

# The Greater Manchester textile and garment industry: a scoping study

## SUMMARY

In 2017, Homeworkers' Worldwide secured funding for a scoping study to document working conditions within the textile and garment industry (TGI) in Greater Manchester. This outreach project collated anecdotal information about the sector, and eventually completed interviews with two retailers, six manufacturers and five workers.

These interviews confirmed that the low wages (around £4/hour) found in Leicester are also present in the Greater Manchester industry. Small manufacturers highlighted the challenges they faced, as a result of large retailers' unfair purchasing practices. These included driving down prices to levels where it was impossible for them to pay their workers properly and leaving invoices unpaid for months at a time.

This report begins with a review of the wider literature on the industry in Greater Manchester, before presenting our findings and provisional recommendations.

Our original plan was to follow this scoping study with a participatory peer research project to understand workers' priorities and concerns in more detail, but unfortunately funding was not, in the end, available for this.

**Homeworkers Worldwide is keen to complete this wider study, and thus enable workers' voices to be represented in important debates about their livelihoods.**

**If you have any suggestions as to how we might take this work forward, or if you would like to get involved, please get in touch.**

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## 1. Introduction

In 2017, Homeworkers' Worldwide, a small international gender and labour rights NGO more often documenting women workers' experiences in countries as far away as India, Chile and China, secured funding for an initial scoping study on the textile and garment industry (TGI) within Greater Manchester. This report summarises the key findings from this seven-month long outreach project, completed in October 2017.

We begin with a review of existing literature on the UK TGI, before presenting the key findings of this project, which built up a database of information about a hundred and eighty two companies within the T&G sector in GM. An extensive outreach programme contacted over sixty local organisations, collating anecdotal information about workers in the sector, which eventually led to interviews with two retailers, six manufacturers and five workers.

Almost all of the workers and small employers interviewed were of South Asian heritage, apart from two Spanish workers. Most interviewees however reported considerable diversity in their current workforce, with European and other migrants working alongside British workers, both of South Asian and white ethnicity.

The report also includes anecdotal information collated from outreach work with local employers within the TGI, in the main, small manufacturing companies operating within Greater Manchester, many of them led by second generation South Asian entrepreneurs, focusing in particular on knitwear, cut, make and trim clothing and homewares firms.

## 2. What do we know about the industry in Greater Manchester?

HWW developed this project in response to recent reports of workers in the TGI in the UK facing exploitative and dangerous working conditions. For example, in January 2017 Channel 4's *Dispatches* broadcast two programmes revealing shocking conditions in garment factories in Leicester, with workers being paid around £3 an hour, packing clothes for high street and on line brands including River Island, New Look, Boohoo and Misguided. Even worse, in one factory the manager was filmed smoking on the factory floor, a serious fire risk given that the fluff generated by sewing is highly flammable, with the problem further accentuated by the piles of material that were blocking fire exits.

In 2015, the UK's Ethical Trading Initiative responded to earlier media reports – many focusing in particular on manufacturers in Leicester - by commissioning Prof. Nik Hammer from the University of Leicester to investigate. His subsequent research report told a similar story: near-universal payment of wages around half of minimum wage rates, and some evidence of a two tier workforce, with UK citizens, many of South Asian heritage supplementing low wages with social security payments whilst undocumented migrants worked a second shift in even worse conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Although the ETI's Leicester Working Group sadly has now disbanded, a recent detailed report in the Financial Times article suggests that these problems have not gone away. O'Connor (2018) documents the existence of 'dark factories' within Leicester's garment industry that have

'become detached from UK employment law' (where a) 'perceived culture of impunity.. has created a bizarre micro-economy, where larger factories using machines are outcompeted by smaller rivals using underpaid humans.'<sup>2</sup>

Although the UK's weak enforcement of employment law facilitates this, her article also highlights the responsibility of large retailers - including fast fashion e-tailers - who continually drive down prices, order sizes and lead times, leaving manufacturers with little choice but to employ their workers on very low rates of pay.

Of course, media exposes of this kind tend to focus on the worst examples; the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's Alliance Project is much more optimistic about the potential contribution of the TGI to local regeneration. They point to recent evidence of the 'reshoring' of textiles and garment manufacturing to the UK, arguing that after many years of decline, the numbers employed in the industry have been increasing as the fast pace of internet-based brands (eg. Boohoo, Misguided) ensures that local manufacturers have a significant advantage.

