

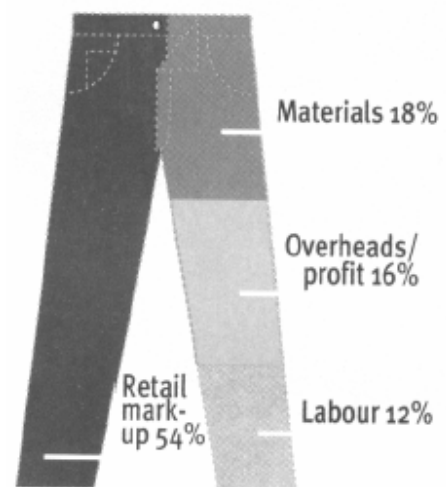
Case study: Labour rights

Sports brands promote healthy living but the lives of workers who make their shoes and clothes in Asia and Latin America are anything but healthy. Independent research indicates that workers live in severe poverty and suffer stress and exhaustion from overwork. Problems include verbal abuse, dangerous working conditions, denial of trade union rights and high levels of sexual harassment (80% of sportswear workers are women). Oxfam Community Aid Abroad is part of an international campaign to persuade sports brands to respect workers' basic rights.

Story: How clean are your clothes?

Your clothes might look clean, but what you might not realise is that many of items we wear are produced under conditions that are far from just.

If you open your clothes closet and look at the labels on your dresses, jackets, shirts or pants, you will find that much of what you wear was made in a developing country. In fact about half the garments now sold in Australia are manufactured in low-wage countries such as China, Fiji, India and Malaysia and often under conditions that are far from just. The other half are probably produced in Australia – and a 'Made in Australia' label means that there is an 80 per cent likelihood that the garment is made by a home-worker. These workers are mainly women who make clothes at home for as little as \$2 to \$3 an hour, working up to 18 hours a day, six or seven days a week. It is estimated that there are more than 300,000 home-workers in Australia.



Source: New Internationalist 302

Most of the workers who produce our garments in developing countries are women, who work under employment conditions that typically involve long hours of paid and unpaid overtime, inadequate wages, and in many cases, unreasonable production targets or piece-rates. These women are often subject to discrimination, and in some cases to intimidation, physical or verbal abuse and sexual harassment.

While a job in a garment factory can provide women with an income far better than that they could obtain if they stayed in rural village, often it is at a high expense. Many are faced with over work, poor health, and strained family relations – some also leave their children and families behind to work in the cities.

Vijitha is a 37-year old woman from a village in the south of Sri Lanka who now works in a garment factory in Colombo. Married with three children, her husband also works in another factory in the same area. “Two of my children are staying with me and the other one stays with my parents back in the village. It is difficult for us to keep all three children with us because of the expenses,” says Vijitha. “It is hard to save money from the wages I get. I have to spend the money on education for the children. So every month I pawn some of our possessions for a loan.”

Governments fail to protect rights

All too often, the governments of the countries concerned are unable or unwilling to protect the rights of their citizens, while the ability of the workers to protect themselves is thwarted by the denial of their basic right to join a trade union and bargain collectively with their employer. Garments production often takes place in ‘Export Processing Zones’, where trade unions are effectively banned by the government concerned.

The manufacturing companies which employ women workers are often small locally owned firms, who fulfil production orders from agents and wholesalers. These in turn are filling orders from brand name companies (e.g. Nike, Fila, Puma, Calvin Klien) or clothing retailers. It is these brand name companies and retailers that hold the commercial power, and who are able to set the price, quality and delivery time for the garments that are to be manufactured.

Some of these companies, in response to public pressure over 'sweatshop' conditions, have established codes of conduct for their suppliers. But often it is the purchasing practices of the companies themselves that are contributing to the problem – the low price per item and tight delivery times that they demand, that create the pressure for low wages and temporary employment, and make the long hours of overtime inevitable.

Snapshot – situation in Cambodia

“In the countryside we have more freedom, but no money. In the factory we have no freedom, but we have money to support our families.” These are the words of Sovana, a 21-year-old woman working in Cambodia's rapidly growing garments industry. These words capture the ambivalence that many women feel about working in the industry. On the one hand, most acknowledge the benefits of

increased income. On the other, there is a widespread feeling that working in garments factories involves a loss of freedom and, in some cases, dignity.

One in five Cambodian women aged between 18 and 25 now work in a garment factory. The vast majority have migrated to the capital Phnom Penh from desperately poor rural areas. Wages provide the magnet. In her rural village, Sovana earned 50 cents a day selling vegetables. In Phnom Penh she earns \$55 a month. This may sound like an improvement, but the fact is that many women are moving from a situation of poverty in the rural village to an alternative where they are still grossly underpaid, work very long hours, and often unable to see their families.

Each month, Sovana sends between \$20 and \$30 back to her family. It is used to pay for the education of her brothers and to support the household budget. After paying rent (for one room, shared with three other women), Sovana is left with not much more than 50 cents a day. Sovana's case is not untypical. Health emergencies and support for the family can place extreme demands on limited incomes.

Oxfam calls for reform

As part of Oxfam's ongoing Make Trade Fair campaign, and our work as part of our NikeWatch campaign, we are calling on companies which trade in garments, and the brand name and retailing companies, to implement codes of practice and to reform their purchasing practices to make sure workers are treated and paid fairly.

As this campaign is about workers rights as well as making trade fair, it is appropriate that it should be run in conjunction with the international trade union movement in Australia.

Find out the latest information about our campaign at the NikeWatch pages of our website at www.oxfam.org.au/campaigns/nike

Activities

- Find out more about home workers in Australia by visiting the fair wear website: <http://www.fairwear.org.au/engine.php>
- Ask students to justify their position in response to the following question, "When buying clothes or shoes, would they take into account the working conditions of the people who made them"
- Contact your local Trades Hall and invite a trade union official to talk about the problem of home-workers in Australia
- Prepare a fair wear charter or code of conduct for garment and shoe manufactures.
- Design a visual display that highlights the issues and personal stories related to labour rights. (For example, display a variety of clothing / shoes etc and hang them up on a make shift washing line. Use over sized labels to highlight the issues and personal stories).