

Sweating it out for a hundred a week

LABOUR MARKET

What has happened to the thousands of clothing workers who have lost their jobs in recent years?

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examines the transition of women clothing workers from formal factory jobs to becoming homeworkers and argues that such workers deserve labour policies and union structures which protect them.

Just as South Africa is changing, 'everything is changing,' replied Georgia over the din of 15 rented sewing machines. She was responding to my question regarding the changes she had noticed in the clothing factory she used to work in during the period leading up to her retrenchment. Georgia is one of many clothing workers in Cape Town who lost their jobs following South Africa's adoption of a tariff reduction schedule on clothing and textiles in 1994 that surpassed General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) requirements in rapidity and scale. Following her retrenchment, Georgia has worked in several small-scale, home-based, cut-make-



trim operations (CMTs) in the coloured township of Mitchell's Plain in Cape Town. On her salary of R100 to R400 per week, without benefits or union membership, she and her two children are barely scraping by.

Georgia's story is one small yet telling piece in the larger narrative of the 80 000 clothing workers who lost their jobs in the 1990s in the face of a massive influx of inexpensive clothing and textile imports from East Asian countries such as China and Taiwan following the tariff reductions. A great many of these retrenchees have since moved from formal clothing factories to CMTs, which are largely unprotected by existing labour legislation and organisation. This shift from predominantly formal to informal modes of clothing production has led not only to the economic depression of thousands of women in Cape Town, but also to the disruption of established social networks and the deterioration of working conditions.

RISE OF HOMEWORKING

In the Western Cape, where more than 95% of workers in the clothing industry are women, the depression of the clothing industry has pushed thousands of women into homeworking. Not to be confused with home-based workers, who work from home manufacturing clothing they sell directly to consumers, homeworkers make clothing that is sold first to an intermediary, who then sells to the clothing manufacturer or retailer, who finally sells to the consumer. Homeworking in the clothing industry is most often organised by CMTs, in which a CMT boss (often the homeowner) employs anywhere between one and 50 workers to cut, assemble, and package garments for a piece-rate or a weekly wage. More recently, specialised cutting services have spawned the development of even smaller 'make and trim' establishments (M&Ts), which only have the capacity to assemble and package garments. Both CMTs and M&Ts usually remain unregistered with the bargaining council.

While manufacturers have historically outsourced production to CMTs during boom periods, retailers and CMTs have become increasingly interdependent through the emergence of design houses over the past ten years, which provide the design and quality

control functions for the retailer, then outsource production directly to CMTs. This has reduced the need for retailers to use formal factories for clothing production. Since the commencement of trade liberalisation in 1994, manufacturers and retailers have tried to offset the pressure from an increase in both legal and illegal imports by outsourcing much of their work to smaller manufacturers and design houses. As a result, clothing firms registered with the Council have downsized or disappeared completely, while CMTs have exploded across the Cape. Homeworking has thus risen to prominence as the backbone of South African clothing production today.

But who are homeworkers? How did they come to work in CMTs, and what has the transition between factory and CMT work meant in their lives? These questions fuelled a series of interviews conducted in 2004 in Mitchell's Plain with 16 coloured women who had lost their jobs in formal clothing factories following GATT tariff reductions and who then entered CMT work after being unable to find another factory job. This study provides a window into how individual women are experiencing the clothing industry's shift toward smaller-scale production, allowing us to grasp how the individual experience is transformed by social and economic change. The termination of quotas on textiles and clothing trade between WTO member states that has come with the end of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement earlier this year will make understanding the experiences of retrenchment and homeworking even more pertinent.

RETRENCHMENT AND RACIAL TENSION

Most homeworkers in Cape Town are middle-aged coloured women with previous work experience in the clothing industry and little formal education. The Coloured Labour Preference Act has played a large part in shaping this demographic in the clothing industry. Beginning in 1956, the Act reserved all unskilled jobs in the Western Cape for coloured labour in order to prevent the movement of black Africans from the homelands into the area. Although this policy was diluted in the late 1960s and abandoned in 1984, its legacy has unfolded such that coloured women form the foundation of the

secondary industries (such as clothing) that dominate the Western Cape's regional economy.