Local stakeholders are seeking to build on this opportunity, to ensure that the Greater Manchester economy can share in the benefits of a thriving textile and garment manufacturing sector. Although the impact is hard to predict, changes in the UK's relationship with the EU have the potential to bring about significant changes in trade and employment policies, making it all the

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<sup>1</sup> See Hammer, Nik et al (2015) *A New Industry on a Skewed Playing Field: Supply Chain Relations and Working Conditions in UK Garment Manufacturing*. London: Ethical Trading Initiative. Available at: <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/press-releases/2015/february/new-report-published-on-working-conditions-in-leiceser-garment-sector>.

<sup>2</sup> O'Connor, Sarah (2018) 'Dark factories: labour exploitation in Britain's garment industry'. *Financial Times Magazine*, 17 May 2018. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e427327e-5892-11e8-b8b2-d6ceb45fa9d0>.

more important that workers have a voice to influence efforts to make the industry more sustainable.

Between 2012-2017, the Alliance project invested £27m of European Community funding in 340 textile companies, matched by £123m of private sector investment. To date, the extensive evaluation that was completed towards the end of this project has not been published, although a short summary was quietly released on the Lancashire Textile Manufacturers' Association website. This highlights the potential for growth linked to the emergence of internet based fast fashion, and the diversity of the Greater Manchester sector, with companies' products ranging from designer clothes and fast fashion to technical textiles, workwear and bedding and homewares, alongside the production of yarn and cloth.<sup>3</sup>

This brief overview argues that the sector could create or sustain over 4000 jobs in the region in the next two years, but also warns of significant challenges facing the industry. These include the absence of large manufacturers with significant capacity to invest in the sector and the difficulties recruiting sufficient skilled labour. The report also highlights the asymmetry between large retailers and much smaller manufacturers, calling for a greater commitment from the former to source from UK manufacturers and specifically, a willingness to look at payment terms.

A more critical analysis of the UK industry from the University of Manchester,<sup>4</sup> reminds us that whilst there may be some signs of recent growth, these come after decades of steady decline in the face of global competition from low cost production sites. They propose a more nuanced analysis that identifies the potential for growth in key product areas, including carpets and woollens and worsteds, whilst also flagging the serious challenges facing manufacturers in other subsectors, in particular garment manufacturing. Here, the central importance of branding and marketing in the fashion industry, amplified by the rise of fast fashion and e-tailing, has created a significant asymmetry in company size between the small manufacturers, typically employing between 10 and 20 people, and the much larger retailers on whom they depend for orders.

