



GETTING THROUGH A PANDEMIC

Migrant Parents and COVID-19 in China's Export Manufacturing Industry

A Study by The Centre for Child Rights and Business (formerly 'CCR CSR'),
2020



Children of workers play with balloons during a family day activity at their parents' factory. Photo: Shiwei Sun, © The Centre, 2020

Author: Canaria Gaffar, The Centre for Child Rights and Business (The Centre)

Contributors & Editors: Ines Kaempfer, Shuiyan Guo, Ellen Schliebitz, Wenxun Pan, Malin Liljert, Mark Robertson

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Photo: Factory workers during a PhotoVoice ceremony in Wuxi, China, November 2020.
Photo: Shiwei Sun, © The Centre, 2020.

FOREWORD

Looking at these survey results, The Centre and all its staff have been touched and heartened by the resilience and perseverance of migrant parent workers, and their often-unwavering commitment to creating brighter futures for their children. COVID-19 has shone a glaring spotlight on the vulnerability of global supply chains, their workers and their families. This should serve as a striking reminder of the need to do more to create better and fairer working conditions, where workers are provided with security and the means to sustain decent living standards for them and their families through a pandemic and beyond.

WE HOPE YOU WILL JOIN US ON THIS JOURNEY!

Ines Kaempfer,
CEO of The Centre for Child Rights and Business



Parent workers whose child attended a Child Friendly Space in the summer of 2019. Photo: Rae Hu. © The Centre

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study builds on two earlier studies published by The Centre for Child Rights and Business (formerly 'CCR CSR') in 2013 and 2017 on the challenges faced by migrant parents working in factories producing for international buyers. The goal of this study was to better understand the trends in migration choices of parent workers, especially post COVID-19, the impact of migration on child rights and available support mechanism to address the negative impact and find better solutions to improve child rights through factory-based programmes. The main data we used for the quantitative analysis came from 73 factories and 2137 migrant parents from 2018 to 2020. The latest data in 2020 came from 12 factories and 318 migrant parents to analyse the impact of COVID-19.

HIGHLIGHTS



80% of migrants returned to work late because of the pandemic



40% of parents did not receive compensation for missing work due to COVID-19



46% of parents said COVID-19 brought them closer to their children



40.6% of parents found it harder to guarantee their children's education because of COVID-19



22% of parents delayed their return to work to support their children with online schooling

Three years after our last study, the world has been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, and migrant workers in China were among the first to be affected. Around the Chinese New Year (CNY) towards the end of January 2020, many provinces in China started lockdown measures and imposed travel restrictions. Non-essential businesses including manufacturing were shut down in high-risk provinces for about two months. 80% of migrant workers returned to work late because of the pandemic and 40% did not receive any compensation for missing work due to the COVID-19 lockdown. As families faced unexpected challenges brought by COVID-19, including loss of income, the situation wasn't all negative for some parents and children. Many parents with left-behind children got to spend an "extended holiday" with their children for up to two months, which normally would only be a couple of weeks in a year. As a result, nearly half (46%) of the parents with left-behind children said the COVID-19 lockdown brought them closer to their children.

By April 2020, 71% of the factories we talked to saw more than 90% of their workforce return, while 84% were already facing shrinking orders, with most reporting either having old orders cancelled or having no new orders from their usual clients. That naturally meant less work for workers, and even reduced salaries and bonuses. 61.6% of migrant parents said COVID-19 brought significant financial losses to their families, and because of that, 52.5% found it harder to afford basic necessities, 44.6% couldn't follow their saving plans, 40.6% found it harder to guarantee education for their children and 25.7% were forced to delay major plans such as moving or buying/building a new house.

As for the children of migrant parents, the biggest negative impact of COVID-19 was on their education. Schools were closed for months after the factories resumed work and classes were taught online. Remote learning meant that children needed more supervision, discipline and guidance at home, which proved to be a tremendous challenge for children of migrant workers both living with and without their parents. For this reason, many parents (22%) returned to work late because they found it necessary to stay back and help their children. Many migrant children were left at home all day without adult supervision while taking

classes online. It was a major source of distress for parents and a huge risk in terms of child protection. The greatest concern among parents of left-behind children was that their children would start lagging behind in school because of their grandparents' very limited ability to support them with their education.

When the production slowed down in export manufacturing and schools and kindergartens reopened, the childcare situation improved for migrant children. Reduced working hours led to parents spending more time with their children, which led to a significant reduction in the number of hours migrant children were left without adult supervision, and allowed usually overworked and overtired parents to spend more quality time with their children.

Looking ahead, COVID-19 may very well have long-term implications on the career and life choices migrant parents make. One of these choices is whether or not to bring their children with them. We observed that more and more migrant workers are living with their children since 2017, which coincides with the fact that government policies in recent years have been supporting migrant children's access to public education and health. Our data also proved that significantly fewer parents in 2020 found it challenging to enrol children in public schools when compared to 2017 and 2013. However, the challenges that existed previously have not disappeared completely. Much less progress has been made to address migrant parents'

childcare challenges and the limited time they have to spend with their families. The challenge of childcare is mostly linked to the lack of convenient and practical childcare options for migrant parents, meaning the opening hours are usually not in line with their busy schedule.

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, a number of factories carried out programmes that addressed the needs of migrant workers. By July 2020, we worked with 19 factories who decided to implement Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) – a safe space where workers' children are cared for while their parents are at work. Six of those factories were newcomers to the programme. When looking at the changes in the workforce before and after implementing the CFS, we found that providing support for workers during a difficult period proved to be a very effective approach to increase their loyalty, as it significantly improved workers' perception of management and the factory and indicated an increase in retention. Stepping back and looking at the data from CFS in 2019, we also observed similar positive changes in the workforce with increased worker satisfaction. Additionally, when analysing the data from workers with left-behind children in 2020, we observed that migrant parents who took part in parenting training were significantly happier than those who haven't. And subsequently, this increase in psychological wellbeing also translated into higher worker satisfaction with the workplace, showcasing how businesses benefit when they go above and beyond compliance to meet the needs of their parent workers.



The Centre staff support a factory during their family day activity in 2020. Photo: Shiwei Sun. © The Centre

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

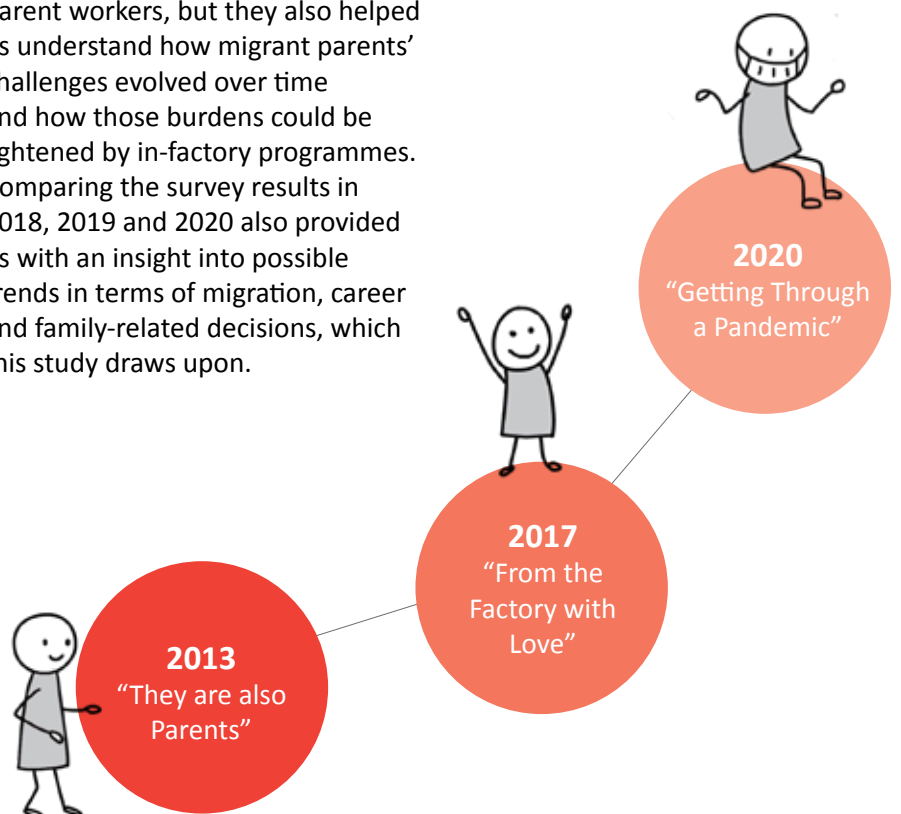
Understanding the Needs of Chinese Migrant Parents and Their Children Over Time

The decisions that migrant parents take when they migrate for work have a huge impact on their family lives and on their workplaces – two areas that are at the very core of The Centre’s work. The migration trends that have been witnessed in China since opening and reform have characterised and greatly shaped the export manufacturing sector, and The Centre continues to monitor, analyse and understand the needs of this demographic of workers. Ultimately, our end goal is to use our expertise to advise business on what these migratory trends mean for their supply chains, and what they can do to provide targeted support.

A periodic evaluation of the situation of migrant parents helps businesses fine-tune their support initiatives to match the realities and needs in their rapidly changing supply chains, and maps out clear linkages to their impact on the lives of children. Thus, in 2013 and 2017, The Centre published two studies on the challenges faced by migrant parents working in factories producing for international buyers. The two studies shed a light on the great personal dilemma migrant workers face: on the one hand working to create a better future for their children, and on the other having to leave their children behind or having very little time to spend with them. The findings from the reports helped The Centre develop factory-based programmes to address the unique challenges of migrant parents.

One such programme was Child Friendly Spaces (CFS). By the summer of 2019, 64 factories in South China were running CFS with support from The Centre. In most of these factories, the CFS serves as a temporary, factory-based facility to enable children and their working parents to spend more time together during the summer. In others, CFS is a year-long after-school centre that provides a safe space for children to play and study while their parents are at work. As part of routine project monitoring, The Centre carried out needs-assessments with parent workers in these factories before implementing the project and final assessments at the end to capture the project impact. These surveys not only enabled us to observe changes in the workforce as a result of factories supporting parent workers, but they also helped us understand how migrant parents’ challenges evolved over time and how those burdens could be lightened by in-factory programmes. Comparing the survey results in 2018, 2019 and 2020 also provided us with an insight into possible trends in terms of migration, career and family-related decisions, which this study draws upon.

