

# Workers' Dormitories in China

In 2002, Pentland produced a research report on factory dormitories in South China in consultation with the Institute of Contemporary Observation (ICO) in Shenzhen to address key issues, assist in the development of ethical codes of conduct, and recommend best practice.

Dormitories are quite common in South China and usually accommodate migrant workers in or near the factory complexes. The workers are often female, young (18-25 years old) and come mainly from rural areas.

The development of ethical Codes of Conduct has highlighted concerns about living standards in dormitories. Are there any standards (laws and regulations) to which we can refer? What is best practice? Are there dangers of imposing so-called Western values without consultation with those most affected?

Other issues however have also been raised such as:

- Right to family life
- Freedom of movement

- Transparency of charges imposed on workers and their methods of collection
- Privacy and security
- Systems of management - rules and fines

In an effort to encourage a wider debate on these issues both within and outside China, Pentland consulted with a Chinese non-governmental organization, the Shenzhen Institute of Contemporary Observation.

In association with local universities, researchers interviewed over 200 workers in four main cities in Guangdong Province. Some of the points and issues that emerged are summarised below.

## Law

There are few legislative guidelines other than buildings legislation (local authority authorization, architectural plans, building inspections, fire inspection etc) and the prohibition of "three in one" buildings which house the workshop, warehouse and dormitories.

In the Shenzhen Labour Management Ordinance (1998) it is stipulated that each worker should have a living space of no less than 2 square meters.

## Physical facilities - Best practice

Facilities vary enormously but the following should be a minimum:

- Application of fire safety measures (adequate exits, trained fire fighters, regular fire evacuation drills, fire extinguishers, emergency lighting etc)
- First aid boxes and training
- Personal lockers
- Sufficient clean lavatories and showers; fixed time hot water supplied
- Clothes washing facilities
- Drinking water
- Freedom of movement with due regard to the safety and comfort of other residents

## More recent trends are:

- The changing needs of workers who marry and start families. Some factories have begun to organize married quarters. Some factories have facilities for children and have arranged local schooling.
- Involvement of workers in dormitory management. They can identify services useful to residents, such as telephone and mail. They can develop the basic regulations and implement them; in some there are competitions for 'Best kept room'. Some have rooms for visitors.
- Workers after a few years wish to be more independent and factories sometimes give an allowance to allow them to rent rooms locally

The main workers' requirement is that they have somewhere that is secure, clean and cheap. Although there are some excellent facilities, there are many that fall well below these basics.

For copies of the report in English or Chinese, please contact Pentland's Corporate Responsibility Department – email: [corporateresponsibility@pentland.com](mailto:corporateresponsibility@pentland.com)



A factory dormitory for migrant workers in Guangdong Province, south China.