### 3. Statistical Sources

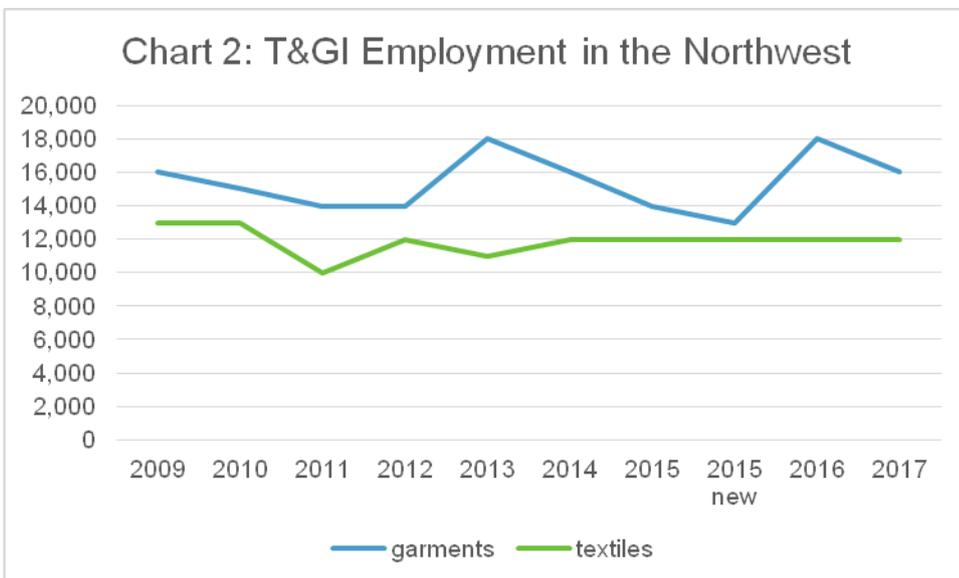
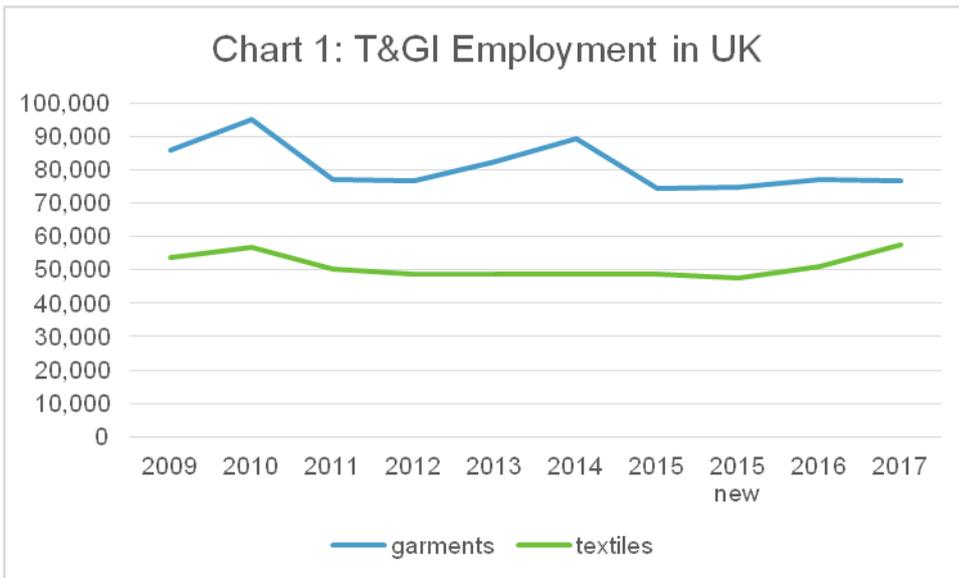
In this section, we explore what we can learn from the official statistical record, drawing on for example, the Office for National Statistics' *Business Register & Employment Survey*. It is however important to start with a note of caution: business surveys typically under-estimate employment as employers are unlikely to report informal employment practices. Nevertheless this data can provide a starting point for a qualitative study, confirming a steady increase in the number of G&T businesses in the UK, rising from 7190 in 2013 to 8075 in 2016. The following charts show the most recent figures for numbers employed in the TGI in the UK and then in the Northwest.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Manchester Growth Company (2017) *Realising the growth potential of UK Fashion and Textile Manufacturing: a report for The Alliance Project and NBrown - National Textiles Growth Programme*. Available at: <http://www.ltma.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/The-Final-Alliance-Project-Report-Oct-2012-to-May-2017.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Froud, Julie, Hayes, Steven, Wei, Hua & Williams, Karel (2016). *Coming Back. Resilience and precarity in UK textiles and apparel*. University of Manchester. Available at: <https://foundationaleconomy.com/files.wordpress.com/2017/02/coming-back-capability-and-precarity-in-uk-textiles-and-apparel-march-2017.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Data from Business Register and Employment Survey (excluding units registered for PAYE only), accessed on 6 Nov 2018. In 2015 the classification system changed for the dataset changed, with the result that two sets of data were produced in 2015, and the 2016-7 data are not directly comparable with the earlier set.



These charts confirm that the steady post war decline in the industry has been halted, but whilst there is certainly evidence that the numbers employed have risen considerably, there are also considerable fluctuations year on year. As a result it is by no means clear at this stage whether those who see the sector as a future engine of growth for the Greater Manchester region are justified in their enthusiasm, or whether as the more cautious researchers at Manchester university suggest, ‘this is just a blip on a downward curve.’<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are significant numbers of people working in the industry, and that Greater Manchester is an important centre, along with London and the East Midlands. An earlier Alliance study of the GM manufacturing sector reports that in 2013 there were 550 textile companies registered in the GM region, 350 of these are operational manufacturing companies, with the remainder being either companies that are closer to service industries (e.g. blind installers), or those that are not actually trading at the moment. Their analysis also shows that

<sup>6</sup> Froud et al, p 12.

many of the functioning businesses are clustered in specific small geographical areas within the region, and that although the number of businesses fell by 65 between 2010- 13, the numbers employed in the industry during this period increased by 3,000 (36%).<sup>7</sup>

## 4. Methodology

The studies reviewed thus far all started either with the statistical record or with employers and business leaders, and whilst they acknowledge the threat posed to the industry in GM by skill shortages and an ageing workforce, there is little sign of any attempt to engage directly with the men and women who work within the sector. This project sought to redress this balance, to provide an opportunity to engage with these workers, to identify their concerns and priorities and to offer an opportunity for them to come together to be represented within debates about the future for the industry as well as the scope to improve their terms and conditions.

