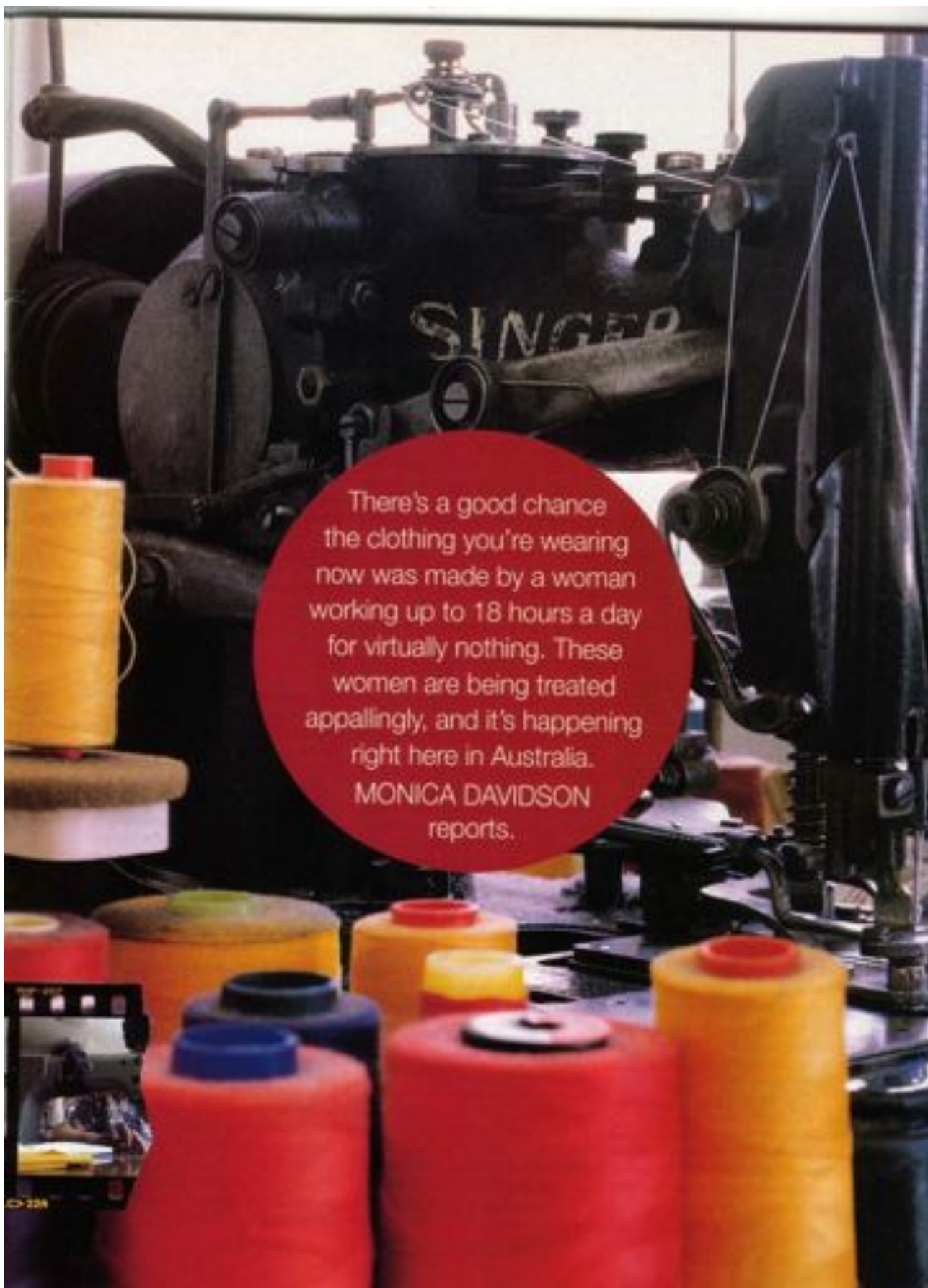


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fashion VICTIMS

There is a job in Australia that more than 300,000 people do. Almost all of them are women, and almost all are migrants aged between 25 and 35. It is the kind of job where you are very likely to receive less-than-livable wages, be sexually harassed, physically and verbally abused, or be forced to have your children working as well for no wages at all.