Moving forward to 2020, the world is in a very different place to what it was when we conducted our last study on migrant parents in 2017. It has become a year defined by tremendous challenges and stresses brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact has been palpable on all levels. At the early stage of the pandemic, factories initially experienced shrinking orders because of lockdowns. With many factories struggling to keep the losses to a minimum, their own survival was at risk. Many factories resorted to laying off workers, while incentives to engage in any projects targeting migrant parents all but disappeared. At the same time, the pandemic spelled a period of immense uncertainty and new challenges for migrant parents. Beginning in early



Survey Methodology and Sample

April 2020, The Centre began efforts to reach out to all the factories that we have partnered with to date to understand their challenges, their strategies for handling those challenges and immediate plans for their workforce. In April, we interviewed 58 factories in China producing for major international buyers from Europe and North America (please see Appendix 1, page 34 for more details about our methodology). Understanding the challenges of these factories in turn shed a light on the new and aggravated challenges many migrant parents could be facing. Even though many migrant workers returned to work by early April, local COVID-19 prevention measures prevented us from physically visiting factories and talking to workers directly. We therefore attempted to reach out to all past project beneficiaries

whose contact information we had, and interviewed them online or via phone calls about their unique challenges and needs during the lockdown and afterwards. We also tried to include the workers' children in these conversations when the workers were with their children during the time of the interview. **All in all, 2137 migrant parents contributed data to this study, of whom 318 were contacted specifically about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives.**

Six months into the pandemic, positive signs of recovery began to emerge at the factories we had contact with. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, by July 2020, 19 factories decided to implement Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), with six factories joining the programme for the first time. By embracing this

programme during these challenging times, these factories not only demonstrated great resilience in the face of crisis, they showed themselves to be supportive, caring, and family-friendly employers. By the end of August 2020, 12 factories and 318 workers contributed data on the impact of COVID-19 (as part of project monitoring). This latest data offers invaluable insight into the situation and challenges of migrant parents employed in supply chain factories in a tumultuous yet defining moment in time. With a global pandemic added to the equation, there is no better time than 2020 to revisit the topic of migrant parent workers in China's export manufacturing sector to understand their vulnerabilities, challenges, needs and level of resilience.



73
factories
contributed data to
this study between
2018-2020



2137
migrant workers
provided data and
information for this
study



13
children were
interviewed together
with their parents

CHAPTER 2: MIGRANT PARENTS, CHILDREN AND COVID-19

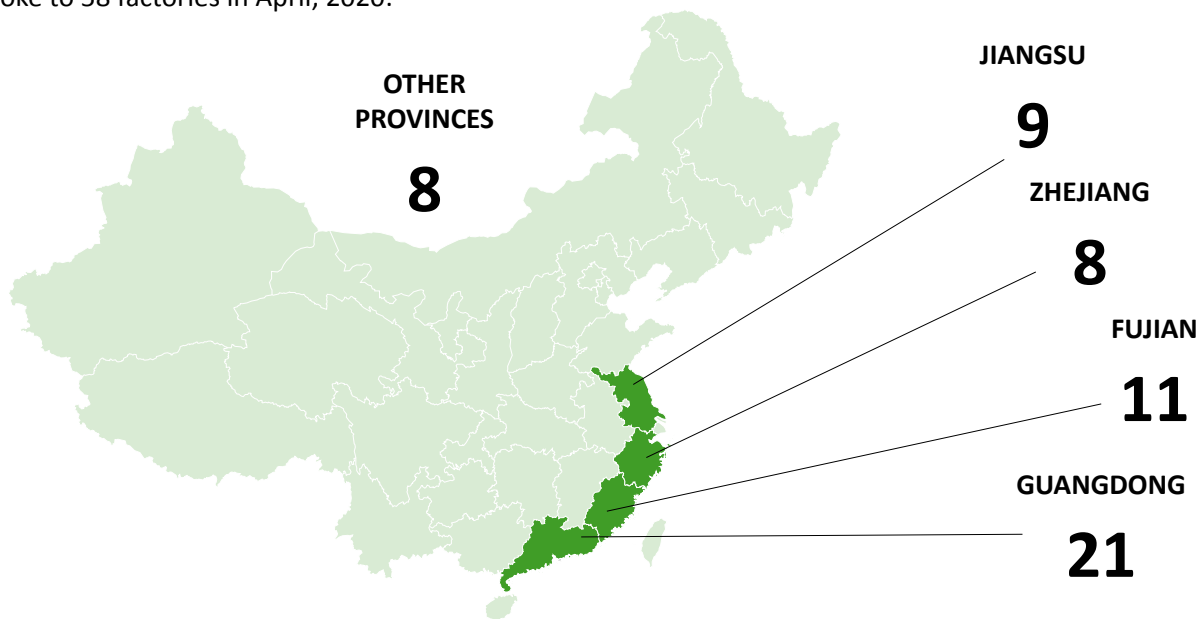
This chapter highlights the immediate impact and possible longer-term implications of COVID-19 on factories, migrant parents and their children that we learned through interviews with 58 factories and 24 parents and their children in April, and subsequently through surveys with 318 migrant parent workers in 12 factories in June to August 2020.

2.1 Immediate Impact

Post-Lockdown Factories

By April 2020, about two months after the Chinese New Year, most factories in China resumed production and rushed to complete old orders that were put on hold during the COVID-19 lockdown. By the end of April 2020, however, as the pandemic situation deteriorated in Europe and North America, many export factories started to run out of orders for production.

We spoke to 58 factories in April, 2020:



These were all export factories producing for major international buyers from Europe and North America.

71% of these factories saw more than 90% of their workforce return by April

84% were already facing shrinking orders

Most factories reported either having old orders cancelled or not receiving new orders from their usual clients

With slowing production, factories further faced a dilemma: should they keep their workforce intact in the face of mounting financial pressure or should they lay workers off to reduce costs? Either way, this posed a difficult choice for factories, as they knew that once the production demand had resumed they would face labour shortages and increased costs related to recruitment and training.

Furthermore, these factories we talked to have invested in their workforce through projects with The Centre. They either provided training for migrant parents on parenting skills, established Child Friendly Spaces over the summer holidays or other activities focusing on migrant parents to increase their worker

satisfaction and retention. However, by April 2020, it started to look impossible for most of them to keep the status quo. 20% started or were considering laying off workers, 10% cut the normal working hours, and 15% were considering putting workers on mandatory leave very soon. For the rest, even though they hadn't reached a decision about what to do with their workforce, overtime hours were not needed anymore. For most workers, overtime could contribute to up to half of their monthly income. This meant that many workers would choose to leave voluntarily to search for jobs elsewhere even if the factory would try to maintain their workforce.

Case Story I

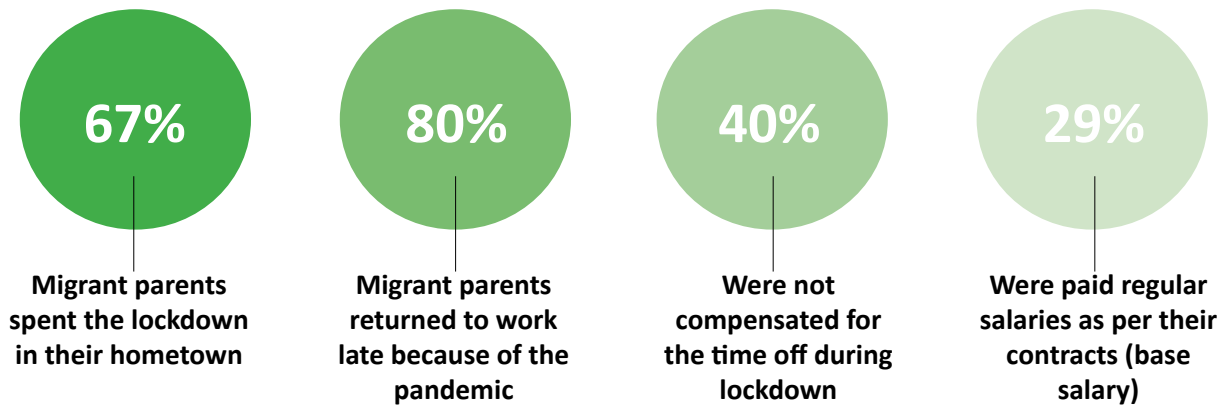
Ms. Hong works in Wuyi, and lives in factory-provided family dorm with her husband and 8-year-old son. Her family is from Yunnan Province but they did not return to their hometown for the Chinese New Year this year. Instead, they stayed behind in the factory. During the lockdown, they were not allowed to leave the factory and ate at the factory cafeteria with other workers who stayed back. "After the Chinese New Year, a lot of people didn't come back to work. No one went back home; they just went to different places to search for jobs because there was not enough work at the factory. My husband goes out to look for some odd jobs, but he comes back every night. If there is work at this factory, he will do it for sure. Our income is impacted by the pandemic, but it's not easy for us to leave and look for job opportunities elsewhere because of our son." March 29, 2020



*A production line in a garment factory in South China,
Photo: Mats Lignell, © The Centre*

2.2 Impact on Migrant Parents

Many migrant parents, especially those with left-behind children, returned to their hometowns to celebrate the Chinese New Year (CNY) at the end of January 2020, as is customary. Right before the CNY, the epicentre of COVID-19 in China, the city of Wuhan in Hubei Province, was placed under a city-wide lockdown. Many neighbouring cities and provinces consequently started lockdown measures of their own and imposed travel restrictions. Non-essential businesses including manufacturing were shut down in high risk provinces for about two months.



During June to August 2020, we talked to 164 migrant parents in Fujian and Guangdong about their experiences during the lockdown. Most of these migrant parents came from Jiangxi (19%), Guangxi (16%), Guangdong (14%) and Guizhou (10%) provinces. We found that 67% of the migrant parents spent the lockdown in their hometowns with their children. As expected, more migrant parents with left-behind children were in their hometowns during the lockdown (81%) than the migrant parents living with their children (48%) who were more likely to stay in their place of work.

Since different provinces followed different schedules to lift the lockdown measures, when factories resumed production one by one, they did not immediately have their full workforce in place. Some had more migrant workers than others, and some had a concentration of workers from a particular province. This meant that not all workers went back to work at the same time. 80% of the 164 workers we talked to told us they returned to work late. 78% of these workers were unable to travel to their factories because of lockdown measures, while many others (22%) chose to go back late because of the childcare and education challenges their children faced due to school closures. We will discuss these challenges later.

a. During the Lockdown

Most workers were out of work for a month or two during the COVID-19 lockdown. According to the government policy, they should be compensated for the loss of income during the lockdown¹. However, even for the ones who returned to work late because of movement restrictions, 40% said they did not receive any compensation during that time. While 24% said they received compensation based on local minimum wages, another 29% received their base salaries on their contracts.

40% of migrant parents did not receive any compensation for missing work due to COVID-19 lockdown.

1. http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/dongtaixinwen/buneyaowen/202001/t20200127_357746.html

Case Story 2

Ms. Li is from Fujian Province. She works in a shoe factory in the industrial city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Wenzhou hard.

Ms. Li has a six-year-old daughter who goes to kindergarten and lives with her grandparents in their hometown. This year, Ms. Li went back to her hometown in mid-January to spend the Chinese New Year with her family. By mid-April, three months after she came home, she was still waiting for news from her factory about reopening.