This table summarises the data sources that this report is based on:

Target	Achieved	Information recorded
40 initial conversations with key sources	67 conversations (+ 00s e mails)	14 positive anecdotal information, 7 concrete leads to specific situations).
2 focus groups with 15 migrant workers	Focus group held at event for EC migrants. Attended ESOL classes 19-21 <sup>st</sup> July.	Anecdotal information about 2 workers. Met the Spanish workers who are now working for e-retailer.
5 interviews with companies	7 interviews completed.	Informal interviews with 2 retailers, 5 employers (4 knitwear factories, 1 bespoke tailor).
5 pilot interviews with workers	5 interviews completed.	Interviews completed with 3 garment machinists, and 2 packers in fashion e-tailor warehouse.

We set out to gather information about workers currently working within the TGI in Greater Manchester, building links with a wide range of local stakeholders, contacting trade unions, employment advice centres, migrant organisations and community and voluntary sector organisations. However, despite some important successes, it proved more challenging than we hoped to make contact with workers in the industry. Although in general people were keen to help, particularly those in contact with women who might be interested in working in the sector, very few had concrete leads – it was far more common to be told

‘my mother and sister used to be garment machinists, 10 – 15 years ago ... but that’s all gone now,’ or

‘she said her ladies were on Jobseekers or housewives, they didn’t know anyone in the community .. sewing.’

<sup>7</sup> Using data from the ONS Business Register & Employment Survey and the Inter-departmental Business Register. See Greater Manchester Combined Authority & New Economy (2016) *Deep Dive 02: Manufacturing*. Available at: <http://www.neweconomymanchester.com/media/1765/02-manufacturing-deep-dive-report-final.pdf>.

The project also received many reports of women who were working at home on a self-employed basis, making clothes for individual customers; often these were women from ethnic minority communities who wanted for example, traditional *shalwar kameez* or African-style clothes. We were clear from the start that the focus of this research was to be workers who were employed by a manufacturer, who was making garments or textiles to order and employing the workers, rather than those who were genuinely self-employed.

However, gradually over time anecdotal reports and even occasional direct contacts with workers and employers started to be made. It was not always easy to convince these people to participate in the project, and several refused to be interviewed or even to speak on the telephone.

Unfortunately none of the trade unions we contacted were able to help us contact workers within the textile sector, although one organiser passed on a list of companies (mainly small homewares retailers) from his days as a delivery driver in the region in the past.

## 5. Outreach to factories

In parallel with this outreach work, we also compiled a database of 180 textile companies within Greater Manchester, starting with lists from the original Alliance-New Economy project in 2014, updated with anecdotal information from contacts or observations from fieldwork visits. We also secured valuable initial information from two retailers contacted through HWW's involvement in the UK's Ethical Trading Initiative, who were sourcing clothes or homewares from the region, and this helped to inform our initial outreach work. Collating company addresses then revealed particular neighbourhoods with a concentration of companies, starting with the significant clusters of knitwear manufacturers in central Manchester (Ancoats, Ardwick, Cheetham Hill, Longsight).



Figure 1: The address of this derelict factory was still listed in an online supplier list, although the company was actually trading from new premises.

Internet sources were then used to develop and extend this, drawing on lists of suppliers available on (a few) company websites and searches at Companies House, although the web-based information did not always tally with the situation on the ground.

(For example, we found the address of this firm from a retailer's supplier list, but a visit to the actual address revealed that the block was virtually derelict and due to be converted

into flats. We tracked down the manufacturer's new modern factory on an industrial estate a couple of miles away.)<sup>8</sup>

This mapping process demonstrated clearly the diversity of the industry in Greater Manchester (in contrast to that of Leicester for example, which is more exclusively focused on fashion and particularly knitwear). Traditional clothing manufacturers including both knitwear and cut-make-

<sup>8</sup> These photographs were taken from the street during the course of our fieldwork, and are not necessarily connected with the workers or employers quoted in this report.



