment. Those living in an industrial area (often in a factory dormitory) were, as might be expected, more likely to report air pollution in their living environment as well as a lack of access to clean drinking water, compared even with those who lived just a short distance away. Significantly, whereas a total of 34% of all the workers surveyed did not have access to clean tap water at the place that they were living, this rose to 48% of those living in the industrial area, or 40.6% of those living in a factory dormitory.



As far as air pollution around where workers were living was concerned, whereas 20% of all the workers surveyed said that the air around where they lived was either polluted or very polluted, this rose to 32.7% amongst workers living in an industrial area, or 24.6% of those living in a factory dormitory.



With Chinese rural migrant workers (especially long distance migrants) being the workers most likely to live in factory dormitories located in industrial areas, these findings, indicating worse conditions for those living in such areas, might lead us to ask whether there is an additional burden of environmental injustice and associated health risks being borne by migrant workers (a group of workers who already face significant discrimination) when compared to many local urban residents and workers.

At the same time, during follow-up interviews with some of the workers, several workers who lived in industrial areas described the environment around where they lived as “normal” or “ok”, but they also said that they chose to describe it in this way only because they had now become “used to it” or because they thought “everywhere is the same”. That workers who have become accustomed to the environment in the industrial area may describe it in such an accepting way might suggest either a lack of awareness of or an underreporting of the seriousness of environmental pollution issues in the living environment more generally. On the other hand, it might also indicate a sense of hopelessness to be able to do anything about the situation by some of the workers.

Pollution in the workplace.

Air pollution was also a direct problem in the workplace, with 27% of workers reporting that the air was either polluted or very polluted, of which the majority were working in Guangdong (47%) or Fuzhou (35%). None of the workers that took part in the survey responded that the air was “very clean”.

In questions about the types of pollutants in the air, of the 77 workers who provided more details, 13 reported exposure to dust in the factories or on the construction sites that they worked, while 64 reported exposure to chemicals and other polluting substances (many of which gave off bad smells), such as glue, paint, benzene acetone, cadmium powder, thinner,

gasoline and various cleaning agents some of which they believed were having an adverse impact on their health.



In describing the situation at the factory where she worked, one shoe factory worker in Fuzhou commented that, “The air is very bad. The smell makes it a little bit hard to breathe and some workers can’t stand it when they first begin to work here. We are exposed to glue without protective equipment, occasionally we are given a disposable mask.” The worker also said that due to the doors and windows being welded with iron bars the year before, this had increased the bad smell. She said that the workers had gone to the union to complain but, “the union didn’t care about this and so it did nothing to help”. This worker thought that her job had a negative impact on her health as she frequently felt dizzy. She wondered if workers at the factory had developed occupational diseases but said that it was difficult to know as when they had medical examinations at the factory the workers were not given the medical check reports . Another worker from the same factory echoed similar concerns, “there is a chemical smell everywhere in the workshop, we don’t know specifically what type of chemical it is, but it could be the glue we usually use or the chemicals that are used for cleaning...We previously went to find the union because of the bad smell in the workshop, but the union would have nothing to do with it.” Meanwhile in Huizhou, several workers also said that they had experienced negative health effects requiring medical treatment or hospitalisation after exposure to benzene and cadmium powder. At least 4 workers had been certified with occupational diseases related to benzene poisoning. These workers cited air pollution as the main reason why they were dissatisfied with their work situation.

Of all those surveyed who reported exposure to chemicals in the workplace, many said that they were either not provided with or were only provided with very basic protective equipment, such as disposable masks. In some instances, workers indicated that they did not know what the pollutants and chemicals that they were being exposed to were. This potentially violates China’s Law on Prevention and Control of Occupational Diseases, which makes it the employer’s responsibility to ensure that workers know about occupational disease hazard factors in the workplace.

While workers at the shoe factory in Fuzhou workers had tried (unsuccessfully) to approach the workplace union about the bad air in the workshop, as with pollution issues in their living environment, the idea of being resigned to their situation was a common sentiment that was

expressed by workers participating in the survey. This was especially true amongst older migrant workers who were approaching retirement age, who frequently made comments such as “I’m aging and there is no other way and so I have to force myself to stay in the factory”, “I’m aging and I won’t be able to get employment in other factories” or “there’s no alternative”, when commenting on their work situation as reasons for their acceptance of it, despite problems related to either pollution or labour issues such as long hours, low wages and poor working conditions.

Summary

Chinese migrant workers are being exposed to health risks and violations of their rights to access clean water and to breathe clean air connected to pollution in their workplace and living environments. (Migrant) workers living in industrial areas may face increased risks.

As this survey is based on workers’ own views and observations, and pollution and its effects are not always directly visible, it is likely that the statistics presented here for this group of workers greatly underestimate the severity of the problem. Workers may also lack awareness of the full extent that their rights are being violated in their exposure to pollutants and living environment.

In the workplace, workers may face increased health risks from pollutants due to company disregard for workers’ health (for instance by not providing suitable protective equipment or ensuring good ventilation) as well as inadequate worker representation through which to defend their rights.