Who looks after the children of the workers who make our clothes? [1]

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EXCERPTS

If you are reading this and wearing Nike or Adidas sneakers, there is a good chance they were made in a factory in Vietnam by a female worker who can't afford to pay for childcare.

Millions of women travel from all over Vietnam to work in factories in the country's large industrial parks, putting in long hours to earn roughly $180 a month. Many of them bring their children with them, but because they come from other provinces, they typically can't place their child in a government-run daycare center, and can't afford to pay private kindergarten fees either. A kindergarten place can cost as much as $85 a month.

In response, a cottage industry of unregulated and overcrowded daycare centers, mostly run by local women out of their homes, has sprung up around the factories. Children are left there in groups of up to 49, with just one or two caregivers to look after them. They might spend most of their day in front of the television, with no time outside or toys to play with.

The most formative years of a child's development are between birth and age five, when every experience and relationship in their life weaves through the fabric of who they will become. If children grow up in safe and stimulating environments, surrounded by adults who love and care for them and are responsive to their needs, they are likely to have better outcomes as adults on a range of factors, from school to professional and social lives. But when children grow up in stressful or disadvantaged situations, or when they are deprived of intellectual stimulation, or love and care, the normal development of their brains and bodies can be affected, with devastating consequences. That's why advocates argue that early childhood is the best time to intervene in vulnerable children's lives and try to improve their environment and the care they receive.

Enter OneSky for all children, a nonprofit that used to be called Half the Sky, after a proclamation made by Mao Zedong that "women hold up half the sky." OneSky has developed a training model for childcare providers in Da Nang province, in central Vietnam, which aims to improve the quality of the care that children of migrant factory workers receive. In doing so, it hopes to lay the foundation for the professionalization of an early childhood development workforce in Vietnam.

OneSky built a model early learning center on land donated by the local government in Da Nang's Hoa Khanh Industrial Park, and by early next year it will have trained 320 caregivers there. Now, it's preparing to scale up, to cover another 19 provinces and ultimately reach as many as 417,000 young children. Their challenge? Convincing the many actors involved—from the local and federal government to the factory owners and companies who buy from them—that these children are their responsibility, too.

"What we're focusing on is changing broken systems"

In the mid-1990s, Jenny Bowen was working as an independent feature filmmaker in California. She and her husband Richard were empty nesters. Bowen read about baby girls abandoned in China in The New York Times and watched the BBC documentary The Dying Rooms, which portrayed pitiable conditions inside Chinese state-run orphanages. She spoke to her husband about finding a way to send money to the kids whose suffering haunted her. But, she says, "the more we looked at the problem, we felt like this is a situation where sending money isn't going to make a difference." So, the Bowens made the momentous decision to adopt a child from a Chinese orphanage instead.

Two-year-old Maya came into their lives in 1997, "bearing all the ill-effects of institutionalization. She was really ill, she had parasites, she had amebic dysentery, she was malnourished, and, most frightening, she was basically just shut down—zero emotion," recalls Bowen. "We were experienced parents…but didn't really know what to do with this child who was just emotionally vacant."

After the adoption, Bowen spent all her time with Maya "talking to her, singing to her, and just loving her up." In response, Maya slowly blossomed in front of her eyes, becoming more like a normal child with every year that passed. "I just said to my husband, wow, that was really easy. Why don't we just do that for all the kids we can't bring home? And that was the beginning of a story that…wasn't about saving a life anymore, but really changed my life and the lives of thousands of kids."

Bowen and her husband founded the Half the Sky Foundation in China in 1998 to train the staff in two Chinese social welfare institutions to provide "family-like" nurturing care to orphaned children. The goal, says Bowen, was "to bring a caring adult into the life of every orphaned child." Research shows that children who have at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult in their community are more resilient to adversity and stress.

Over the next two decades the nonprofit—renamed "OneSky for all children" in 2016—says it trained more than 38,000 caregivers, thereby directly affecting the lives of nearly 180,000 children in China. In 2016, OneSky expanded into Vietnam, where the clothing and footwear industries alone employ about 2.8 million women. More than 1 million young children live in the country's many industrial zones, and OneSky says most of them lack access to public kindergartens. The organization picked Da Nang province for the rollout of its new training program because the local Department of Education and Training was already looking for ways to help vulnerable children.