The job is outworking — sewing garments for the clothing industry in your home. The items produced range from babies' wear to upmarket clothing, and are the kind you will find in stores all over Australia. Inexpensive brands and high-end fashion labels alike use outworkers to make their clothes, and they make them as cheaply as possible, reaping the biggest profits. All this is made possible by the exploitation of workers, who are producing clothes for far less than Award wages.

One outworker who cannot be named

was paid \$9 by a contractor for a vest she had worked on. This vest was bought from the contractor for \$21, and was sold by the fashion label in stores for \$150. Many of the outworkers who supply garments for this particular label are happy with their wage, as it is higher than other labels are prepared to pay.

Last August, Senator Sid Spindler, Democrat spokesperson for Ethnic Affairs, proposed a motion before the Economic References Committee to begin investigating outworking. "We are rightly disgusted with child exploitation and slave labour conditions in other countries," says Senator Spindler. "However, here in our own backyard we are tolerating the exploitation of home workers — mainly women, mainly migrants, and one suspects also children — in conditions which we have fought for decades to eliminate from Australia."

Spindler's allegations are supported by the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear

ZHU and a friend sew uniforms. At one stage they worked for four months for an employer, and the only information they had about this person was a mobile phone number. The employer collected the work they had done, but never returned with the money. When Zhu called the mobile number, the person was no longer answering. They were never paid.

NGUYEN and his wife, in addition to being refused wages for mistakes that were not their fault, were instructed by their employer on how to apply falsely for Social Security payments. They were told how much of their earnings to declare each week, how much would be paid to them on the books, and how much in cash. The same employer uses between 30 and 40 outworkers, and all are expected to be on benefits to continue receiving work.

MARKO BOK



THINK BEFORE YOU BUY... The following Australian fashion labels sell clothing produced by outworkers. This list was tabled in parliament on March 29, 1995. A new, expanded report will be tabled later this year; Pelaco, Kmart, Saba, House of Stitches, Sportscraft, Adidas, Diamond Cut, Sussan, Portmans, Swiss Models, Laura Ashley, Kafies, Solo, Ojay, Stockey, Elle B, George Gross, Daiketh, Exacto, Anthea Crawford, Country Road, Perri Cutten, Jag, Sportsgirl, Harry Who, Davenport, Nike, Review, Toronto.

Union of Australia, which last year produced the report *The Hidden Cost of Fashion*. In compiling the report, the union discovered that the bulk of clothes produced in Australia are being made in private homes. Outworkers are estimated to outnumber factory workers by 14 to one, despite statements in the Clothing Awards of 1982 that "an Employer shall not have more than one outdoor worker for every 15 indoor (or factory) workers".

So how can such exploitation exist when there is a union and Awards to protect workers? These Federal Awards, which allow for fair pay and decent working conditions, are only binding if employers are named or registered in the Award. If the employer is not named, it is extremely difficult for the union or the Industrial Relations Department to know who and where they are. Without that information, employees are relatively helpless, unless they are aware of their rights. As many outworkers are very recent to Australia, and are often isolated and unable to speak English, it is an almost impossible predicament.

Contracting is a way in which employers can hide the fact that they are using outworkers without permission from authorised bodies. In many cases, retail stores buy stock from a contractor, who has purchased the garments from the manufacturer or straight from the outworkers. In many cases contractors may not realise they are purchasing clothes made under exploitative conditions — but, of course, some are aware. Either way, retail owners are even further removed from the truth.

The ignorance of retailers, contractors and customers to the outworkers situation is understandable, but far from excusable. When the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union conducted a national phone-in campaign in July 1994, many outworkers called to express their fear and confusion regarding their rights. A number of problems were frequently

raised — many outworkers were afraid of intimidation by their employers if they spoke out publicly, or were worried they would lose their job if they asked for better conditions. One Chinese woman had not been paid by her employer for eight months; when she approached him for her money, he punched her and took her receipt book, which was her only evidence of the work she had done.