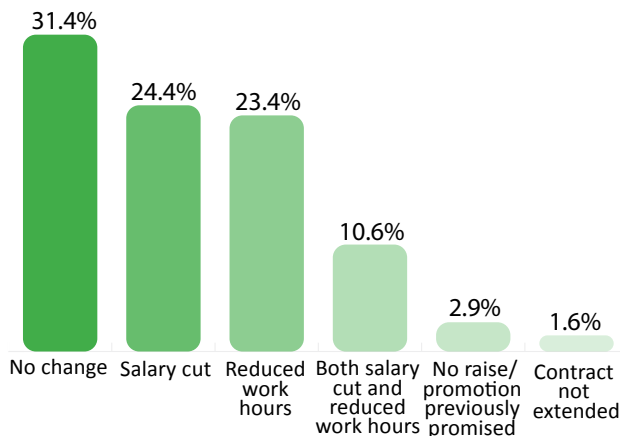
“We are expecting the factory to resume production at the end of April. It’s a small factory. Our salary is calculated by piece rate, so we earn as much as we work. In the past three months, I didn’t get any salary or allowance because I don’t have social insurance. I couldn’t really ask the factory for help because it’s shut down for now.” April 12, 2020

b. Post-Lockdown Factory Work

Depending on the origin of the workers and the location of the factories, some workers went back to work as early as mid-February, which still amounted to a much-longer-than-usual break of almost a month (most workers only take one or two weeks off for the Chinese New Year). Others began trickling back to work a month after that. By April, most migrant workers had returned to their region of work, either to their old factories or to explore job opportunities elsewhere. Once production resumed, factories rushed to complete the old orders from before the lockdown. But soon, as the pandemic deteriorated in Europe and North America, most factories had to slow down production once again due to a lack of new orders. That naturally meant less work for workers, and even reduced salaries and bonuses, while their factories struggled to get through the difficult time. By summer 2020, of the 312 workers we talked to, only 31.4% said that no significant changes happened at work since the lockdown. For others, their income was reduced significantly either due to salary cuts (24.4%) or reduced work hours (23.4%) or both (10.6%, Chart 1).

61.6% of migrant parents reported that the pandemic has had a significant negative impact on their income.

Chart 1: What changes happened at work since the lockdown?



“Our factory produces export goods, and our orders got cut so our salaries have been reduced by a few hundred Yuan. If we don’t get any new orders, we don’t know what will happen.”

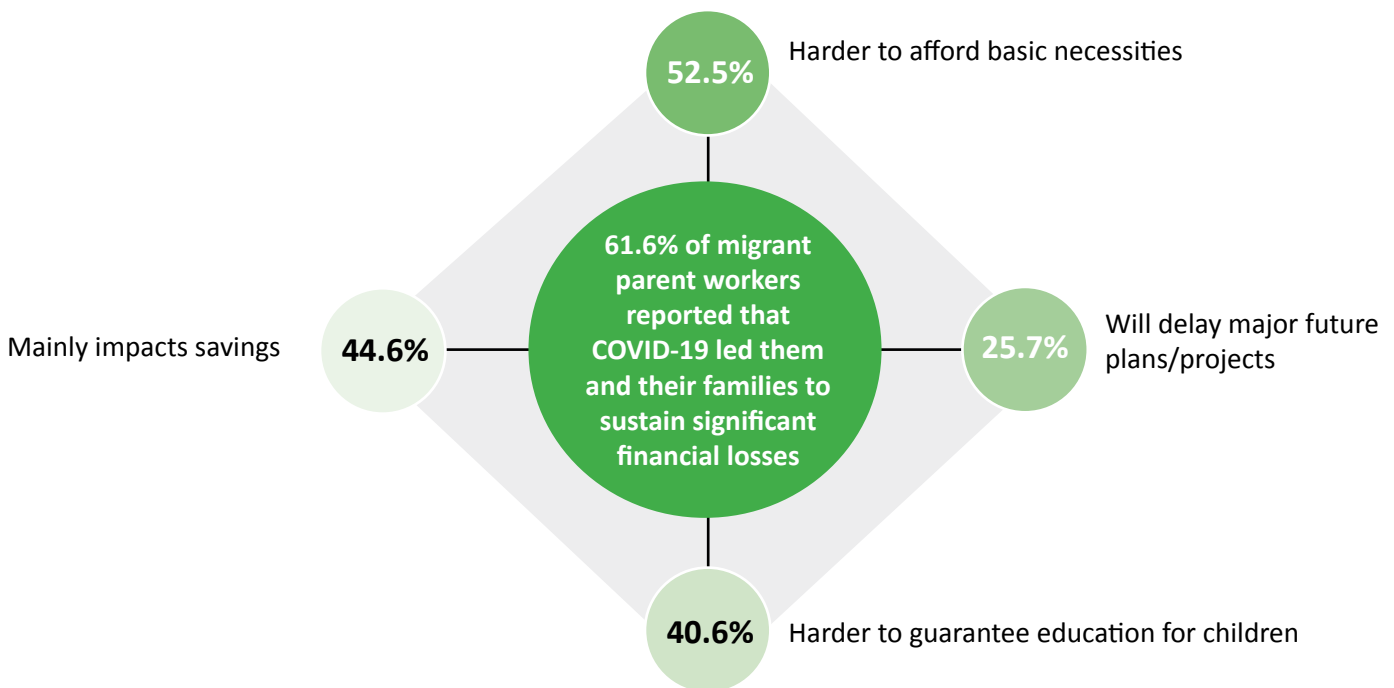
A migrant father of a 6-year-old boy who lives with his grandparents, May 2020.

In the following 5-6 months after migrant parents returned to work, the biggest perceived impact of COVID-19 on their lives has been financial in nature. As shown in Chart 2, 61.6% of migrant parents said COVID-19 brought significant financial losses to their families, and because of that, 52.5% found it harder to afford basic necessities, 44.6% couldn't follow their saving plans, 40.6% found it harder to guarantee education for their children and 25.7% were forced to delay major plans such as moving or buying/building a new house etc.

“ My husband has barely earned anything since the lockdown. I’m also making about half of what I used to. That’s the biggest impact of COVID-19 on our family.”

A migrant mother living in Fujian with her two children (aged 3 and 8), August 2020.

Chart 2: What is the impact of the financial loss?



2.3 Impact on Children

a. Education

As many countries turned to remote education via internet or TV, children had to rely more on their parents/caregivers to keep up with schoolwork. In China, during the school shutdown, classes were taught online. That required an internet connection either on a computer, a tablet or a smartphone. Almost all the migrant parents we talked to said remote teaching had a significant negative impact on their children’s education. They all feared their children would not be able to catch up once the schools reopened.

More than one out of five migrant parents returned to work late after the lockdown to support their children when schools and kindergartens were closed.

For most migrant parents in China, their children's academic performance is of utmost importance. However, that task mostly falls onto the teachers. This is especially so for left-behind children living with their elderly grandparents who can do very little to support them with schoolwork. But remote learning meant that children needed more supervision, discipline and guidance at home, which proved to be a tremendous challenge for children of migrant workers both living with and without their parents, especially when parents returned to work. For this reason, many parents (22%) returned to work late because they found it necessary to stay back and help their children. Some even quit their jobs to stay with their children until schools and kindergartens reopened.

Many of the migrant children living with their parents were left at home by themselves all day without adult supervision. Apart from the child protection risks brought on by neglect, this lack of supervision could very well contribute to poorer academic progress of migrant children already challenged by remote learning.

The academic performance of children left with grandparents in their hometown is especially worrisome for parents. These children are already disadvantaged academically compared to children in bigger cities and the ones with parental support. For those children currently in a critical exam year – such as those taking their middle school or high school entrance exams – the psychological pressure on both children and parents has been enormous, especially now that much of the year was taken up by online learning. Apart from the psychological impact this stress might have had on many families, it may also have brought some real negative impact on left-behind children's opportunities for academic success, which may become apparent with time.

Case Story 3

Ms Zhou worked in an underwear factory in Foshan for many years. Her hometown is Sichuan, where her two children – a 7-year-old boy and 14-year-old girl – live with their grandmother. After the Chinese New Year, she went back to Chongqing to be with her children when they started to take classes online. Her husband stayed in Foshan to work.

“I had to quit for my children. I'm an old employee, so the factory says I can go back any time I want... The children's grandmother took care of them up until now. Her education level is low, so the children didn't have a good foundation.”

“If my children's school performance improves, I'll consider going back to work. It's hard to rely on their dad alone. It makes us struggle financially. If the conditions are right, we might even bring the children with us at some point. But the costs are too high. Plus, I may not be able to take care of them while working... We didn't get any support from work as migrant parents before. But now, what I really need is childcare. If there's a childcare option, I'll be able to go back to work. Right now, I don't know what will happen. I feel anxious.”

April 10, 2020

*Photo below: Parent workers help their children with an art project during a family day in their factory.
Photo: Shiwei Sun. © The Centre, 2020*





Case Story 4

Hong is an 8-year-old boy living in Wuyi with his parents. He's an only child and his family moved here from Guizhou. The family lives in the employees' dorm provided by his mother's factory.

"When mum and dad are not around, I stay at home alone and do my homework, watch TV and practice Taichi. I don't have any difficulty taking online classes, but mum thinks going to school is more effective. The classes start at 9 am, for 4-5 hours a day. I go online by myself. No one supervises my studies. No one really explained why exactly we have to take classes online. The teacher did say it was because of the pandemic, and asked us to wash our hands more often." March 29, 2020

Case Story 5

Ms. Li works in a factory in Shanghai with her husband. She's the mother of two – a 6-year-old girl and a 9-year-old boy – who live with their grandparents back in their hometown in Henan Province.

"The pandemic didn't bring us any other difficulties, except that we worry about our son's middle school exam. I don't think the teaching quality is as good as the real classroom. At first, he seemed interested, but after a while, he was not so eager anymore. He isn't very self-disciplined. I have to chase after him to do his homework and hand it in on time. If he went to school, his teacher would do all that pushing. We installed internet at home just for his online classes. He only has one option for selecting a middle school, so he only has one shot. He's under so much pressure. Before the Chinese New Year, he was confident about getting into the school he chose, but now he's not as confident. If the schools start in May, we still have some time as long as he works hard."
April 15, 2020

Case Story 6

Ms. Mao has three children aged 9, 10 and 11. She's from Guizhou and lives with her husband and three children in Xiamen. When she and her husband go to work at the factory every day, her children stay at home and take classes online.