The large-scale retrenchment of coloured women from clothing factories has eroded their previously secure position within the clothing industry and given rise to new racial tensions surrounding the relationship between black and coloured labour. When interview subjects told their stories of retrenchment, they framed themselves as 'insiders' in the clothing industry and spoke of black labour as 'outsiders' and threatening to an already unstable industry. Indeed, coloured women were officially recognised as insiders through their privileged status under the Coloured Labour Preference Act while blacks were pushed to the peripheries of employment. Now that this insider status has disappeared in the wake of trade liberalisation, coloured female retrenchees have channelled much of their frustration with changes in the clothing industry into resistance to black worker presence in the industry.

In describing their experience of being retrenched and attempting to find a new factory job, women interviewed for this study discussed their belief that the policies of the ANC government gave unfair preference to blacks and did little to benefit coloured labour. While there is no viable relationship between the precarious position of coloured women in the clothing industry and government policies promoting black employment, these women's beliefs are supported by pre-existing racial tensions and a long history of distrust of the ANC on the Cape Flats.

There is also a palpable anxiety surrounding the migration of rural blacks from the Eastern Cape into the Western Cape in search of employment more generally. A *Cape Times* report estimated that 48 000 people from the Eastern Cape come to the Western Cape searching for jobs each year. The willingness of migrant populations to work for lower wages in order to escape rural poverty is perceived as a grave threat to long-entrenched coloured labour. Greater competition for scarce formal jobs in the clothing industry stemming from downsizing and migration has exacerbated existing racial tensions in Cape Town.



SOCIAL REORGANISATION

Coloured women have historically been integrated into clothing factories through familial and social networks, often leaving school at a young age to support their families. It was not uncommon during the period leading up to trade liberalisation for entire families to be employed in single factories. This means that retrenchment frequently wipes out the entire income bases of many households in addition to destroying important networks of social and economic support. Lena, who now works as a machinist at a small CMT in Mitchell's Plain, describes leaving her social network when she was retrenched from her factory job: 'Oh it was a very terrible day when we left... oh we were crying. Because, you know, everybody knows everybody. There's a whole history in [the factory]. You've actually got a family in there - up to 14 sisters and children working. It was like splitting up the family! We had been through a lot together. A lot of deaths, a lot of births, I mean everything.'

The loss of incomes from clothing factory work has been perhaps the most visible blow to coloured households in Mitchell's Plain following the restructuring of the clothing industry, but the loss of social networks Lena describes has been equally detrimental to the survival of workers and their dependents.

On retrenchment, there is a limited support structure for workers outside of familial or social networks. Retrenched workers are entitled to severance pay and can

apply for their Provident Fund. However, retrenchment packages are often not clearly related to the term of employment before dismissal, and household expenses and debt repayment eat up both the retrenchment package and Provident Fund quickly. Inadequate and unsustainable retrenchment packages and the difficulty or impossibility of finding a new factory job push many women into homeworking as a survival strategy following retrenchment.

BECOMING A HOMEWORKER

Most women enter homeworking through friends, family or neighbours. The entrance into homeworking marks not only an economic transition for retrenched women, but also a social and psychological one. When women enter homeworking after spending their entire working lives at large clothing factories, they encounter a shockingly different workspace in terms of expectations, pace, and social interaction. The experience of transitioning into homeworking varies widely, both according to the worker's own priorities, and the specific characteristics of the CMTs they work for such as size and reputation.

One CMT at which interviews were conducted was relatively separate from the owner's residence and had well-established

and sustainable relationships with retailers and design houses. Workers at this CMT were members of the SA Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu), received consistent wages and benefits, and worked regular hours. However, most CMTs operate on a more survivalist basis. The same women interviewed at the more established CMT had also worked in a range of smaller, less established CMTs immediately following the loss of their factory jobs. These CMTs were often next-door to the woman's place of residence and were survivalist. The 'employer' in these CMTs generally worked as a machinist alongside one to three employees in her lounge. There was often no clear employer-employee relationship in this type of CMT since the employer often operated on as much of a survivalist basis as the employees.

The employer and employees splitting overhead costs such as electricity and sewing machine rentals often characterise survivalist homeworking operations. Hours in survivalist CMTs can be entirely random; owners require that employees work long periods in one sitting when there is an order to fill, then send employees home indefinitely until

another order comes in. Survivalist workers report that weekly wages fluctuate wildly and workers often receive no wage if the CMT owner cannot cover production costs. Homeworkers in these survivalist operations, as well as in CMTs employing 10-20 workers, do not receive sick, holiday or overtime pay. A clear pattern emerging from this study indicates that homeworkers generally remain in a survivalist CMT for no more than two to three months because the boss is often unable to pay the promised wage or loses the CMT's contract.