Sexual harassment is another terrifying aspect of outworking. Many women report being harassed, and threatened with losing their job if the harassment was reported. A majority of the people who called the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union during the phone-in also commented that their work was very difficult, and they were unconvinced the situation would ever change.

Many outworkers are also forced by their employers to claim Social Security benefits. This allows the employer to enter a lesser wage in their books, and therefore dodge tax and other necessities, despite the fact that workers are already being paid minuscule sums. Outworkers will often be required to obtain benefits before employment, and as a result are understandably scared of being penalised for receiving monies they are not entitled to. If they are caught, they may have to pay back the government any benefits they received illegally.

In recognition of this bind, Prime Minister Paul Keating last year introduced an amnesty for outworkers receiving Social Security benefits without entitlement. The debts will be waived, as long as they are declared between December 1, 1995 and May 31, 1996. "This is the sleaziest form of exploitation," says Keating, "and (the employers) threaten to expose employees if they speak out."

In light of the reality of outworking in Australia, the push to buy products made in this country is a double-edged sword. Despite the national campaign to encourage people to purchase clothing made locally, the average

PHAN and his wife currently work for a contractor.

Phan feels trapped in his situation, as he and his wife work an average of 13 hours a day, seven days a week — that is the only way they can make ends meet. As a result, they have no time to spend with their children. Phan's request is pathetically simple — he wants at least one day a week to go out and spend time with his family. "Our hearts are crying. We didn't come (to Australia) to do nothing, but when I see other families going out together on a Sunday I feel I am failing. I feel very sad."

HANG approached the Textiles, Clothing and

Footwear Union after being pressured to finish a job sewing pants in one week. In that week she worked 154 hours — an average of 22 hours a day, seven days in a row. After the work was completed, she was told that there was a mistake, and that she would be penalised for all repairs. Hang had recognised the mistake in the cutting, before she had begun to sew, but her employer had told her to sew anyway. Her wage for the week, \$726, was held over in lieu of necessary repairs. Hang told the employer that she would fix the pants, even though she was not at fault. She received no response and no pay.

TRAN and his wife currently work for a mid-range

fashion clothing company, making women's dresses. He travels one hour each way to pick up and deliver the work, and is not paid for this expense. The couple, on average, can make three dresses in five hours, and get paid \$6.50 per dress. Their usual work schedule is 14 hours a day, seven days a week. Their total wage for a normal week is around \$190, roughly \$1.95 an hour.

amount being paid to outworkers is so low it is cheaper for manufacturers to use these workers than to import clothing made in similarly slave-like conditions overseas. The saddest fact is that the public is largely ignorant of this terrible irony, and the more clothes purchased for these rates, the more likely it is that employers will continue to pay outworkers less than they should.

"It is time we as a society got to the bottom of what is actually happening," says Senator Spindler. "It is essential the industry is compelled to follow reasonable standards regarding minimum rates of pay."

Mei's story is an example of how low wages and other forms of exploitation can keep a worker silent. She emigrated from China two years ago, and spent six months looking for work before being told by a factory manager that she could make money if she had her own sewing

machine. The manager offered to help her buy such a machine. Mei gave him a deposit on the \$3000 industrial sewing machine, and was then sent pre-cut pieces to make up. She was paid 5c and 10c for sewing seams on adults' shirts. By working 18 hours a day, seven days a week, she was able to make between \$300 and \$350 — roughly \$2.50 an hour. If she had been paid according to the Award, she would have made around \$1500 for her 126-hour week. She also went without pay for weeks at a time, because she was afraid that if she stopped working for her employer, she would never see him — or her money — again. She eventually sought the help of the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union, after 18 months of abuse, when two of her long-awaited pay cheques bounced.