"All three of my children have to take classes online, but there is only one computer at home. So my husband and I leave our mobile phones with them so everyone has a device to get online. We worry that the mobile phones distract them. We wouldn't know what they did on the mobile phones after finishing their online classes. They could be playing games instead of studying, but we wouldn't know."
August 20, 2020

In addition to the lack of supervision that might contribute to poor quality of education, there were technical challenges that created obstacles for migrant parents who were not financially well off enough to make online learning easier for their children, especially when there were multiple children studying at home and not enough internet devices to share among them.

b. Childcare

For migrant children living with their parents, their situation changed drastically when schools were closed and then reopened again. For many of them, their parents had to go back to work for 2-3 months while their schools and kindergartens were closed. If their grandparents were not living with them, their parents left them at home by themselves all day while they worked. It was a major source of distress for parents and a huge risk in terms of child protection. When we talked to parents in April, we fortunately did not hear of any accidents happening to children while studying alone at home. However, considering the thousands of migrant children in similar situations, it would be hard to expect that no mishaps occurred due to neglect. Many parents even turned to installing security cameras at home so that they could keep an eye on their children while at work.

Reduced working hours led to parents to spend more time with their children.

While migrant children were spending more time without adult supervision when taking classes online, the situation improved once schools and kindergartens reopened.

Furthermore, many export factories had to slow down production due to the lack of new orders. Factory workers who used to work at least 10 hours a day started to work no more than eight hours or even less. Many were working five days a week instead of six. While this meant that workers were earning much less than they used to, they were also spending more time at home with their children. As seen in Chart 3 below, when we compared the latest results (children are back to school) with those in 2017², we discovered that, by the summer of 2020, migrant children were being left without adult supervision much less (14.3% vs. 23.9%) as their parents were working less. We also observed that parents were relying much less on community-based and factory-based day-care options and relying more on grandparents because of the pandemic. This was also confirmed by our interviews with some parents, where the grandparents of children came from their hometown to help take care of children, especially when the children were of kindergarten age.

Similar to many places, women take on the majority of childcare responsibilities. This would mean that when parents rely less on childcare services and more on their families, most of the burden is likely to fall onto female workers. When we broke down the results in Chart 3 by gender, we found that only 31.4% of female workers rely on their husbands to take care of children when they are away, while 51.6% of male workers rely on their wives. It followed a similar pattern as 2017, where only 18.5% of female workers relied on their husbands for looking after their children, while 45.5% of male workers relied on their wives. So we can safely say that, in terms of childcare responsibilities, gender roles haven't changed significantly. It was also supported by our interviews with parents that when one of them needed to stay at home or work less to take care of children, it was only the mother.

When we looked at the hours children spent without adult supervision, we found that migrant children in the summer of 2020 were spending significantly fewer hours alone compared with migrant children in 2017 (during the school year): 4.7 hours per week on average vs. 9.6 hours, which is actually about half of the hours found in 2017³.

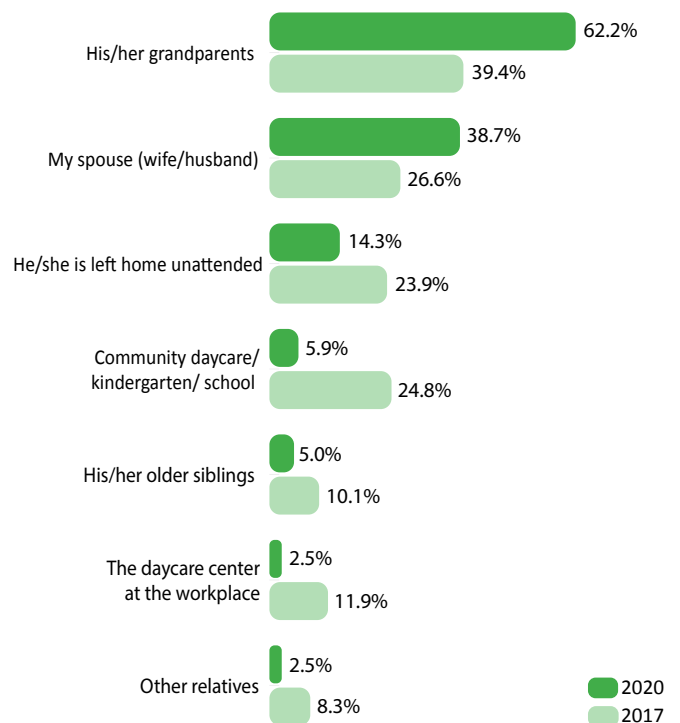
c. Parent-child Relationship

As the families faced unexpected challenges because of COVID-19, including loss of income, the situation wasn't all negative for some parents and children. Many parents with left-behind children got to spend an "extended holiday" with their children for up to two months, which normally would only be a couple of weeks in a year. As a result, nearly half (46%) of the parents with left-behind children said the COVID-19 lockdown brought them closer to their children.

“ We live in the factory dorm. My oldest son is 11 and taking classes online. The little one is 6, and my mother-in-law used to come to watch over him during the day. But because of the COVID-19 safety measures, she can't come to the factory anymore. So we installed a web cam in the dorm to keep an eye on the children.”

Ms. Cui in Ningbo, April 12, 2020

Chart 3: Who takes care of your child/children when you are away from home/at work?



Fewer parents struggled to find sufficient time with their children because of reduced work hours.

2. The Centre for Child Rights and Business, From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China, 2017
 3. Ibid

“ During the Chinese New Year, we used to have 10 days off at most. But this time, I stayed at home for about a month. After all those years working away from home, this is the longest I’ve spent with my children. They are so happy, and say they want to come with me to Suzhou. But I say ‘no, you have to stay behind and focus on your studies.’

Ms. Li, April 13, 2020

“ I feel so happy to be with mum even though sometimes I’m afraid of her. When I misbehave or make mistakes with my homework, she beats me. But I’d rather live with my mum than with my grandmother. I like my mum. She buys me good things to eat and takes me out to play. When she was working in Guangdong, I missed her. I would call her to ask when she was coming back home.”

A 7-year-old boy who got to spend two months with his mother – the longest he remembers. April 10, 2020

“ I used to meet my children only once a year. But this year, I’ve spent a long time at home. The children are so happy about it.”

Ms. Zhou, mother of two, April 10, 2020

As for migrant children living with their parents, as mentioned in the previous section about childcare, parents leaving work earlier than before and spending more weekends and off days with them is one positive experience they got out of the pandemic. As we talked to the migrant parents, we found that significantly fewer parents (27.5%) living with their children struggled to spend enough time with their children in the summer of 2020 compared with 2017 (42.0%)⁴ – the difference is a striking 14.5 percentage points (or 34.5% reduction).

“ There’s no more overtime at work, so I spend that time with my daughter. She’s taking classes online, and I can be there for her much more than I used to.”

Mr. Wu, father of a 9-year-old girl, April 12, 2020

d. Long-term Implications for Migrant Families

As the pandemic brought uncertainties into the lives of millions, only time will tell what the long-term implications will be for China’s export manufacturing and its millions of migrant workers. The majority of the 313 workers we talked to in the summer of 2020 were still optimistic that COVID-19 would not impact their future career plans (62%) or family plans (55.3%). However, as shown in Chart 4 and 5, a significant portion of migrant parents already started to plan alternative paths for their careers and families. The fact that almost a third (30.4%) of migrant parents planned to move back to their hometown if they lost their jobs instead of looking for other opportunities at a different factory might indicate that many are pessimistic about the job market.

Chart 4: Do you think COVID-19 had an impact on your future career plans?

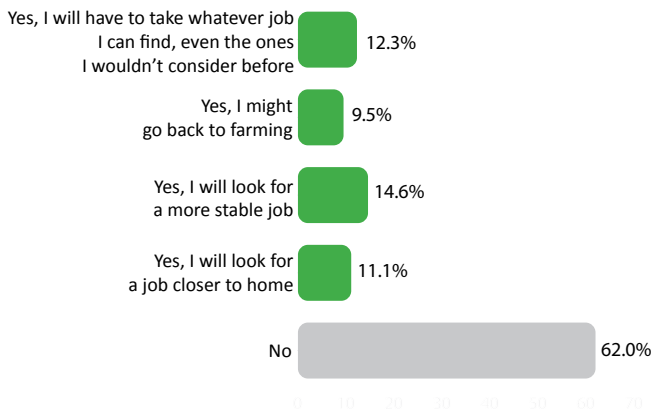
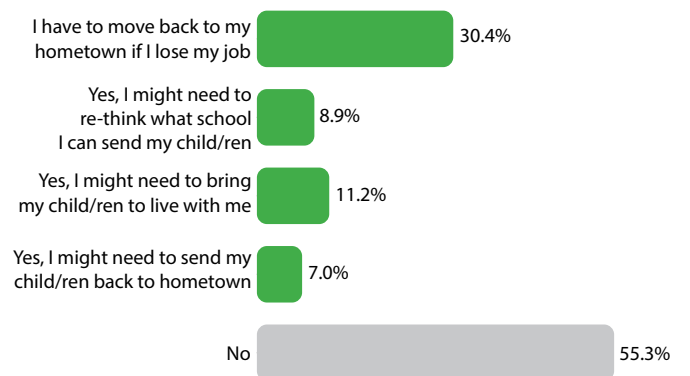


Chart 5: Do you think COVID-19 had an impact on your future family plans?



4. The Centre for Child Rights and Business From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China, 2017



CHAPTER 3: CHANGING MIGRATION DECISIONS OF FAMILIES & INFLUENCING FACTORS

As we discussed in Chapter 2, unexpected changes brought by COVID-19 might have long-term implications for career and life choices migrant parents make. Along with these choices, migrant parents’ decision about bringing or leaving their children behind could also be impacted, which will become apparent with time. It is too soon to predict the future, but we can look at the past to see how workers’ decisions to migrate with or without their children have been changing in recent years and what the reasons behind those changes could be.

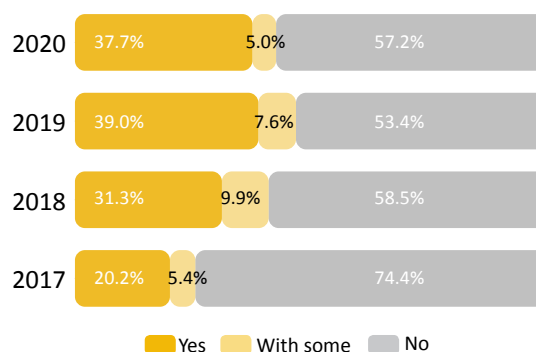
3.1 Changing Patterns Vs. Enabling Patterns

As shown in Chart 6, in 2018 and 2019, we saw a significant increase in the percentage of migrant parents who were living with their children. However, this number did not change significantly in 2020, indicating an interruption to this trend by COVID-19. The increase in the number of migrant workers bringing their children when they migrate could very well be because of the implementation of the Interim Regulations on Residence Permits that officially came into effect on January 1, 2016. It granted migrant workers access to the most hoped for public services including public education for their children and access to public healthcare⁵.

