



**Let's Get Ready for Departure:  
Life-Planning Skills Training Among  
Migrant Youth From Peixian County,  
Jiangsu Province**

**Peixian County Family Planning Association**

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**China Youth  
Reproductive Health Project**



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**Abstract:** This case study briefly documents the process of conducting a vocational school-based life-planning skills training for rural, young migrants from Peixian County, Jiangsu Province, China, and shares the lessons learned from this intervention as well as the possibility and necessity of expanding the program.

## **1. Project background**

### **1.1 Demographic features of Peixian County**

Peixian County is an economically underdeveloped area located in northwestern Jiangsu Province. With a total population of 1.18 million, Peixian has about 300,000 unmarried youth between the ages of 10 and 24—26 percent of the total county population. Among these unmarried youth, 24 percent (about 80,000) do not attend school and over 90 percent are 16 to 24 years old. Given the lack of economic opportunity in Peixian, the local government has passed numerous policies encouraging young people to leave Peixian for other, more prosperous regions of China. These efforts have included establishing 18 vocational schools that aim to prepare young migrants-to-be with the skills necessary for jobs in big cities.

According to recent government statistics, each year about 150,000 people from Peixian travel to other regions of China as migrant workers, and among them, 50,000 to 70,000 are unmarried youth. By becoming migrant workers and remitting funds, these youth can improve the economic situation of their families and communities in Peixian.

### **1.2 Rationale for conducting the life-planning skills training program in Peixian**

The Peixian Family Planning Association (FPA) first conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) and surveys among migrant youth during the 2003 Spring Festival holiday, when many returned to visit their families. The FGDs and surveys revealed that a large proportion of migrant youth had experienced sexual harassment at different levels, and many young female migrants returning to Peixian for the festival break reported having had repeated abortions within a one-year time period. Moreover, some male migrant workers also reported that they had been seduced into being sex workers—some were aware that they had already acquired sexually transmitted infections (STIs). About 80 percent of those who participated in the surveys also indicated feeling confused and intimidated by the sudden change in their environment after migration. They did not know how to deal with complicated issues such as sexual harassment while they were already stressed due to cultural differences and heavy workloads. They desperately needed reproductive health knowledge and skills to protect themselves. Thus, improving knowledge and skills among young migrants became the top priority of the local FPA.

Local FPA staff asked themselves: what is the best way for the FPA to reach young migrants-to-be in order to arm them with appropriate reproductive health knowledge and skills to protect themselves in the cities? Since most of the young migrants-to-be (about 95 percent) attend vocational schools for training, the county FPA decided to work with local vocational

schools to incorporate life-planning skills (LPS) training, including reproductive health knowledge and classes on self-protection, into the schools' education programs.

I met a newly promoted female village affairs secretary general during one of my routine work survey visits. She was an ex-migrant worker who had worked in a clothing factory. She told me that she was forced to leave the factory simply because she could not endure the constant sexual harassment of a quality control officer anymore.

—Liang Ensheng, secretary general and project director of Peixian Family Planning Association

## **2. Main activities of the life-planning skills training program in Peixian**

### **2.1 Selection of the pilot project schools**

The Peixian FPA selected the Hongxin and Yucai Vocational Schools to be the pilot project implementing sites.

Hongxin Vocational School has a popular and young principal, as well as other young teachers who communicate easily with their students. The majority of the students are high school graduates. All 280 students study computer science. Students are divided into eight classes—two three-month programs and six one-year programs.

Yucai Vocational School students have diverse academic backgrounds, ranging from elementary school to high school graduates. Training programs also vary, ranging from computer repair and information science to arc welding. Implementing the training program in such a dynamic environment provided valuable information for the development of future LPS training in other vocational schools of different backgrounds.

### **2.2 Needs assessment conducted in the pilot project schools**

In order to obtain detailed information about the current reproductive health situation and specific needs of young migrants-to-be, the county FPA conducted participatory learning and action (PLA) activities—an interactive form of needs assessment—at the two pilot intervention sites. Sixty students from two schools, all between the ages of 16 and 24, participated. The PLA activities helped the project team understand students' current reproductive health status, needs, and the variety of challenges they face. Many participants indicated that LPS trainings were very much in demand and that the trainings had to be conducted by suitable people, in a comfortable environment, and with interactive methods.

PLA activities also provided opportunities for the project team to apply and practice their newly acquired facilitation and communication techniques, which helped them to understand what young people today think and need. This also helped them to realize the significance of youth participation in the project development and implementation processes.

### **2.3 Conducting the life-planning skills trainings**

Starting in March 2003, the two pilot schools provided six hours of participatory LPS training to students through a class called *Comprehensive Skills Development*. LPS training topics included STI/HIV prevention, prevention of unintended pregnancy, correct use of condoms, how to avoid sexual harassment, refusal skills, and future planning. About 300 students participated in the training.