Figure 2: A specialist workwear manufacturer.

and-trim factories, were producing garments and also bedding and homewares, alongside specialist manufacturers, making protective clothing or work wear and uniforms. Other companies were diversifying – for example, a homewares firm combined the packing and sale of imported goods with limited on-site manufacturing, and a small internet-based retailer was selling imported clothes from Italy and Germany.

Elsewhere across the region there were larger textile manufacturers producing cloth or actually spinning yarn – for example, the Textile Growth Project is particularly proud of its investment in English Fine Cottons, a state of the art spinning mill in Ashton producing top quality cotton thread for use in producing luxury clothing.<sup>9</sup> Then there are the ‘technical textile’ firms, where an innovative manufacturer has created a new product, often rooted in a traditional textile manufacturing process – for example, the innovative founder of Bindatex, which produced coated textiles used in book binding, has diversified into producing composite materials that can be used in aeroplane manufacture.<sup>10</sup>

We began by identifying clusters of factories in key locations, and looked for evidence that the



Figure 3: a large tenement building which has clearly housed many different companies over the years.

business was still operating. During the early visits in April and May this was often not clear, as most of the buildings were shut up and the streets and car parks deserted.

This process was further complicated by the fact that many companies still operate out of large tenement blocks which have obviously housed many different firms over the years so there are often numerous company signs outside the building.

By July however the situation was very different, walking outside the factories on a hot day, there was no denying they were operating. You could hear the whirr of machinery and catch a glimpse of an incongruous Christmas jumper or a worker standing behind a knitting machine. The small car parks outside the more modern units were full, and there were cars and vans parked on pavements and in alley ways.

On one occasion, whilst I was lurking outside a factory on a particularly hot day, the foreperson spotted me and invited me to come in; he was proud to show me the factory’s modern knitting machines, which he said were able to make clothes in the most environmentally sustainable way

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/business/business-news/cotton-spinning-returns-greater-manchester-10532083>.

<sup>10</sup> Shelina Begum (2014). ‘Manufacturer secures £1m after expanding into aerospace sector’. *Manchester Evening News*, 1st April 2014. Available at: <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/business/deals/bindatex-secures-1m-after-expanding-6899546>.

possible. This factory was operating out of a large modern building, and had many knitting machines, with a few workers, mainly Asian men, keeping an eye on them. My informant showed me an orange off the shoulder top, which he said the knitting machine could make in a seamless whole so that no cloth or thread was wasted. They produced clothes that were sold by 'all the high street retailers'.

On many of these trips I was accompanied by the Co-ordinator of a local community organisation, Migrant Support, which provided a Manchester base for the project. After this experience we decided to be more open; we explained that we were researchers keen to find out more about the industry and the challenges employers faced we visited several small units in different locations in Greater Manchester. All of the knitwear factory owners that agreed to speak to us were Asian and male, though a couple of the other employers that we contacted by phone were white British. Inevitably some people were too busy to talk to us, and others were suspicious and answered our questions in monosyllables, but many were open and friendly, proud to show us their factories and talk about their businesses.

During these fieldwork visits we gathered first-hand information about twenty four companies in several different locations across the region, and completed six interviews with employers. Their key messages were the difficulties they were experiencing in securing regular orders, particularly after Christmas (for the knitwear factories), with several reporting that the usual seasonal quiet period was getting longer and longer. This made it harder to retain skilled staff as few workers could afford to spend more than a couple of months without work. Companies also bemoaned the decline in orders and the resulting fierce competition for work, which meant that prices were so low that they were struggling to survive. This included both competition between local manufacturers, with employers committed to ethical standards alleging that local competitors often undercut them, with the tacit encouragement of the retailers, and from other countries, where costs were significantly lower:

'.. there's lots of uncertainty, with Brexit, and cheaper imports coming in from Bangladesh and Pakistan .. we're a reputable company, we do things properly and meet the legal and ethical requirements but then we don't get the orders.'

'every year the industry is declining... even in Leicester where it's always been really well established .. some of the biggest companies have folded, they're just not getting the trade to carry on ..'<sup>11</sup>

'The order size has come right down, and the supply times and volumes from China have also come .. down, you can get a repeat order from China within a week, so they don't need us to top up either and we can't compete on price.'<sup>12</sup>

'.. prices in China are increasing, but now there's so many other countries with a garment industry, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, even some African countries .. all driving down prices ...'<sup>13</sup>

'some of these other companies are cutting corners, not paying the minimum wage and even stealing electricity, I went into one factory recently, and the electricity was wired up to bypass the meter!'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Interview 8, small employer, 22 August 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Interview 5, small employer, 10 August 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Interview 7, small employer, 10 August 2017.