More migrant families can access public education now than in 2017.

More and more migrant workers are living with their children since 2017.

Chart 6: Do you live with all of your children?⁶



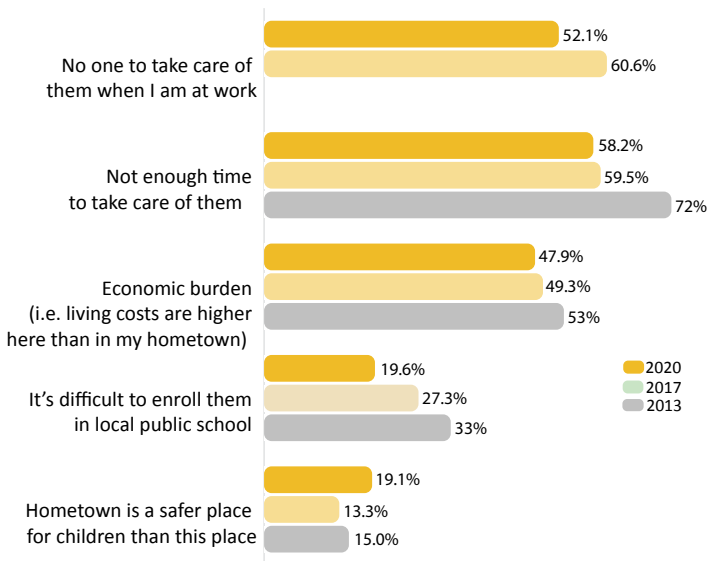
In the previous studies we conducted on migrant parents in 2013 and 2017, access to public education was among the major reasons for migrant parents to leave their children behind (33.0% and 27.3% respectively)⁷. As we compare migrant parents’ reasons for not bringing their children with them, we can see that the percentage that chose difficulty in accessing public education has reduced significantly (Chart 7).

5. Wang, Xiang. Permits, Points, and Permanent Household Registration: Recalibrating Hukou Policy under “Top-Level Design”. Journal of Current Chinese Affairs. 2020

6. The 2017 data comes from The Centre’s report “From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China”; 2018 data comes from worker surveys in 18 factories with 624 workers; 2019 data comes from worker surveys in 31 factories with 877 workers; 2020 data comes from 12 factories and 318 workers.

7. The Centre for Child Rights and Business, From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China, 2017; The Centre, They are Also Parents, 2013

Chart 7: What are your main personal reasons for NOT bringing your child/ren with you?



Having sufficient money, time and childcare options for their children remain the deciding factors in migrant workers' decision to live with their children.

As we see in Chart 7, even though the implementation of new government policies to support migrant workers and their children led to improvements over the past few years, the top reasons for migrant parents to leave their children behind has not changed. Lack of time for children, lack of childcare support and economic burden continued to be the most important reasons for nearly half or more migrant parents to leave their children behind.

However, the percentage of parents choosing lack of childcare support as the top reason for leaving their children behind reduced by 8.5 percentage points. This could very well be due to the fact that 60 workers in the 2020 surveys are from a factory that has been running CFS over the past few years.

Case Story 7

Ms. Li works in a factory in Shanghai. She's the mother of two: a 6-year-old girl and a 9-year-old boy who live with their grandparents back in their hometown in Henan Province. Her husband also works in Shanghai but at a different factory. They rent an apartment outside the factory.

"When my second child was born, I went back home for a year. Before coming to this factory, I was in my hometown taking care of my oldest as he was still young. We didn't consider bringing the children here. Because we go to work everyday, we won't have time to look after them." April 15, 2020

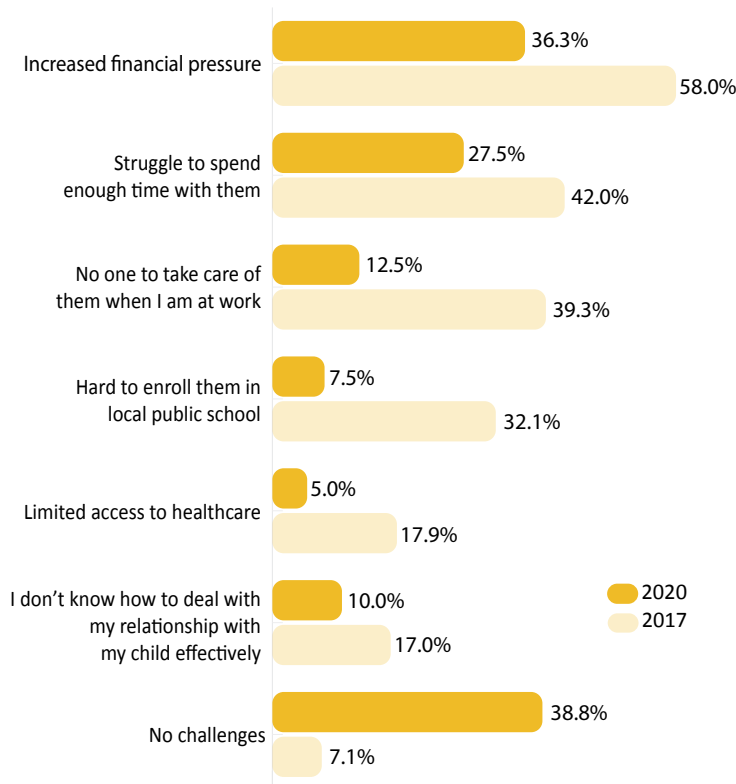
3.2 Challenges and Obstacles

When we look at the challenges of migrant parents currently living with their children, they mirror the top reasons for migrant parents to leave their children behind, corroborating the fact that the deciding factors for migrant families to live with or without their children are financial, time spent at work and availability of childcare (Chart 8).

The challenges migrant parents living with their children face mirror the reasons they leave their children behind.

As shown in Chart 8, there is a substantial increase in migrant parents who believe living with their children bring them no challenge (38.8% vs. 7.1%), and along with this positive change, the percentage of parents who are challenged by increased financial pressure related to children (36.3% vs. 58.0%), insufficient time with the children (27.5% vs. 42.2%) and lack of childcare options (12.5% vs. 39.3%) reduced significantly (by 21.8, 14.5, 26.8 percentage points respectively).

Chart 8: What challenges have you faced living with your children?



Compared to 2017, overwhelmingly more (31.7 percentage points) migrant workers living with their children find that migrating with their children does not create significant challenges.

Case Story 8

Ms. Wang is from Shanxi Province, and works in Chongqing where she lives with her husband and two children aged 2 and 7. By the end of March 2020, her factory was still closed due to the COVID-19 lockdown. For her, childcare had been the biggest challenge in her work.

“Our biggest challenge is childcare. My in-laws are here but they are old and uneducated, so I don’t want to trouble them to take public transport often and help take care of the children. I get off work at around 5 or 6. My husband’s work is further so he can make it home at around 7-8. If I need to do overtime, I won’t have time to pick the children up from school/kindergarten and ask neighbours for help. When we both do overtime, we have to leave the children with the neighbours until late. I feel bad creating so much trouble for them. I wish my company could give us some time to pick up children from school/kindergarten. I hope my company can set up a place for where children are temporarily looked after. A simple place with some tables and chairs would be enough if they could do their homework there. We wouldn’t have to worry about their safety all the time.” March 29, 2020

Regardless of the positive trend in the past few years, if the negative economic shock of COVID-19 persists, it could have a major impact on migrant families' decisions about their children. Even if the public services are easier to access for migrant children, and parents have more time at home due to reduced work hours, financial pressure on families might deter them from bringing their children with them, or even force them to send the children back to hometowns to make it easier for them to look for jobs and/or relocate.

This may be especially the case in cities like Dongguan and Zhongshan, where the points system remains in place to allocate educational resources to migrant children based on their parents' education attainment, property ownership, and tax contributions⁸. That means that workers whose children are in local schools can't easily leave their jobs unless there is a job opportunity that guarantees immediate continuation of their social insurance payments.

In summary, government policies in recent years targeting migrant families and possibly some in-factory programmes to support them helped reduce the burdens of migrant parents and influenced their decision to migrate with their children. Migrant parents living with their children are less likely to face challenges accessing public education and healthcare compared to 2017. Because of these services, many migrant parents feel that living with their children does not create a significant financial burden. However, the challenges that existed previously have not disappeared completely; it is a work in progress. There is still a substantial number of migrant parents who are reluctant to bring their children with them due to barriers accessing public education (19.6%). Much less progress has been made to address migrant parents' childcare challenges and the limited time they have to spend with their families, especially in factories without support programmes such as Child Friendly Spaces (CFS). For many factories and brands, lessening migrant workers' burdens and facilitating family unity should still be a priority focus.



Two migrant workers employed at a factory in Zhejiang, China with their two children. This summer the family lived together because their factory opened a Child Friendly Space. In previous summers, their mother would have to take time off work to go back to her hometown to look after her children over the summer.

Photo: Shiwei Sun, © The Centre, 2020

8. Wang, Xiang. Permits, Points, and Permanent Household Registration: Recalibrating Hukou Policy under "Top-Level Design". *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. 2020