OneSky trains cohorts of caregivers from informal daycare centers around the province. Every other Sunday, for 20 weeks, they sit in a classroom and learn the basics of providing stimulating care. The training uses a blended learning approach, meaning that the women—and it's always women—also have access to online instruction through a platform created by OneSky. During the first session, caregivers learn why it matters to hold or kiss a child, and to talk to them about what they're reading or seeing. The trainer gives each caregiver a bag of beans or pebbles, and encourages them to put one in a jar every time they do something to help build children's brain connections. When the trainers visit the caregivers in their childcare centers every other month, each is encouraged to show their jar. It's part of the attempt to build new habits to benefit children into caregivers' daily routines.

The model is scalable, because OneSky picks particularly motivated caregivers in each cohort to become trainers, and they then train the next cohort. It costs about $60,000 to train a cohort of 320 trainees in one province, which works out to about $10 per child. Funding comes from international donors like Grand Challenges Canada's Saving Brains initiative. (Saving Brains is funded in part by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, which also supports Quartz's series on early childhood.)

A pilot group of 80 women finished training in December 2018, a second cohort of 240 caregivers are halfway through the course, and a third cohort of 160 will start in December 2019. OneSky plans to ultimately train 35,000 caregivers in 19 provinces of Vietnam—about the same as it did in China. Now, it's expanding into Mongolia (pdf, p. 20) and considering a presence in Myanmar. "The goal for us is to help as many kids as we can as quickly as we can," says Morgan Lance, OneSky's chief development officer.

Stable, consistent, and high-quality childcare could also help women, who spend five hours a day on unpaid care work—two hours more than men, according to nonprofit Action Aid. According to the World Bank (pdf), women in Vietnam earn about one month's income less than men every year, a gap that can partially be explained by their decision to work in lower-paid jobs. These jobs, says the Bank, "offer better non-monetary benefits," including paid leave and flexible work hours, which could influence women's choices.

OneSky also aims to help the caregivers. The training allows the women to bond, trade stories, and create a support network as childcare professionals, says Lance. She adds that the first course had a nearly 100% attendance rate because "the women are very, very hungry for education and for the ability to develop a sense of professionalism. They've been looked down on for many years as sort of babysitters and now they're being seen as childcare professionals and education specialists and there's a lot of value in that."

"What we're focused on is changing broken systems," says Bowen, "systems that harm vulnerable children," in which caregivers are underpaid, inadequately trained, overworked, and often dismissed as unimportant.

An overview of the evidence

There is limited scientific evidence of the impact of OneSky's caregiver training on the workers and on children's development outcomes.

The only published evaluation of OneSky's programs covers a two-year period from 2015 and was conducted by the China Development Research Foundation. It assessed the impact of a training program for parents and family members, preschool teachers, and the wider community in 40 villages in Ye County, China. The researchers surveyed caregivers' parenting practices, and self-reporting of their child's development, as well as height and weight. The evaluation was limited by high attrition rates and low take-up in the original group of villages. It found that the training had an effect on children's gross-motor and personal-social skills and their cultural knowledge and physical development, as well as on parents' practices.

Last year, with $220,000 in funding from Saving Brains, OneSky hired Aisha Yousafzai, an associate professor of global health at the Harvard T. Chan School of Public Health, to evaluate its caregiver training model in Da Nang. Yousafzai plans to measure the effect of the training on every caregiver in all three OneSky cohorts in Vietnam. This will allow for assessment of whether the lessons from the training stick, and how they affect children's environment and development. Yousafzai is applying for ethics approval in Vietnam and the US and plans to begin data collection in Da Nang in December.

OneSky's program in Vietnam is one of several different attempts around the world to offer professional and reliable childcare to the children of migrant or informal workers. In the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, Kidogo runs a "social franchising model," which trains female entrepreneurs—"Mampreneurs"— to start their own childcare centers. In India, Mobile Creches, a nonprofit, works with the employers of migrant workers to finance mobile childcare centers on work sites.