'E-tailer X can be tricky, so earlier this year, I pulled out .. (because) they gave my garment to another company to copy, at a lower price ..'<sup>15</sup>

## 6. Staffing Issues

Several employers mentioned challenges retaining staff, usually due to the lengthening 'quiet period' after Christmas, when there were often very few orders, although the negative image of the industry and difficulties finding skilled staff were also mentioned:

'this year's been a bad year, the National Minimum Wage is rising, and the cost of living, and also we haven't really had a cold winter for a couple of years, that affects the demand for knitwear'<sup>16</sup>

'Staff can be hard to find. Young people don't want to work in factories, they don't see a future in the industry .. for example, I took over the business from my father, my brother went to university, he's a software engineer .... my son won't take on the business after me, he's only 14 so I don't know what he's going to do, but it won't be this.'<sup>17</sup>

'Increasing regulation is another problem, for example the introduction of the minimum wage, twenty years ago there was an open market for wages, you could negotiate with someone, for example if they needed training, you could agree a lower price whilst they built up their skills, but now if you take on someone unskilled you still have to pay £7.50/hour, you train them up for three months and then they leave and go and work for someone else.'<sup>18</sup>

## 7. Unfair Trading Practices

Almost all the small employers we spoke to had a story to tell about their negative experiences in their business dealings with much larger retailers, a situation that was accentuated by the slow payment terms within the UK, meaning manufacturers often had to wait for several months to be paid, a wait that could be even longer if there had been problems with an order.

'In Bangladesh, China you have to pay 30% in advance, and then pay everything to release the goods ... whereas here the law is so weak, they all expect 60 or 90 day terms ..'<sup>19</sup>

'the retailers are very dishonest .. they're all billionaires, yet they won't pay invoices for months, and they quibble at the slightest thing ... for example, (one well known company director A), we worked with him for years, but he wants charity for himself, when he was buying (a new company), he contacted all his suppliers and asked them to contribute to the cost, I sent him £5000 and he said that was a disgrace, he was expecting a lot more but I couldn't afford it ..

(another retailer B) accused us of copying their designs, they sent me a solicitor's letter ... but I was able to challenge their claim, going through the detail of the patterns, pointing out that the stitches are all the same from the original 17<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>14</sup> Interview 8, small employer, 22 August 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Interview 7, small employer, 10 August 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Interview 8, small employer, 22 August 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Interview 5, small employer, 10 August 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Interview 6, small employer, 10 August 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Interview 7, small employer, 10 August 2017.

so how could they claim it was original .. in the end, they agreed to drop the case for a payment to charity.<sup>20</sup>

'E-tailer X in particular is really hard to work with, constantly driving down the prices .. they're blatant about it, just not bothered .. Y, the internet company owned by retailer E, they've been sourcing from a company that I know had 30 non-compliances, yet they've been manufacturing for them for years, that's not right ..'<sup>21</sup>

'Most of what we're producing now is for the internet stores .. X,Z ... X can be tricky, so earlier this year, I pulled out .. (because) they gave my garment to another company to copy, at a lower price.'<sup>22</sup>

## 8. Worker interviews

Alongside this intelligence gathering, the project was eventually able to establish connections with workers, building sufficient trust so that one – and subsequently, two others from the same locality - agreed to be interviewed. The challenging experiences described in these conversations help to explain why several other workers that we contacted were reluctant to speak to us. These initial contacts with workers still working in the industry came through a community development worker who has worked for twenty years in the same borough. Almost all of the other anecdotal reports we received about textile workers came from similar sources, community based women's organisations, migrant groups or community development workers.

As a result, the project completed two interviews with South Asian women workers sewing in a factory producing school uniforms, one with a former worker from the same company currently working for a homewares importer, and finally, with two Spanish workers in a distribution warehouse for an internet-based retailer that sources clothes from Greater Manchester. Although almost all of these workers were glad to have a job, their interviews confirm that the poor working conditions documented by Professor Hammer in Leicester are replicated in at least some factories within Greater Manchester.