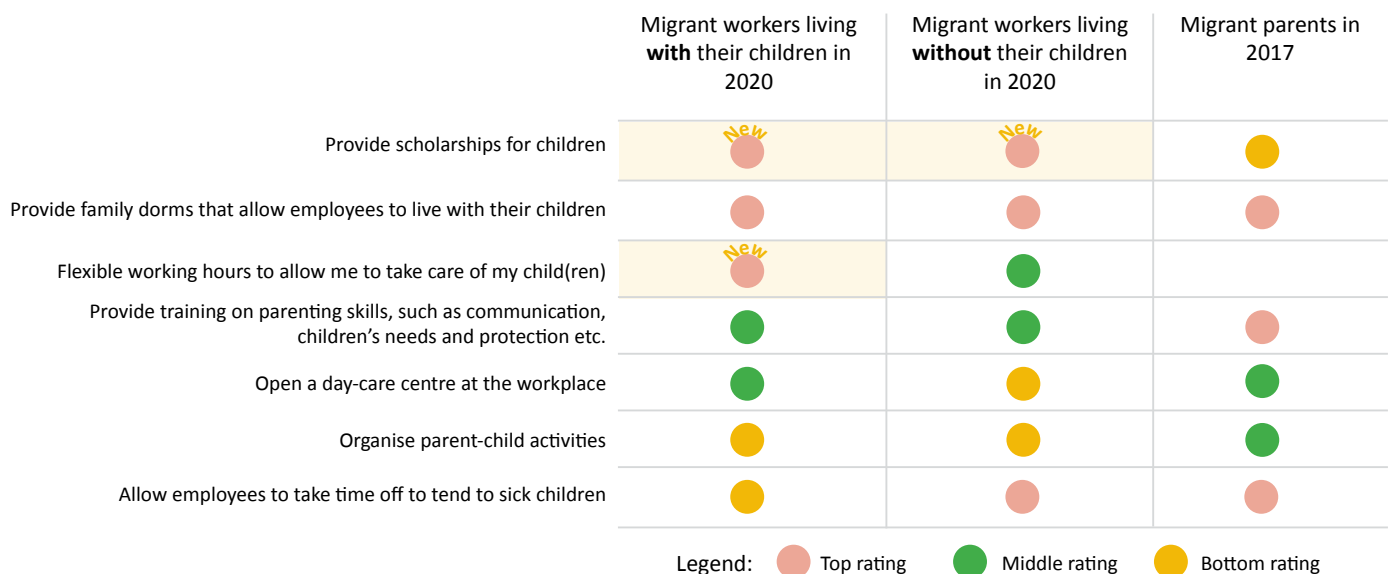
CHAPTER 4: SUPPORTING MIGRANT PARENTS AND THE BUSINESS CASE

Our migrant parent studies in the past, namely in 2013 and 2017, helped us identify a set of challenges faced by migrant parents both living with and without their children. In the past few years, The Centre actively communicated the needs of migrant parents to brands/buyers and factories to promote the establishment of more family-friendly workplaces. As a result, many brands/buyers and factories joined hands with The Centre to implement a variety of in-factory programmes such as Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), parenting training focusing on remote communication with left-behind children and the smartwatch programme to encourage more intimate communication between migrant parents and their left-behind children. In this chapter, we will introduce the most urgent support migrant parents needed this year and will likely need in the long run. We also show how workers’ loyalty towards their workplaces changed when factories supported migrant parents in a difficult time, and how businesses benefited when companies went beyond compliance to meet the needs of their parent workers.

4.1 The Most Urgent Needs of Migrant Parents

In our 2017 study, we found the top support migrant parents needed from their employers were: 1) training on parenting skills, 2) family dorms and 3) time to take care of sick children, which was followed by 4) a day-care centre at the workplace and 5) parent-child activities⁹. In the summer of 2020, when looking at what migrant parents both living with and without their children expected from their workplace, we found that while some needs remained the same, a number of their priorities have, in part due to the pandemic, shifted significantly.

Chart 9: What type of support do you need most urgently from your employer as a migrant parent?



9. The Centre for Child Rights and Business, From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China, 2017

Chart 9 shows the priority ratings of the type of support migrant parents need from their workplace in 2020 compared to the ones in 2017. We see that “scholarship for children” jumped from the lowest priority in 2017 to the highest

priority in 2020 for both migrant parents living with and without their children. This starkly reflects the struggles of families whose livelihoods were seriously affected by the pandemic, as 40.6% of migrant parents who experienced financial losses due to COVID-19 said it made it harder for them to guarantee education for their children (Chart 2).

The financial impact of COVID-19 increased families’ need for more education support in the form of scholarships.

Family dorms that allow children to live with their parents remain to be a top need migrant parents expect from their workplace.

family dorms for their frontline workers¹⁰. Of the factories we worked with since 2018, although 76.5% have dorms for the workers, only 25.3% have family dorms that allow children to live with their parents. The fact that even parents who are not living with their children find it to be one of the most important benefits from the workplace indicates the importance of having this option, and mirrors the increased intention of migrant parents to bring their children with them when migrating for work – having the option of a family dorm available to them makes it logistically and financially easier to do so.

Another priority for migrant parents, regardless of whether they live with or without their children, is family dorms provided by the workplace. This top priority of migrant parents remains the same as 2017. Less than a quarter (23.7%) of factories we talked to in 2017 provided

In Chapter 3, looking at the challenges of migrant parents living with their children, we understood that childcare challenges are mostly rooted in a lack of childcare options that are convenient and practical for migrant parents, meaning the opening hours are usually not in line with their busy schedule. Just like Ms.

Wang (“Case Story 8” on page 19), many other parents might also have to turn to their neighbours or friends for help pick up their children from school and kindergarten and watch over them when they work overtime. It certainly creates tremendous stress for migrant parents who are living with their children and discourages others from bringing their children from their hometown. In almost every interview we ever had with migrant parents with left-behind children, they tell the same story over and over again about why they cannot bring their children with them: that they wouldn’t be able to get away from work to pick up their children from school/ kindergarten, and would have no one to look after them when they work overtime.

Flexible working hours that allow parents to tend to their children is a top need migrant parents expect from their workplace to help lessen their childcare burden/challenges.

While flexible hours are difficult in the manufacturing environment, we have observed factories outside of China who adapted shift hours to school hours and added a one-hour afternoon break to allow parents to pick up their children or allowed couples to choose their shifts in a way so that childcare is guaranteed. However, most factories find it quite challenging to provide flexible working hours for parents. One possible way to lessen the childcare burden without flexible working hours is having a centre such as CFS and/or a year-long after-school centre for workers’ children with flexible opening hours, so that children are supervised by adults while their parents work overtime.

“ I participated in the CFS last year. I felt good about it, but I’m guessing that we can’t have it this year due to COVID-19. If there is CFS this year, I hope the opening hours will be different. I hope it’s open from Monday to Saturday and in line with our work hours. Last summer my child had a month to play [at the CFS]. So I was hoping the factory would open CFS again.

Ms. Zhang in Dinghai with her 5-year-old daughter, April 12, 2020

10. The Centre for Child Rights and Business, From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China, 2017

4.2 Business Cases of Supporting Migrant Parents

This section introduces three cases that show how factories supported their parent workers in tackling the challenges they face as working parents and the impact these support interventions had on their business. The three cases spotlight the following:



How workers' loyalty changed when four factories implemented CFS regardless of the challenges of COVID-19



What it meant for the workforce when 31 factories implemented Child Friendly Spaces in the summer of 2019



How the support parents receive influence their level of happiness (psychological wellbeing) and what it could mean for their work

Case 1: Support During the Difficult Times of COVID-19

In summer of 2020, many factories were still facing disruptions to their production as a result of a global pandemic. It led to the cancellation or suspension of many in-factory programmes. Therefore, when four factories belonging to the ICTI Ethical Toy Program (IETP) decided to open CSF to support their parent workers, the initiative was an impressive indication of their commitment to supporting worker-wellbeing. The programme was a collaboration between IETP and The

Centre to create factory-based facilities for the children of workers to spend a meaningful summer holiday where they could play, learn and develop social skills. CFS provides a childcare solution to parent workers during the school break and allows migrant parents to spend more time together with children. It also helps parent workers work in a peaceful state of mind as they do not have to worry about their children during working hours¹¹.

Providing support for workers during a difficult period proved to be a very effective approach to increasing their loyalty.

With some workers earning less money than before the pandemic due to fewer orders, morale at these four factories was impacted as some workers worried about their future employment prospects. Many workers we talked to were quite understanding about the difficult situation that their factory was in. Implementing CFS at these four IETP Certified factories led to further improvements in the extent to which parent workers felt that the factory understood their needs. For example, we talked to 104 migrant workers before the implementation of CFS and 60.6% agreed that the factory management understood their challenges as parent workers. When we compared it with the results from the final evaluation with 53 beneficiaries of the programme, we saw that 100% believed the factory management understood the challenges of parent workers – a significant change of 39.4 percentage points (or 65% increase, Chart 10).

11. For more information about Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), please visit The Centre for Child Rights and Business's [website](#)

The Business Case for Supporting Migrant Parents

Chart 10: "Factory management understands our challenges as parent workers."

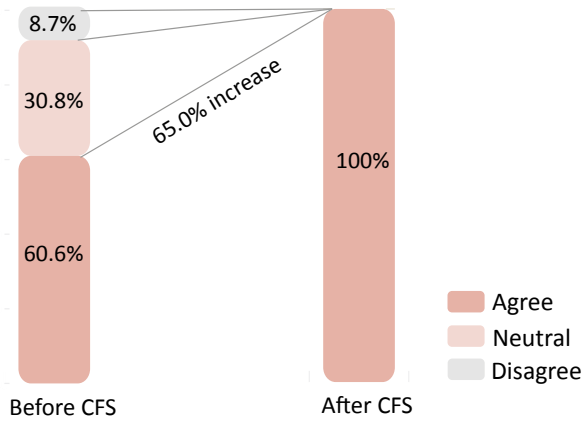
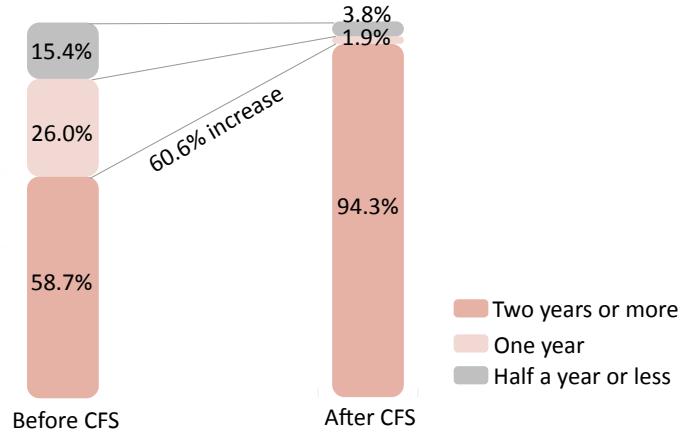


Chart 11: "How long do you plan to stay in the current factory?"



Workers' enhanced perception of the factory management and the workplace as a result of the factories setting up CFS was also reflected in their increased sense of loyalty to the factory. Significantly more beneficiaries of the programme (60.6% increase) intended to stay longer than two years at their workplace compared to the baseline (Chart 11).

Even though the programme did not increase salary levels of parent workers, and it only benefited their children for about a month, we observed dramatic changes in beneficiaries' perception of their management and the workplace and increase in their loyalty at these four IETP Certified factories. This shows that these factories' commitment to supporting workers during trying times could be one of the best investments they could make to strengthen worker's commitment to the factory and to boost retention.