OneSky is expanding. Last year, it launched a massive fundraising effort to build a new regional training hub in Hong Kong, which opened this year. That, says Bowen, explains why the charity spent $1,455,346 on fundraising last year, or 15.3% of its yearly revenue of $9,512,169. This is more than the 10% recommended by the independent charity assessment website CharityNavigator, which gives OneSky a two-star financial rating, meaning it "needs improvement" and "underperforms" compared to other similar charities. In a written response, OneSky said, "Bringing in major gifts via a capital campaign takes time, but our work in 2018 to build the center and lay the

foundation for fundraising in Hong Kong is beginning to pay dividends this year, which is unfortunately not reflected in the Charity Navigator rating system."

After training caregivers in a state-run nursery in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, OneSky plans to launch a parenting education and community engagement program in the country in 2020. It is also considering the possibility of getting involved in the development of New Yangon City (pdf), a massive and controversial industrial and commercial hub in Myanmar that will host hundreds of thousands of manufacturing workers and their children. "This is kind of the dream scenario," says Lance. "To be there from the very beginning, and instead of trying to fix broken systems, help create a good one to start with."

With funding from MIT's Solve challenge, OneSky hopes to redesign and improve its online learning platform for caregivers and adapt it to different languages and cultural contexts, says Lance. It also hopes to "develop some sort of business model that allows the global brands to help fund these kinds of solutions," she explains. "I have a really strong feeling that there's some responsibility amongst the global community to take care of these children. These factories are running on very, very small margins, and they're producing for really big global brands whose products we all buy."

But as it looks to expand, OneSky faces challenges. In Vietnam, no one can agree on whose responsibility the care of these children is, says Lance. The central government blames the provincial government for not opening up more spots in public kindergartens; the provincial government "believes that they shouldn't be using their funds to pay for children from another province"; the factory owners think the global brands who buy their products should be paying them for childcare costs, and global brands think the factories or the government should do it—if they think about it at all. In the end, says Lance, nobody steps up and "NGOs like us…do it."

Freedom House rates three of the four countries in which OneSky works or is planning to work—China, Vietnam, and Myanmar—as "not free." It's difficult to reconcile the mission of an organization dedicated to the protection of vulnerable children with the reality on the ground where it runs its programs. The government of Myanmar has been accused of the horrific abuse of the Rohingya people, including tens of thousands of displaced children. The government of China has been accused of separating Uyghur families and putting parents in detention camps and children in welfare institutions.

And yet "if you don't find a way to work with government, it's almost not worth [it]," says Bowen. When she initially approached the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs in the 1990s, she says the orphanages were closed to foreign visitors because of the backlash to The Dying Rooms. But China let her in because, in Bowen's words, she was "the most persistent and least critical of what was happening." Is docility the price of government cooperation? "We don't come to a place to criticize," said OneSky in a written statement. "Our conversations are always about how we can partner together to bring children the services they need. Always positive—and I think government authorities (who are just people, after all) appreciate that."

It comes down to the kids

"Children who are born into adversity, whether it's poverty or whether it's abandonment, or whatever it is, there's a soulfulness that they have, [that] all the kids we work with have," says Bowen. She saw that soulfulness in Maya, who, in addition to being the reason for OneSky's existence, might also be the program's greatest success story. After graduating from the University of California, Davis with a double major in human development and psychology, and a minor in education, Maya now works as a program coordinator at the OneSky Centre in Hong Kong. She is also applying to graduate programs to research early interventions for at-risk kids in developing countries. Bowen says that Maya "really feels very strongly about passing it on."

Maya's story illustrates the power of loving caregivers to change the trajectory of a child's life. But Bowen and her group can't adopt every poor or abandoned child in the world. Instead, they hope to instill the value of "family-like" love and care in enough childcare professionals, parents, and teachers to make a difference. "If there's a generation of these children that we can give them what they need to thrive and grow, help them feel securely attached and loved and that their lives matter, they can be the most extraordinary generation of adults," says Bowen. "I think that they could heal the world."

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