Project-related personnel received youth-friendly services training in order to provide more appropriate health services to the students. Schools placed mailboxes in classrooms and dormitories to collect questions that students were too embarrassed to raise in public. All the answers, along with information regarding where to acquire contraceptives and other information on reproductive health-related concerns, were then posted on the school bulletin board.

The project also developed supplemental reading material for the students. One example is *Guide for Migrant Workers*, with a pleasing cover symbolizing the endless opportunities and prospects for young migrants looking for a better livelihood in the cities. This guide covers topics such as: 1) how to locate employment opportunities; 2) signing a work contract and how to protect one's legal rights; and 3) themes from the LPS training. Many young migrants enthusiastically accepted this guide.

### **2.4 Expanding the life-planning skills training to other vocational schools**

Based on the lessons learned from the pilot phase in the two schools, the county project office became more confident about expanding the LPS training to other vocational schools. The county project team invited school administrators and policymakers to observe participatory LPS training sessions in order to understand the significance and benefits of the LPS training, its methodology, and content and to see for themselves how receptive the students were to the information.

After observing the training classes themselves, many policymakers and school officials supported the LPS training. In 2004, a policy document was jointly issued by the Peixian County FPA, the county department of family planning, and the county department of labor, calling for reproductive health and LPS training for all migrants. This motivated another 15 schools to join the project.

By February 2004, 18 vocational schools had voluntarily conducted LPS trainings. Training sessions were held once or twice a week, with each session lasting 1.5 to 2 hours. Every participating student also received a copy of *Guide for Migrant Workers*.

### **3. Impacts and effects of life-planning skills training**

#### **3.1 Benefits for participants in life-planning skills training**

From March 2003 to February 2004, students from the two pilot project sites received a total of 300 hours of training that covered STI/HIV prevention, pregnancy prevention, correct use of condoms, sexual harassment, refusal skills, and future planning. From February 2004 to October 2005, about 7,110 students from 18 different vocational schools participated in 446 LPS training sessions.

Participants' reproductive health knowledge increased as a result of the training, especially in STI/HIV prevention, pregnancy prevention, and sexual harassment. Students' attitudes and behaviors also changed. In June 2004, the county FPA conducted follow-up interviews with 239 participants from the pilot project sites by telephone, by mail, and in person. The results showed that participants' self-protection skills and intentions to use these skills had increased. Among those students who had already left Peixian and were working in the cities, none of them had had an unintended pregnancy or an STI, and they reported resisting temptation when facing sex and drugs.

The LPS training strengthened my self-esteem and pulled me out of the depression caused by my failure to pass the college entry exam. The LPS training also taught me necessary skills to survive on my own and how to avoid immature relationships and mistakes. Now, because of my effort and hard work, I have a great job and am going to establish a family with someone I love in the city.

—From a letter from a former trainee of the LPS program

Many former participants, now working in the cities, share what they have learned from the LPS training with their friends who do not attend the training. Sharing information and helping their friends gives them tremendous satisfaction and confidence. At the same time, through the LPS training, those once sensitive topics that were too embarrassing to talk about can now be discussed freely among friends.

### **3.2 Support from parents and schools**

Many parents, especially those of girls, have agreed that because of the LPS training, their children now have more knowledge about how to protect themselves; therefore, there are fewer worries for parents.

During the intervention, the county project office also paid special attention to school administrators and principals, inviting them to the LPS training classes. Many of them discovered a chain reaction from incorporating LPS training into their schools: students had more knowledge; parents had fewer worries and became more confident in the school's education quality; and ultimately, the school's enrollment increased. According to the statistics, the number of female students in vocational schools has increased considerably compared with the pre-training period. Thus, vocational school-based LPS training programs have garnered praise and recognition among school principals, and many who had doubts about the program have changed their minds.

#### ***3.2.1 Opinion of the project prior to implementation***

We are not responsible for students' reproductive health knowledge, since their technical classes have already been pretty heavy. We don't have time for this useless program.... Also, what students do outside of this school is none of our business; if they are infected with any diseases, it's their own problem!

—Record of a telephone conversation with a principal prior to the LPS training

#### ***3.2.2 Opinion of the project following implementation***

Our parents trust us with their children; therefore, we should be responsible. Conducting reproductive health education before they actually start working in big cities has very positive and real effects on our students. At the same time, it is a way to show our parents that we, as educators, really care!

—Principal ZhuWei, Hongda Vocational School, following implementation of LPS sessions

### **3.3 Institutionalization of life-planning skills in vocational schools**

The county project office petitioned the local governments and school officials to institutionalize the LPS training program in order to establish a long-term commitment and the financial security of the program. In 2004, the Peixian County department of family planning, the county department of labor, and the county FPA issued an official document strongly supporting inclusion of reproductive health and LPS training for migrants as a work objective for relevant agencies. (In China, policy is critical to ensuring institutionalization—without supportive policies, the sustainability of the program would be in jeopardy.) This policy document

communicates the necessary government support for the institutionalization of the LPS training programs in Peixian.