Parents having lunch with their children at a Child Friendly Space in their factory. © The Centre, 2020

Case 2: How Child Friendly Spaces Influenced the Workforce



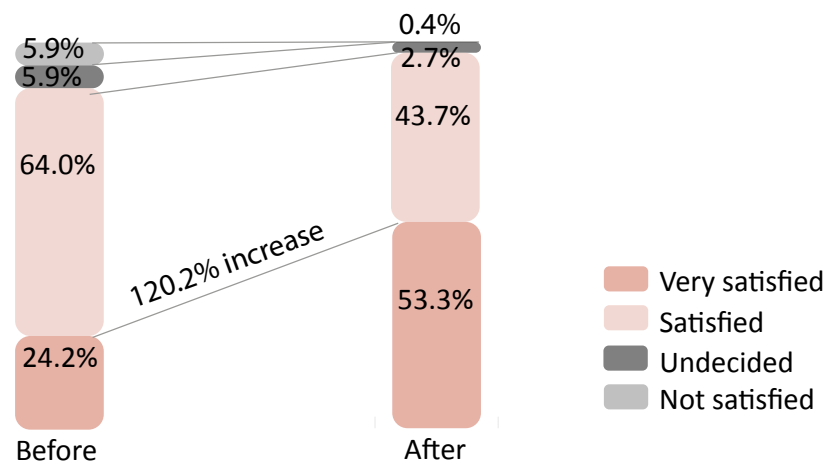
Artwork from children that attended a CFS in 2019

In 2019, many of The Centre’s partner brands and factories saw the need and benefits of setting up Child Friendly Space (CFS). By the summer of 2019, 64 factories in south-eastern China were running CFS with support from The Centre. Among them were 31 new factories belonging to seven different brands. Before setting up CFS, The Centre carried out baseline worker surveys with 877 migrant workers¹² in all 31 factories to identify the childcare needs of parents during the summer vacation and to collect baseline data on key indicators to compare with the project impact later on. At the end of the CFS project, The Centre conducted final assessment worker surveys with 559 migrant workers who benefited from the programme¹³. Comparing the before and after results not only helped collect feedback from the workers about the programme, but also gave us an important insight into the business case of implementing such programmes, particularly in terms of the positive changes in the workforce that could prove to be an effective investment from factories’ perspectives.

The direct link between workers’ satisfaction with their workplace and the retention rate is widely known. High retention is costly for factories because of recruitments costs and loss of productivity. Therefore, an investment in the workforce by increasing worker benefits or in-factory programmes expect to positively impact worker satisfaction and retention. As the change in retention might take some time to surface, we look at the change in worker satisfaction immediately after a programme to use it as a proxy for possible change in retention in the future.

Looking at the results from 31 factories after implementing CFS in the summer of 2019, we saw a substantial increase in the level of satisfaction migrant parents felt towards their workplace. As shown in Chart 12, the percentage of migrant workers who were “very satisfied” with their workplace more than doubled after the programme.

Chart 12: “In general, how satisfied are you with your factory?”



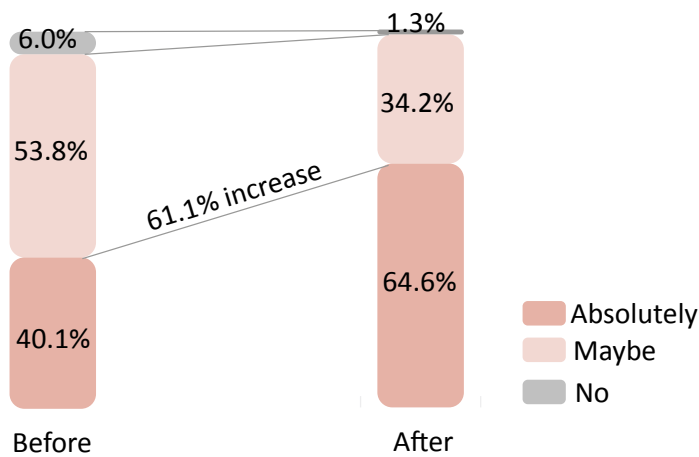
12. For the sake of our report, only the sample of migrant workers were included in the analysis.

13. For the sake of our report, only the sample of migrant workers who benefited from the CFS programme were included in the analysis.

In general, from the worker survey data, as well as the interviews with the management and workers, we found that this additional effort by the factories contributed to a more harmonious workforce. With significantly increased levels of trust that workers have in the management, the friction between supervisors and migrant parents also visibly reduced. One example is the reduction in workers saying they only get along “okay” with their supervisors (instead of “well”). After CFS that number dropped from 31% before the programme to 17.8% after, a 42.5% reduction.

Because of the increased satisfaction of the workplace and trust in the management, migrant parents were more likely to recommend their factory to their friends and family, which would make the recruitment process easier and less costly for the factory. As shown in Chart 13, after the CFS programme, 61.6% more migrant parents would “absolutely” recommend their factory to their friends and family if they were looking for a job.

Chart 13: “Would you recommend this factory to your friends or relatives? “



A mother with her son at a Child Friendly Space that opened at her factory in the summer of 2019 © The Centre

“ So far it is hard to tell to what extent the CFS would influence the retention rate, but it will surely bring positive impact on the image of our factory. Workers, both CFS participants and non-participants, have felt that our factory cares about their well-being, so that they can work with a peaceful mind”

Mr. Hu, the main person in charge of a CFS in 2019

“ We noticed that our employees became more enthusiastic and focused at work. They understand that our company cares about them, and they are willing to work harder in return.”

An HR manager whose factory took part in the CFS programme in 2019

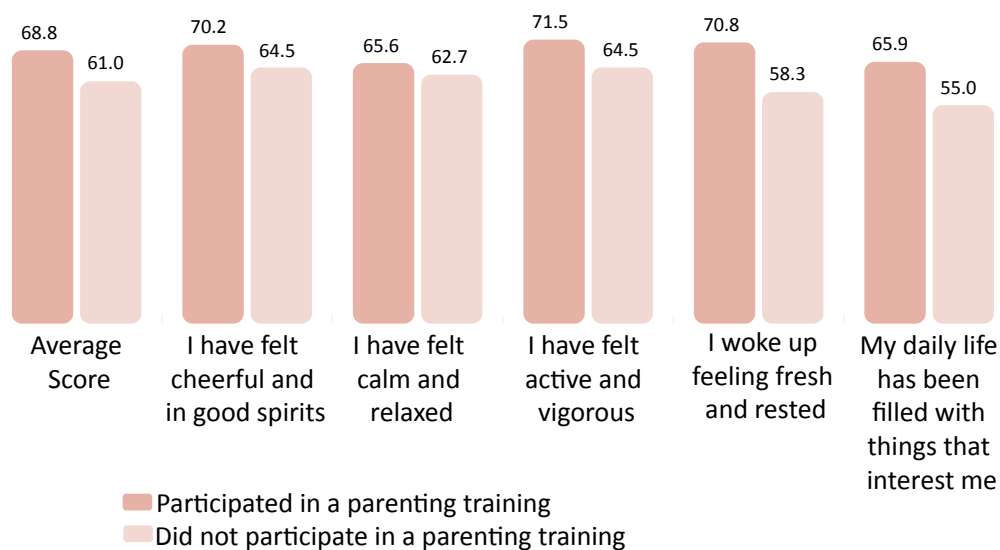
Case 3: Happier in Life, Happier at Work

In our 2017 study, we found that over 95% of migrant parents who didn't live with their children felt guilty about the limitations they faced in parenting their children, and that this guilt was significantly associated with their psychological wellbeing¹⁴. Understanding that this guilt comes from lack of close contact with their left-behind children and not knowing how to be part of their education and upbringing, The Centre has been implementing a "Distance without Separation" training programme over the past few years, aiming to break the cycle of detachment and give parents the support and tools they need to ensure their child is not just materially looked after, but emotionally as well. The beneficiaries of the programme were working parents with children aged 0-18 years old, especially migrant workers separated from their children.

Apart from collecting feedback from both parents and children on how the training helped migrant parents communicate more effectively with their children and how it brought them closer, we also tried to understand the impact on their psychological wellbeing, and consequently, how the changes in their level of happiness reflected in their satisfaction towards their workplace.

We looked at the data from 164 workers with left-behind children in 2020, where 37.20% participated in the parent training. We used the WHO-5 scoring system¹⁵ to compare the psychological wellbeing/level of happiness of parents who participated in the parenting training with those who haven't. As indicated in Chart 14, we saw a significant difference between these two groups: migrant parents who participated in the parenting training were significantly happier than those who haven't¹⁶.

Chart 14: Psychological index scoring of migrant parents who participated in parenting training vs. who didn't



Our data furthermore showed that when workers are happier in general, they tend to be more satisfied with their workplace¹⁷. Chart 15 demonstrates this clear link as we can see that those workers who score higher on the WHO-5 index also tend to be more satisfied with their workplace. As we observed that migrant parents who participated in the parent training were happier than the ones who did not, we subsequently also observed increased level of job satisfaction among the ones who participated in the parent training (Chart 16)¹⁸.

14. The Centre for Child Rights and Business, From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China, 2017
 15. WHO-5 used a 5-scale scoring system ranging from "All of the time" (5) to "At no time" (0). We converted the scores into 100-point scores
 16. There is a significant correlation between migrant parents' psychological index and participation in the parenting training. The correlation is $r = 0.1386$, $sig = 0.0767$.
 17. There is a significant correlation between migrant parents' psychological index and level of satisfaction with the workplace. The correlation is $r = 0.3470$, $sig = 0.0000$
 18. There is a positive correlation between migrant parents' (with left-behind children) satisfaction with the workplace and participation in the parenting training; however, the correlation is not significant. The correlation is $r = 0.1542$, $sig = 0.1638$.

Chart 15: Psychological wellbeing/level of happiness vs. job satisfaction

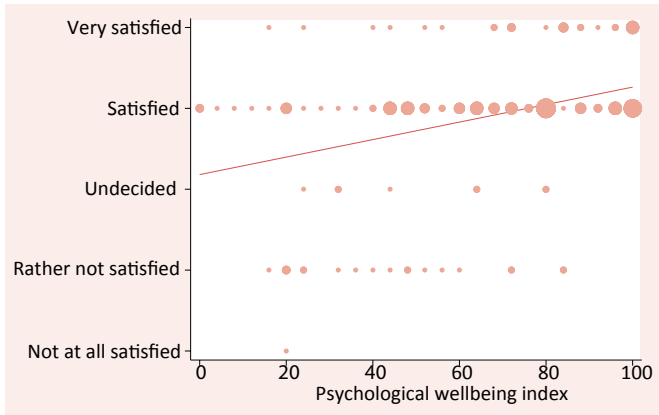
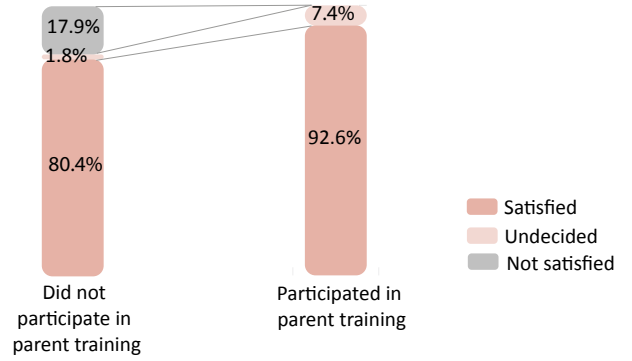


Chart 16: "In general, how satisfied are you with your factory?"



