

Reproductive Health and Access to Services among Rural-to-Urban Migrants in China

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Migration and Health in China

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Introduction to Working Papers on Migration and Health in China

This paper is part of a series of outputs from the research project on [Migration and Health in China](#).

China is confronted by major challenges posed by the massive population movement over the past three decades. In 2009, approximately 230 million rural inhabitants moved temporarily or permanently to cities in search of employment and better livelihoods. Such large-scale mobility has huge implications for the pattern and transmission of diseases; for China's health care system and related policies; and for health of the Chinese population in both receiving and sending areas. The health and social issues associated with population movement on such an unprecedented scale have been inadequately addressed by public policy and largely neglected by researchers. Based on interdisciplinary research across the health, social science and policy fields, this project constitutes a major effort to fill research and policy gaps. Collectively, the papers and commentaries in this series aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the health and public policy implications of rural to urban migration in China, to inform policy and to identify future research directions.

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Working Papers on Migration and Health in China

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The Influence of Migration on the Burden of and Response to Infectious Disease Threats in China: A Theoretically Informed Review

Joseph D. Tucker, Chun Hao, Xia Zou, Guiye Lv, Megan McLaughlin, Xiaoming Li and Li Ling, November 2013

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Abstract

Reproductive health, including maternal health, is an important issue for China's migrant population. This paper briefly reviews the reproductive health situation, including reproductive health knowledge and status, health service use, and interventions among rural-to-urban migrants. By analysing three data sets, the authors assess the reproductive health status of migrants, focusing particularly on the self-reported reproductive health of migrant women; maternal health and service utilization of migrant women; and contraceptive use among migrant men. Their three surveys found the following common themes in terms of migrant reproductive health services: (i) migrants were found to have limited access to health service or poor health-seeking behaviour in some aspects of reproductive health; (ii) they often have relatively limited sources of service compared to local residence; and (iii) their knowledge and information about reproductive health service is not adequate. There have been some improvements over time, in some cases through project intervention. Further research is needed to assess the impact of policy change and other variety of efforts to improve migrants' reproductive health.

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Introduction

China has experienced large labour migration flows since the 1990s, and especially after 1992 when related policies shifted from controlling population mobility to encouraging rural surplus labour to move to urban areas for work. Before the 1990s, most rural woman migrated mainly because of marriage. From the early 1990s, more young single women migrated to the east coast in response to the demand for labour in manufacturing. The pattern of labour migration changed gradually with an even larger flow in the twenty-first century.¹ Duan et al. (2008) documented changes in migration since the early 1980s in China:

- migration became a wide-spread phenomenon;
- more people migrated for work;
- migrants tended to stay in their destination areas for a longer time;
- coastal areas attracted more migrants;
- more family members joined migrants in cities; and
- migrants were more gender-balanced as more women joined in. By the first decade of the 21st century, migrant women made up almost half of labour migrants and more married women migrated out, some with their children.

As economic growth benefited from the migrant labour force, migrants increased their income and obtained better skills from work experience in cities. However, being away from home and their community, migrants also encountered higher risks and negative experiences in their daily life, including health issues. While greater attention has been paid to the health issues of migrants in the past decade, much of the data used comes from the 1990s. Given the double selection of migrants on health (that is, those who are able to migrate out are mostly healthier than those who do not migrate, and migrants with health problems tend to return home sooner than those who are healthier), it seemed as if few migrants really had the need for health services, except for injuries sustained at the workplace. Even less attention was paid to the reproductive health of migrants, except for the purpose of birth control.

Reproductive health refers to the health and well-being of women and men in terms of sexuality, fertility regulation, pregnancy and birth, including maternal health and the health of the newborn. The need for reproductive health service varies among different sub-groups in different reproductive periods of their lives. It is important for youth who have not married to have adequate knowledge about sexuality and safe sex, to be made aware of risks of unprotected sex, and to be given the means to prevent unwanted pregnancy; while for married couples, the important issues are helping them to have a healthy baby at the right time (that is, when couples think they are ready to raise a baby and the pregnancy is wanted by women), and to use a suitable contraceptive method when they are not ready to have a baby or decide to stop childbearing. For older women nearing menopause, regular health check-ups are important to prevent or enable an early diagnosis of disease in the reproductive system, such as breast or cervical cancer.

As more reported cases and research findings revealed the extent of reproductive health problems among migrants, especially among youth, the Chinese government starting paying more attention to the issue. As China has focused on reducing maternal mortality and providing universal reproductive health care services to meet the fifth goal of UN Millennium Development Goals, migrants have been one of the focal groups. The health

¹ For the most recent publication on the trends of migration in China, please refer to Chan (2012).

issues of migrants are also addressed in related development plans, such as the Program for the Development of Women and Children. However, most efforts have been in the form of short-term projects or organized activities to address the different needs of migrants in cities. Some improvements have been observed, such as increased health knowledge or decreased neonatal death in some cities. However, with large rural-urban differences in the reproductive health service system, individual incomes, as well as in health beliefs, knowledge and practices, and health service use, the efforts seem neither satisfactory nor effective. The problems of under-provision and under-utilization of health services by migrants still remain.

Problems of reproductive health among migrants are not unique to China. The Programme of Action of International Conference on Population and Development (organized by UNFPA in 1994) specifically addressed the issue of reproductive health and rights of migrants, for example, in paragraph 7.11: “Migrants and displaced persons in many parts of the world have limited access to reproductive health care and may face specific serious threats to their reproductive health and rights. Services must be particularly sensitive to the needs of individual women and adolescents and responsive to their often powerless situation.” However, in the Chinese context special attention should be paid to the study of migration and health because of the fast-changing context of both migration patterns and local government policy related to reproductive health needs of migrants. Both the migrants themselves and urban public services are changing rapidly. Compared with the migrant workers of one or two decades ago, the young migrant workers today have higher educational attainment, fewer siblings and higher expectations of their future careers. More research is needed to update our knowledge and to identify emerging issues and gaps. This paper seeks to contribute to that effort with both a literature review and new data analysis related to the situation of migrants’ reproductive health in the last decade in China.

This paper includes a brief literature review and a description of data and methodology used in this paper. The major findings—self-reported reproductive health of migrant women, maternal health and service use of migrant women, and contraceptive use of migrant men—focus on different migrant groups. It ends with a brief conclusion, a discussion of policy implications and comments on further research priorities.

Research on Migrants’ Reproductive Health in China: A Review

For several decades, the China government treated rural and urban dweller as two separate populations, identified by their household registration (*hukou*). A *hukou* status

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