For example, the machinists we spoke to said that they were paid a standard hourly wage of £4/hour, although a few tasks were paid on a piece rate for which some could earn more. They were all paid in cash, and given a pay slip that showed them working part time at minimum wage rates, but the actual amount they received was then calculated at £4/hour, on the basis of the actual hours worked. Although their pay slips were always the same, their actual hours, and the corresponding wages, varied considerably throughout the year, depending on the orders that the factory received:

'We're paid in cash, we'd rather it that way, instead of a bank transfer. They give us pay slips but they only show 16 hours/week, at £7.50/hour, whereas in fact we're doing many more hours than that .. usually we do 30 hours/week, from 8 am to 6pm, and we're paid around £500/month. Now that there's less work the hours have reduced, to around 9 – 5.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview 7, small employer, 10 August 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Interview 8, small employer, 22 August 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Interview 7, small employer, 10 August 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 10, female worker in garment factory, 20 September 2017.

One of the women also recounted how her employer had essentially bribed her to pay him substantial sums from her wages, in recognition for his support in her application for a UK passport. She explained:

‘The owner of the factory .. insisted that I repay him £10,000, when I finally got my UK passport, as he said I’ve employed you for all these years, paid tax for you and as a result you’ve been successful in getting your passport.

I agreed to pay him this money because he was a family friend and I didn’t want to cause any problems ..’<sup>24</sup>

One of the three interviewees was no longer working for this employer, having found a job in a small industrial unit, for a company importing household textiles, mainly from Pakistan and China, e.g. duck feather cushions, duvet covers and baby duvets. Here she was paid at minimum wage rates, doing packing work, making up orders and sending them out. Most of the stock came from overseas, especially for items made from duck feather, but some was made locally, in for example, a local factory making microfibre mattress toppers that are then sold by the major high street retailers. Although her pay had improved, the worker reported that the boxes she was unpacking and repacking were very heavy, especially the duvets. As a result, she had developed a back problem and her arms hurt, which meant she couldn’t work as fast as she could when she first started: ‘I’ve ... got arthritis but my boss complains because I work more slowly now.’<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, the other two workers were relatively satisfied with their situation; despite the fact that the work was paid at well below the minimum wage, they felt it was a good place to work, with a supportive manager and flexible working conditions making it easy to take time out for their domestic commitments when necessary. The factory offered women with limited English a flexible opportunity to earn an income and to contribute to the wider community, as one explains below:

‘We enjoy working there, when its busy and we’re all working hard, the manager promises he’ll take us out if we work hard. Last year we all went to Blackpool ..’  
there’s a good atmosphere, we all eat together at lunchtime and share our packed lunches, and once a week we’re order a takeaway together .. where as in some English factories the workers aren’t allowed to talk to each other.’

The workers from the e-tailor warehouse reported that they were paid at minimum wage rates, by bank transfer with accurate payslips. However, although they agreed that this made the payment process much easier and fairer, they explained that as new arrivals in the UK, they struggled to start work straight away as they didn’t have a bank account in place; it had taken one of them 6 weeks to do this.<sup>26</sup> They also said that they had heard that some workers could be given other peoples’ bank details in order to start work, and that others relied on google translator to complete application forms and prepare for interviews.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interview 3, female worker in garment factory, 25 May 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Interview 3, female worker in garment factory, 25 May 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 11 &12, female worker in garment warehouse, 19 October 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Interview 11 &12, female worker in garment warehouse, 19 October 2017.

## 9. Conclusion

This project was originally designed as a pilot for a larger participatory research project, but unfortunately, the funding for this was not in the end forthcoming. Although only an initial overview, this report does document concerning evidence that workers are paid at rates well below minimum wage and also provides an anecdotal example of the ways in which a worker's irregular immigration status can leave them vulnerable to further exploitation. The conversations with employers again highlight the asymmetric power relations that other studies have identified between these very small manufacturers and the much larger retailers. As fast fashion increases incentives for production that is located closer to UK markets, there is a danger that these trends will only increase.

The original aim of this project was to use participatory research methods both to document the experiences of those working in the textile industry in Greater Manchester, and to encourage them to come together to support each other in some form of collective organisation. This second stage would recruit current or former workers as peer researchers who would then be directly involved in the research process, thus building their capacity to identify and then advocate for improvements in working conditions. In this way, the intention was that the project would potentially contribute to the sustainability of the sector within GM, since the availability of skilled labour has often been flagged as a key challenge.

