

**'Home sweat home':
Preliminary findings* of the first stage of a two-part study of outworkers in the textile industry in
Melbourne Victoria
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by

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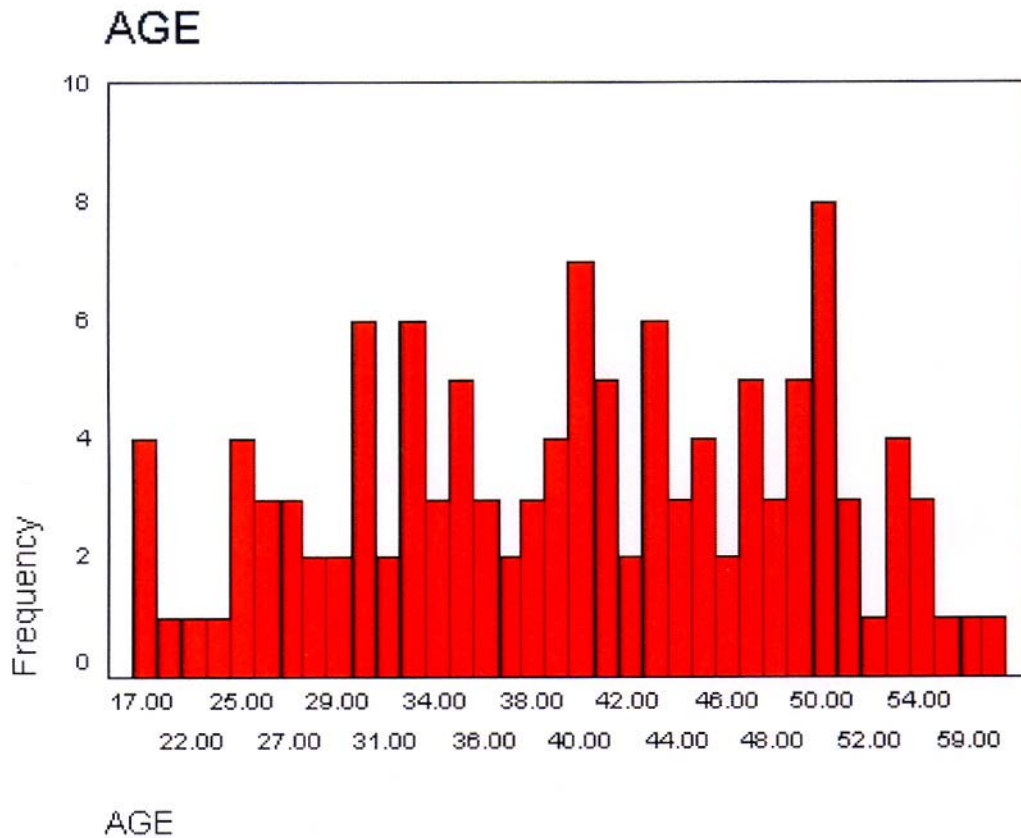
* All numbers and percentages in this report refer to the number who answered the question. Because this was an administered survey, there were few missing cases.

These are the preliminary findings of the first part of a two-stage survey of textile outworkers that was conducted in Melbourne, Victoria in the early part of 2001. Initially, the Textile, Clothing & Footwear Union of Australia was approached in order to make direct links with outworkers so the latter could be trained as interviewers in the project. 8 outworkers contacted another 111 outworkers. The sample of 119 took part in an intensive study that involved an administered questionnaire and open-ended discussion. Each interview lasted about 3 hours. The investigation was conducted in Vietnamese or English, as appropriate, and involved Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai and Australian-born outworkers. 115 of the outworkers were female. The project involved strict academic methods of enquiry, following ethical guidelines and involving translation and back-translation..

119 workers were surveyed The majority of the outworkers were women. There were 114 females and only 5 men. 110 were born in Vietnam and 105 of these were educated there. Four were born in Cambodia, three in Thailand, and two in Australia. The majority had completed secondary education and nearly a sixth were graduates.

Primary	15	13%
Secondary	81	68%
Tertiary	17	14%
Other	1	1%
	114	

Their ages ranged from 17 to 64. They were widely spread across the age groups. The average age was 39. The age group with the largest number of workers (eight of them) was 50.



All of them came to Australia from 1979 onwards, some arriving each year, the last in 1999. Although 10% came in 1983, the majority – about 60% - arrived from 1988 to 1995. At the time of the survey, over 80% had been outworkers for at least 5 years. The average length of time in outwork for this sample was seven and a half years, though a few had done this kind of work for more than 15 years. This was their living, although only about a tenth said they wanted to be an outworker all their lives.

Their level of English was poor. With regard to each of the categories of speaking, writing, listening and reading, only about ten per cent said they were fluent, while around a half said they were poor. In fact, most had attended English classes.

The family

82 (70%) were married and all to someone of the same ethnic background.

Of these,

-56 did outwork with partner together in home

- 24 had partners who were not involved in outwork

- 1 in Vietnam, 3 not in work

- 19 employed - 13 in factory work (only 1 in clothing), 2 shop work, 1 office work, 2 professional,

- 17 full-time, 1 part-time

72 had children. 66 had pre-schoolers or pupils at school. 10 were solo-parents. 16% of all parents had one child, 49% had 2, and 35% had 3.

In only 12 cases did the household have any other money than that provided by the couple. Household income ranged from \$140 per week to \$900. There was one outlier of \$1500. The highest number of families (17) was in the \$500 a week group. Unsurprisingly, almost all the outworkers (106) said the family could not manage without their wages.