"An eight-year-old boy was found sewing because his mother was suffering from severe stress due to working 18-hour days."

However disturbing such stories are, the employment of children is the most heart-breaking aspect of the home-based sewing industry. Although children are probably not being employed directly, visiting union officers have found children working on industrial sewing machines after school, late into the night, and in school holidays. They are often working beside their parents or siblings, because the pressure of deadlines and low wages means the more work done, the better —

regardless of the circumstances. Many families simply have no choice. An eight-year-old boy was found sewing because his mother was suffering from severe stress due to working continuous 18-hour days.

But the future is looking brighter for outworkers. In addition to Senator Spindler's inquiry, last November, Prime Minister Keating launched an agreement between the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union and Target Australia, with the aim to end the exploitation of outworkers. This agreement (which also included the Ken Done label) will ensure that Target's clothing suppliers use fair practices and wages when employing outworkers to make the company's garments. Target director John Irah says, "We don't believe workers in Australia should be exploited, neither do we believe workers in any country should be exploited. I don't think it will do anything to our profit margin. We pay fair

prices for our goods, and if somebody is making a lot of money, it is not Target."

The Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union has also targeted 60 retailers in an effort to expose and diminish the exploitation of outworkers. Sadly, though, despite this effort and continued campaigning by the union and the government, many big-name companies have not cleaned up their act. Some, too, continue to employ outworkers without being identified. It's up to the public to get involved — buy Australian, but buy from those who pay a fair price for their goods. ■

NE: The Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia's booklet *The Hidden Cost Of Fashion: Report on the National Outwork Information Campaign* was published in March 1995 with funding from the Department of Industrial Relations. The views expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department or the Australian government.

FOR HELP OR FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fax: (02) 264 5229
National Office — Melbourne
2nd Floor, 132-138 Leicester
Street, Carlton, Vic 3053.
Ph: (03) 9347 2566, (03) 9347 2766;
Fax: (03) 9347 4049

* There are branches in each capital city. Contact your nearest head office for details.

Department Of
Industrial Relations
NSW — Sydney: (02) 232 0800
VIC — Melbourne: (03) 9649 4545
QLD — Brisbane: (07) 231 2567
WA — Perth: (08) 426 4333
SA — Adelaide: (08) 237 6966
TAS — Hobart: (003) 35 1910
ACT — Canberra: (06) 257 6404
NT — Darwin: (089) 46 1611
Senator Sid Spindler is looking for statements from outworkers in the community. If you would like more information about the Outworkers Inquiry, please write to:
Inquiry Into Garment Industry Outworking, The Secretary,
Senate Economics Committee,
Room 5G 64, Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT 2601.
Or telephone the offices of Senator Spindler:
Parliament House — Ph: (06) 277 3640, Fax (06) 277 3741
Victorian Office — Ph: (03) 9416 1580; Fax (03) 9417 1690
For an interpreter, call and leave a message on the Translating & Interpreting Service, Ph: 13 1450

If you want to help... Express your concern and outrage at the treatment of outworkers in Australia by writing to us at PO Box 4455, St Leonards, NSW 2065; or faxing us on (02) 9901 6116. We will pass on all of your responses to the Federal government.

Feedback letter appeared in Issue #54 of Australian Women's Forum, May 1996, pg 70. © 1995.

feedback

In support of outworkers

I am writing in response to your article on outworkers ("Fashion Victims") in the March issue. I had never heard of outworkers and am absolutely disgusted that this is going on — I can't believe there has not been more information given to the public about which companies employ and exploit these people.

I realise this practice must be very difficult to police, but companies that have been found to use outworkers in this way should be brought out into the open. I am very disappointed, as I have been buying several of the labels mentioned and have been happy with the quality of garments. However, knowing that someone in the middle is making a hell of a lot of money and paying a pittance to

the people doing the work makes me sick to the stomach.

I will be carrying your list of these companies when I shop and telling my friends as well. Hopefully, there will be more enquiries into this matter and a greater degree of publicity given to it. — Lisa, Parafield Gardens, SA