## 10. Next Steps

HWW is keen to collaborate with others to find a way to take this work forward, as our original concern, that workers in this industry are not currently represented in important debates that will affect their livelihoods, remains unchanged. Although funding was not available to enable us to recruit peer researchers and complete the qualitative interviews we had planned in phase 2, we believe that a sustained outreach process over a longer period would be successful in gathering such information, particularly if it was carried out in partnership with local organisations working with migrants and women of ethnic minority heritage. Our original methodology was based on a peer researcher model, partly because this is also a good way to develop potential leaders who could play a role in future work. Research dissemination processes would prioritise feedback to the workers, and thus provide an opportunity to develop new organising initiatives.

Although HWW's priority for this project was to ensure that workers were represented in current initiatives to improve existing working conditions, we also recognise that often their immediate employers are not in a position to make significant changes, because their customers, the main high street and online retailers, are unwilling to pay the higher prices that this would require.

Our future plans for the project therefore included a second strand of the work, to collect more information from small employers within the sector. This would build on the rich qualitative data collated thus far through informal connections with small employers, providing a more systematic approach to analyse the opportunities and challenges facing small companies in GM, particularly given the current uncertainties as a result of Brexit. This would involve an initial online survey,

followed by telephone interviews, alongside conversations with wider industry stakeholders such as the Textile Institute and the Lancashire Textile Manufacturers' Association.

**If you have any suggestions as to how we might take this work forward, or if you would like to get involved, please contact Lucy Brill at [lucy@homeworkersww.org.uk](mailto:lucy@homeworkersww.org.uk), or call 0781 399 8322.**

## 11. Policy recommendations

Specific policy recommendations are in many ways provisional, whilst workers' voices have not yet been heard. Nevertheless, we suggest the following proposals should be explored by those seeking to address the serious issues identified in this and other research on the UK T&G industry.

Retailers should:

- place more regular and/or larger orders to UK manufacturers who are committed to improving working conditions, to incentivise them to make changes
- pay invoices promptly, to reduce cash flow issues that can lead to late payment of wages
- commit to supporting suppliers to address workplace issues, and not 'cutting and running' when abuses are disclosed, as this will only deter others from speaking out
- ensure that their purchasing practices do not undermine their stated commitment to ethical standards, by for example, ensuring that lead times are not so short that excessive overtime – or unauthorised subcontracting - is unavoidable.

Civil society organisations should:

- increase the provision of free or low cost legal advice, to make it easier for workers to be aware of their rights and to take action when these are denied
- seek ways to support workers employed in the GMTGI to come together to form some form of collective organisation or trade union to represent their interests.

Statutory bodies should:

- strengthen and simplify the current enforcement system for UK employment law
- adequately resource enforcement bodies, so employers face a realistic chance of prosecution should they fail to comply
- sever the links between some enforcement bodies (eg. the GLAA) and UK immigration authorities, to encourage migrant workers to report their concerns
- introduce a flexible two tier system for employment rights redress, with an accessible process for straightforward issues (eg. non payment of holiday or sick pay), with tribunals, supported by legal aid, for more complex legal issues (eg. discrimination)
- ensure that penalties are collected by the same authority, so that employees do not have to pursue their employers through the small claims court
- reduce legal minimum waiting times for payment of invoices, to reduce cash flow issues that can lead to late payment of wages
- consider introducing joint liability for the most serious labour rights abuses, to hold the often much larger retailers accountable for working conditions in their supply chains.

## FURTHER INFORMATION:

This paper was written by Lucy Brill, with input from Jane Tate, Nesta Holden and Nik Hammer. Sandra Penaloza Rice from Migrants Support also provided much practical support throughout the fieldwork process. This is the first HWW research into practice report; others will follow and will be available in the Resources section of the HWW website.

## HOMEWORKERS WORLDWIDE:

HWW is dedicated to supporting homeworkers and other women workers in precarious work around the world as they fight for rights, respect and recognition as workers. We do this by supporting grassroots organising projects, pressuring companies to improve conditions for homeworkers in their supply chains, lobbying for better laws to protect homeworkers, and building solidarity with other women workers.

**website:** [www.homeworkersww.org.uk](http://www.homeworkersww.org.uk)

**twitter:** @homeworkersww

**address:** Office 14, 30-38 Dock Street,  
Leeds LS10 1JF, UK

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