It is absolutely necessary and urgent to provide reproductive health education for our vocational school students; implementing and supporting such a program is being responsible for society, for parents, and for our young generation. As policymakers, we should actively support this program and be more involved. In addition to continuing the LPS training program, we should also integrate it into our government's five-year work plan.

—Feng Peiling, vice director of the Peixian  
County Department of Labor and Social Welfare

The adolescent reproductive health project is very beneficial for young generations to come. Those of you who do not support this project should feel ashamed!

—Gao Guangdong, Peixian County Department of  
Family Planning

## **4. Experience conducting life-planning skills trainings**

### **4.1 Life-planning skills training was welcomed by young people**

Young people overwhelmingly welcomed the participatory LPS training. Training teachers to facilitate LPS sessions with participatory methods, rather than the usual teaching method of lecturing, encouraged students to participate in class discussions and to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences with each other. By making students feel closer to the facilitators, this method enabled students to discuss reproductive health issues and concerns freely in a comfortable and relaxed environment. The variety of activities, such as group discussions, role-plays, and case studies, also let students contribute to the training program without being judged or criticized. These activities also were important in helping them to practice skills they learned in the class for use in real life.

Facilitators have also learned from the LPS training.

I spent nearly 20,000RMB (about US\$2,500) over a five-year period, hoping to learn more about how to help my students succeed in life. And this project has given me more brilliant inspiration than I could get from books....

—Hao Benli, principal of the Hongxing Vocational  
School



Being a facilitator has taught me how to communicate with my own children, and how to listen to their opinions and suggestions.

—A female training facilitator from Peixian County

The LPS training has improved the traditional teaching method by stimulating students' interest and directing them to consider for themselves why some behaviors are right or wrong....

—Hu Bing, reproductive health education project

## **4.2 Appropriate training content**

Selecting proper LPS training topics is key to meeting the needs of young students and to maintaining project sustainability. Based on the needs assessment conducted with vocational school students and the project framework, the LPS training program included topics such as STI/HIV prevention, pregnancy prevention, correct use of condoms, sexual harassment, refusal skills, and future planning. During project implementation, project staff confirmed that students were interested in these topics and activities.

As the LPS training program expanded, facilitators adjusted or enhanced the training topics as needed. Many young migrant workers, especially women, return from the cities with complaints about not knowing what to do when being sexually harassed by their bosses, friends, or co-workers. The LPS training, therefore, has added role-plays about sexual harassment so that students can analyze situations and find possible resolutions under different circumstances.

Training facilitators are encouraged to pay particular attention to making connections between the training topics and real-life experiences. When discussing routes of HIV infection, the facilitators first introduce accurate information regarding the topic, clarifying many misconceptions. Then by engaging students in a discussion of high-risk and safe behaviors, the facilitators help the students to think about how to protect themselves.

## **5. Challenges**

This vocational school-based LPS training program accomplished a great deal but also faced many challenges. Many of the challenges could not be fully resolved, such as conservative traditional values, turnover of facilitators, and policy and financial support shortages.

### **5.1 Effects of traditional values**

Chinese traditional values had different effects on the reproductive health education program. Some training facilitators were unable to conquer their prejudices, and many students felt very

uncomfortable when discussing sensitive topics. Also, conservative values toward reproductive health have prevented some students from participating in the training at all. Facing these difficulties, the project office observed LPS training sessions and provided feedback and assistance to the facilitators. Many facilitators, due to this mentoring and feedback, gradually adopted a nonjudgmental attitude and developed even more interesting and engaging activities.

## **5.2 Turnover of facilitators**

The turnover rate among trained facilitators is also a problem for the well-being of the project, since teachers are always looking for better employment opportunities. Facing this instability, the project team continually trained more facilitators. After consulting with school principals, the team started selecting facilitators from those unlikely to change employment sites, such as teachers who are also stockholders in the schools.

## **5.3 Policy and financial support**

Gaining policy support requires a project team to maintain constant and effective communication with governments and policymakers, while using the well-established connections of the county FPA. Nevertheless, some vocational school principals just do not think providing reproductive health education is part of their responsibility. In order to ensure that sufficient time is devoted to the LPS training, the project team advocated policy changes to pressure school principals into accepting and supporting the program. In February 2004, the county department of family planning, the county department of labor and social welfare, and the county FPA issued an official document that requires LPS training to be included in the vocational school students' final evaluation.

With the expansion of the LPS activities, financial demands have increased and are harder to fulfill. Young people's demands for high quality reproductive health education and youth-friendly services are increasing, and more funding is needed to expand the training program and services. The project team has gained policy support to help solve this problem.

## **6. Conclusion**

Vocational school-based LPS training for rural youth from Peixian County has proven the effectiveness of participatory teaching methods. Pre-migratory students warmly welcomed the information and skills provided. Institutionalization of the LPS training program has helped countless young migrants before their departures to work in the big cities become prepared with essential reproductive health knowledge and the skills to protect themselves.