

ABSTRACT

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is an important field of global health, especially for low-and middle-income countries like Lao PDR where the number of factories is increasing while OHS remains unrecognized and poorly implemented. In the garment sector, most workers are young females who have relocated from their rural homes into the city to search for work and they may be subjected to harsh working conditions and long working hours.

Objectives and Method: The objective of this study is to assess the knowledge, recognition, and practice of factory managers and workers of OHS in nine garment factories in Vientiane, Lao. The working environment and conditions of the three large, medium, and small factories were observed and evaluated. This study consists of 1) Factory observational walkthroughs by the researcher and the managers 2), In-depth interviews (IDI) with safety managers, 3) Focus group discussion (FGD) with five to seven workers. The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks were discussed in FGD's. Factory observational walkthroughs were made to evaluate the environment and implementation of OHS within the factory.

Results: The study found a big difference in knowledge of OHS between managers and workers. The knowledge of the managers was more than the workers who worked many years in the factories. Knowledge of workers differed by factory size. The medium and large factories had more varied ways to transmit OHS knowledge to workers than the small factories. In the larger factories, the workers generally understand important OHS topics. Training was lacking or infrequent in the smaller factories. While some workers had knowledge, actual practice to improve OHS was limited. An example is the lack of use of masks. Managers and workers understand the hazard and the potential health risks of not using PPE. But workers didn't use PPE frequently. Attitude of managers and workers were poor for promoting PPE, and there was poor culture of wearing PPE in the work place. Another key outcome is the lack of understanding of risk for both managers and workers. All had a good understanding of hazards. But, only two managers were able to clarify the difference between risk and hazard. Understanding risks and need for risk assessments is critical for OHS. Workers had no understanding of risk assessments, which made improvements of OHS in garment factories difficult. Both managers and workers ignore "small injuries" such as needle stick, electric shock, and cuts. Workers feared losing their job by reporting small injuries. Managers may blame workers for their unsafe use of machinery, rather than improving OHS education and accepting their responsibility for OHS improvements. Thus, no action for prevention and improvement is taken. Both managers and workers accept this situation. This poor OHS attitude and culture results in lack of

improving OHS. Perhaps the workers feel the knowledge is not useful because it does not translate to positive practices. The observational walkthroughs found that the OHS related risks to workers in smaller factories is higher than the larger factories in terms of PPE, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), working environment, and posters and instructions. As a conclusion, there is a significant need to improve the implementation of OHS in the garment factories of Vientiane.