Parent workers take part in a migrant parent training session in their factory in 2020. Photo: Shiwei Sun, © The Centre



Photos clockwise from top left: factory workers look at the photo posters created by their colleagues as part of the PhotoVoice parent support programme; Parent-child games during a family day at a factory; Children at a CFS in the summer of 2020; Parent workers and their children during a family day event; Concentrating hard to not drop the ball during a family day activity; parents taking part in a migrant parent training in 2019 (photo by Rae Hu). All other photos: Shiwei Sun, © The Centre

CONCLUSION

Migrant workers are key contributors to production processes in China for international brands and retailers. To ensure global supply chains offer sustainable and viable workplaces, it is important to understand the needs of migrant parents and their children. Key takeaways we present to businesses from this study are:

- 1 More and more migrant parents are living with their children since 2017. This is mainly due to the easier access to public education enabled by recent government policies.
- 2 Migrant parents living with their children still struggle with lack of childcare options suitable for their working hours.
- 3 Inflexible working hours is a major bottleneck in parents' decision to bring their children, as migrant parents' work schedule, namely long working hours and routine overtime, conflicts with normal school/kindergarten hours and makes it difficult for them to pick up their children from school/kindergarten.
- 4 Shrinking orders owing to the COVID-19 pandemic led to reduced working hours, revealing fundamental issues with factory work in China, namely that workers overly rely on overtime pay because the base salary from a regular 8-hour day and 40-hour week, in most cases, is not sufficient to cover families' basic needs. This makes the migrant families extremely vulnerable to external shocks like COVID-19 and uncovers the volatility of the labour force in export manufacturing.
- 5 While reduced working hours brought significant financial losses and added to migrant families' burdens, it gave the migrant children much-needed time to spend with their parents, which they otherwise would not have had, and to a certain extent, it relieved migrant parents' pressure from having insufficient time and childcare options for their children.
- 6 While most factories struggled to shield themselves from the negative impact of COVID-19 on production, and thus had limited resources to address the needs of migrant parents, there were exceptions whereby factories demonstrated extra care by engaging in factory-based programmes such as Child Friendly Spaces (CFS), which resulted in significant increases in workers loyalty in a matter of weeks.
- 7 The most important benefit a factory can give to migrant workers is family accommodation, as this reduces the financial burden of workers living with their children and encourages more workers to live with their families.
- 8 The biggest impact COVID-19 had on both migrant and left-behind children is on their education. Children were academically more disadvantaged due to lack of support with course work, and the risk of children's academic performance sliding created tremendous pressure and anxiety for migrant parents.
- 9 The longer-term effect of COVID-19 could be increased volatility among workers in the manufacturing industry and might further exacerbate China's labour shortage. Data from past projects in recent years showed that workers' loyalty towards the workplace could prevent such volatility, and in-factory programmes ranging from CFS to migrant parent training, play a crucial role in increasing worker satisfaction and loyalty.

Conclusion

The increased desire of migrant workers to migrate together with their children and to spend more time with them might fundamentally change the face of China's supply chain workforce. The workforce is no longer willing to put their lives in the background just to focus solely on work, or at all times accept overtime as a means of earning a decent wage. Nor is the workforce willing to put income above anything else. Looking at the current trend, demand for family-friendly workplaces that offer childcare services, family housing and shorter working hours with decent wage levels will likely increase, and for labour intensive manufacturing it will be of essence to respond to these needs in order to grow and sustain sustainable supply chains.

Please see Appendix 2 for a list of practical steps that businesses can take to support migrant parent workers.



*Photo: Migrant workers with their children during a family day activity at their factory.
Photo: Shiwei Sun, © The Centre*

APPENDIX 1: STUDY OVERVIEW

1. Study Overview

Goal and Objectives

“Getting Through a Pandemic” is a sequence to two previous studies published by The Centre in 2013 and 2017 on the challenges faced by migrant parents working in factories producing for international buyers. The goal of this study is to better understand trends related to migrant parents’ migration choices, especially post COVID-19 and the impact of migration on child rights. Another goal of this study is to explore available support mechanisms to address the negative impact and to find better solutions to improve child rights through factory-based programmes.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- To observe the trends in migration decisions of parent workers and their children and possible reasons behind such changes from the personal/family level to the broader social level including government policies, changing economic environment, COVID-19 and the consequent economic downturn
- To better understand the recent changes in the situation of migrant parents, especially in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19 and how current in-factory support programmes respond to their situation
- To assess the implications and impact of in-factory support programmes such as Child Friendly Spaces and migrant parent training on migrant workers and factories
- To better understand the new challenges factories face post COVID-19 and the possible implications on the level of support they can provide for migrant parents
- To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on migrant families and their future migration plans
- To better understand current gaps in available support for migrant parents and their children and areas to improve
- To provide suggestions on how brands/buyers and factories can support working migrant parents and their children through in-factory programmes

Methodology

We collected primary data through quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The qualitative data came from remote interviews (phone or internet) with factory management, parents and children. The quantitative data came from our worker surveys in 2018, 2019 and 2020. The quantitative data was collected (with the exception of one factory) in the context of baseline and needs assessments at our project factories from 2018 until August 2020. We also used the results from The Centre’s earlier studies in 2013 and 2017 to compare trends and changes in migration decisions and challenges of migrant parents. Additionally, we used impact assessment results from projects in 2019 and 2020 for before and after comparison to demonstrate changes in the workforce.

The quantitative data was collected using mobile devices. As many workers in China have access to smart phones, The Centre staff arranged for most workers to either complete the survey on their mobile phones or to use our survey tablets during field assessments, and guided them with technical aspects. The surveys were anonymous and confidential and did not save any personal information about the workers that could potentially identify them. The data was saved securely on two different online platforms. As most of the surveys included both local and migrant workers, we filtered the data to use only the responses from migrant parents for the purpose of the study.

2. Sample Description

Qualitative Interviews

In March and April 2020, in order to understand the immediate impact of COVID-19, we had phone interviews with 58 factory managers, 24 parents and their children.

Factory interviews collected information from factories in export manufacturing about the changes in their workforce since the lockdown, order changes, most urgent challenges, actions and planned actions concerning the workforce etc. The 58 factories we interviewed were from Guangdong (21), Fujian (11), Jiangsu (9), Zhejiang (8) and other provinces (8 in total). These were all export factories producing for major international buyers from Europe and North America.

From the end of March to mid-April 2020, as local COVID-19 prevention measures prevented us from physically visiting factories, we reached out to migrant parents who participated in our programmes before and left us their contact information. 24 migrant parents from 11 factories accepted our phone/online interviews. 19 of them were mothers and 5 were fathers. Thirteen of the parents were interviewed together with their children. The interviews focused on their experiences during the lockdown and after, the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and work, the changes that have happened at work since the lockdown and what their factories have done to support them. The children's interviews tried to capture the changes from their perspectives.

The qualitative interviews we had with factory management, workers and their children provided us with important insights into the challenges they face because of COVID-19 pandemic, and their stories helped us draw vivid pictures that we validated by aggregate analysis of worker surveys later on.



Workers filling out a routine worker survey to be used for measuring programme impact. © The Centre, 2020

Quantitative Surveys

The main data we used for the quantitative analysis came from 73 factories, and 2,137 migrant parents, 65.8% of which are female. When showcasing impact on the workforce, we also used the “after” results from the same factories for comparison, which were collected when the projects concluded. Additionally, we also referred to the quantitative results from the previous studies on migrant parents to demonstrate changes in challenges experienced by migrant parents (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample

Main data source				
Year	Source	No. of factories	No. of migrant workers	% of females
2020	Filed survey for the migrant parent study	1	60	65.5%
2020	Needs assessment surveys for CFS	4	104	67.3%
2020	Needs assessment surveys for WeCare programme	7	154	62.3%
	Total for 2020	12	318	64.8%
2019	Needs assessment surveys for CFS	31	877	66.3%
2018	Needs assessment surveys for CFS	18	624	66.2%
	Total main data for analysis	73	2137	65.8%
Comparison data				
2020	Final evaluation surveys for CFS	4	63	56.6%
2019	Final evaluation surveys for CFS	31	559	62.1%
	Total comparison data for analysis	35	622	61.5%
Reference data				
2017	Study: “From the Factory with Love: A Study on Migrant Parent Workers in China”	N/A	735	74.6%
2013	Study: “They are Also Parents: A Study on Migrant Parents with Left-Behind Children in China”	N/A	1231	N/A

APPENDIX 2: HOW TO CREATE FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKPLACES

TO GET GOING

Parent Training

- Develop training to foster positive parenting skills with staff and tackle challenges as working parents
- Awareness campaigns to highlight the importance of various parenting practices such as early childhood development

Parent-Child Activities

- Organise factory-based activities to increase sense of belonging and cohesion among factory workers and their children and to strengthen their family ties
- Arrange a PhotoVoice activity whereby workers learn to use photography to engage with their children and create photo stories, which are exhibited in the factory

FUNDAMENTALS

Parental Leave

- Establish a minimum of six months paid parental leave to ensure parents can spend quality time with their children when they need it the most
- Include job protection with paid parental leave

Family-Friendly Work Arrangements

- Grant flexible working time arrangements through work-from-home policies, flexible shift switch and other measures
- Provide leave specifically for the care of a child or allow paid sick days to be used to care for family members

Protection for Pregnant & Nursing Women

- Support mechanisms for pregnant women such as comfortable workstations, lighter tasks, no hazardous work assignment and medical support

EXEMPLARY

Childcare

- Establish on-site childcare facilities such as Child Friendly Spaces and After-school Centres for parents and children to spend time together, especially during school holidays
- Provide childcare referral systems or collaboration with external childcare providers for working parents
- Address the specific challenges faced by migrant and seasonal workers through supporting digital tools or facilitating family visits
- Accommodate education and childcare needs due to school closure and remote learning during COVID-19

Child Benefits & Decent Wages

- Cash subsidies, allowances and other support to ensure that all children have access to affordable, quality childcare and early education
- Support immunisation, nutrition and other health-related measures to aid healthy child development, including sanitary and medical during COVID-19
- Family-friendly wages that reflect and support the cost of living for families

Women's Economic Empowerment

- Offer job security and incentivise childcare responsibilities uptake, especially for men
- Guarantee that women are not discriminated against based on pregnancy, motherhood or family responsibilities – for example, in relation to employment conditions, wages or career opportunities
- Create an environment that allow workers (both women and men) to strike a balance between paid work and care roles

Family Dormitories

- Ensure that employee housing and services are safe and suitable for resident children
- Support or provide temporary accommodations for visiting family members & children

THE CENTRE

FOR CHILD RIGHTS AND BUSINESS

The Centre for Child Rights and Business
8/F Pacific Plaza, 410-418 Des Voeux Road West,
Sai Wan, Hong Kong

info@childrights-business.org; www.childrights-business.org



*A migrant worker with her child during a family day activity at her factory.
Photo: Shiwei Sun, © The Centre, 2020*