In addition to the lower, more sporadic pay at CMTs and the lack of benefits or job security, women entering the CMT industry must adjust to multiple and conflicting roles at work, a smaller workplace, and new social groups. Lena described how the first day she worked in a CMT, she was astonished at how 'everything was everywhere,' how small the workspace was, and the apparent lack of order to the place. Most interview subjects also characterised CMTs as much 'quieter' than large factories in the sense that workers do not interact with one another nearly as much since the boss can usually watch all workers at once.

CMT work is much less structured than factory work. Particularly in the very small CMTs (one to three employees working in the employer's lounge), employees were expected to accomplish a much broader range of tasks than in their prior positions on the factory floor. Zelda described how when she was hired as an examiner for a CMT with only three employees, she was also responsible for packing and cleaning: 'I struggled, because it was a lot of work then, because I had to do three people's work at one time'. Zelda's position is typical for workers in a CMT of this size. Although a job at a small, survivalist CMT may mean performing three or four job functions at one time, essentially completing more work for less pay, women in this study felt forced to accept such jobs due to the lack of any other employment opportunities.

ADVANTAGES OF HOMEWORKING

One significant advantage of homeworking for many women is a much shorter commute. Women interviewed for this study spent between one and three hours per day and on average 10% of their weekly wages

commuting to and from work when they were employed at formal factories. They awoke before 5am and prepared themselves and their families for the day on a tight schedule. Infrequent bus schedules meant a stressful, unreliable, and often unsafe transportation regime. While commuting, women also struggled to keep track of their children's needs and get them to and from school each day because they left the house before their children awoke and came home many hours after school let out. In Mitchell's Plain, where gang violence and missing person's reports are a reality, it was disconcerting for these women not to see their children off to school each morning or be able to check on their safety after school. Less travel time each day means that women are able to carry out household responsibilities under much less stress and exhaustion.

Cassandra compared her experience of working in a CMT in her neighbourhood versus a factory that required a long commute. [At the factory] 'You must think, 'eh, I'm tired now. I must run for the train. You see, I must get that train 5.15, 5.30[pm], come at home like this time [8pm] to make food, bathe the kids, see that everything is right. Now here [at the CMT] it is more calm for me. I thought about it, for the time I had to spend from a big factory until I get home, and the whole day - I'm not gonna make it'.

Working close to home, CMT workers are able to leave their houses later, taking a short and relatively inexpensive taxi (roughly 6% of weekly wages) or walk to work. Without a long commute, women can accomplish domestic chores and cook in the morning or at a reasonable hour after work rather than preparing the meal for the present night and the next morning late into the evening after returning from the factory. They no longer have to spend Saturdays 'catching up' on washing or shopping, which could not be done during the week. Interview subjects agreed that they appreciated getting more sleep each night, waking up with their children, seeing them off to school and being able to quickly run home from work to check on their family as necessary.

LOOKING FORWARD

This study demonstrates how individual

women have been affected by the structural changes taking place in South Africa's economy. Neoliberal trade policies are not enacted within a sterile world of economic models; their effects are visible in the massive retrenchments that have provoked racist narratives of job loss and in the reorganisation of social networks and survival strategies that have come with the rise of homeworking. Though the rise of homeworking has driven many women to enter an insecure and often gruelling occupation, homeworking cannot be easily categorised into positive or negative for the economy or its workers. Homeworking is an extremely complicated phenomenon, which can be rather ambiguous for women who undertake a shorter commute as homeworkers and are able to fulfil their domestic responsibilities under less stress. Could homeworking be a solution to the costly commute many workers undertake to survive in South Africa's divided cities today? It is difficult to fathom how homeworking could mean a bright future for South Africa's clothing workers without some further consideration of how homeworkers can gain access to important structures of support such as unions and labour policy.

Forthcoming articles in this series will explore the impact of homeworking for Sactwu and the prospects for a labour policy, which understands the experiences of homeworkers. Homeworking is not a peripheral component of the clothing industry that will disappear with the modernisation of South Africa's economy. Informality is a central aspect of the economy that will only become more prominent in the years to come. The experiences of women discussed in this article provide an opportunity to begin thinking about informal workers as quintessential, not peripheral, and deserving of labour policies and union structures which take into account their specific experiences and demands. 15

Greenburg is a student from the University of California, Berkeley. This is the first in a series of articles on her research into the clothing industry in the Western Cape. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of interview subjects.