Why working at home

It was quite clear that most wanted to do work for pay outside the home. There was a distinct minority, however, who wanted to look after their children mainly unencumbered by paid work. The respondents were asked: If you had a real choice of the kinds of jobs that you think you could get, what would you like to do most?

Group 1

Work outside the home in another industry	43	38%
Work in a clothing factory	33	30%
Take on training to do other work	5	

Group 2

Not work for pay – look after household	24	20%
Paid work in home	7	

Those who preferred not to be doing homework were asked what prevented them doing what they preferred. They could give as many reasons as they wished. Again, two groups were apparent. The ranking of reasons in each group was as follows.

Group 1

Cannot get work outside the home	49
English not good enough	46
Not understand Australian systems	25
Have experienced racism in outside work	24
Have experienced racism in public	22
Cannot drive	20
Not have enough confidence	20
Cannot afford childcare	19
Husband wants me to stay at home	17
Family wants me to stay at home	14
Family does not have car	13
Afraid of public transport	11
No childcare available	8
Family gets more income	3

Group 2

Fit work around my family duties	30
Want to look after children myself	27
Enjoy being in control of work pace	20

Friends and social life

These workers did not live in isolation. Two thirds said they knew some neighbours. Over 80% knew other people in Melbourne and over 90% knew other outworkers - between 1 and a dozen - with a few knowing lots of them. Yet they lived in their own ethnic world within Australia. These acquaintances were clearly mainly people of their own race. At home and with friends, most of them used their own language. They were asked how they found out news about Australia and the world. This is the ranking of the responses.

Radio – own language	111
Newspaper – own language	82
Friends	54
Husband	31
Children	21
Radio/TV – English language	19
Newspaper – Australian	15

In 30% of the families, no-one spoke fluent English; in the remainder, it was generally the children. It was the whole family in only 10% of cases.

The work

Mainly work was found through friends (70%), followed by newspaper ad (15%). Only 7 of them felt they could gain other work easily, though 54% said they did not know. Two fifths had worked in a clothing factory and most of these preferred to work there than at home.

They were asked whether the work came direct from the factory or via another person.

Factory	53	45%
Agent	65	55%

In just over half of the cases, the sex of the individual they dealt with was male, in 35% female, the rest, both. In the great majority of the cases the language used in the transaction was their own.

114 owned their own machine, which was mainly kept in the garage or the bedroom. Slightly more learned to sew in their own country than in Australia. They were mainly taught by friends or self-taught. Almost all received no training from their employer.

A sizeable minority (45%) said they enjoyed sewing for work. A fifth admitted to working less well than they could because of the pressure of work. Two-thirds would have preferred to work more carefully. Only 20% sewed for pleasure in their spare time.

They were asked 'What best describes your current attitude to your work?'

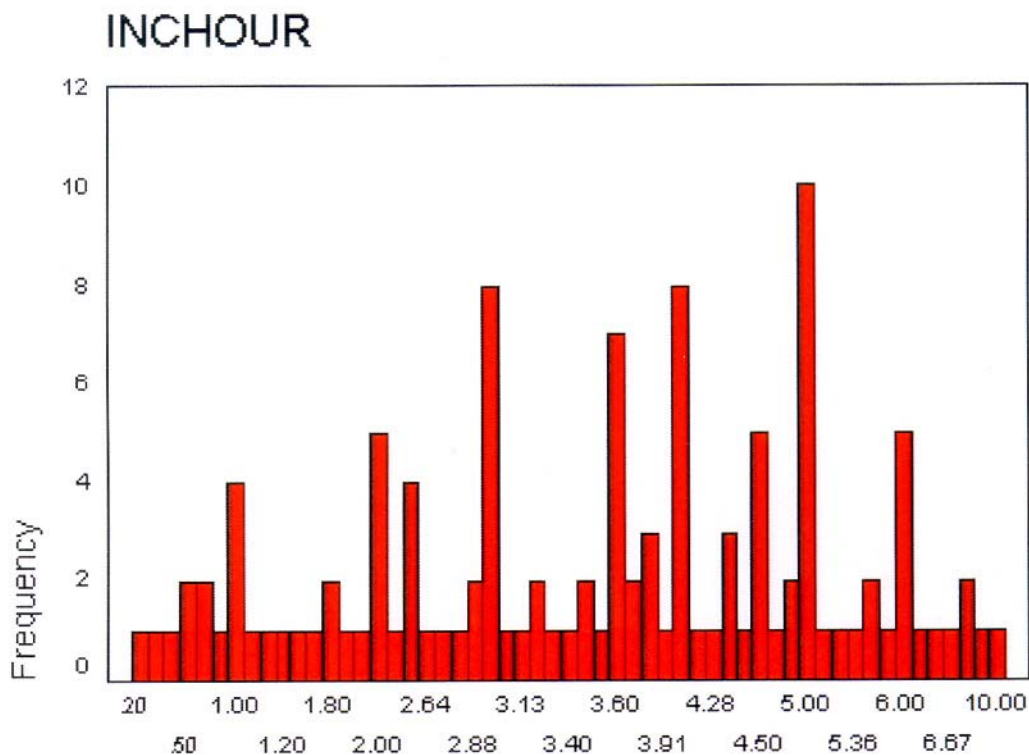
I like it	15
I neither like nor dislike it	26
I don't like it but I just have to do it	64
I don't like it and I don't see How I'm going to be able to cope	7
I don't like it and I'm going to get training to do other work	3
I don't like it and I'm going to get training and help other outworkers	2

They were asked if they had any legal knowledge about their rights at work. Slightly less than half said they had. They gave the source of their knowledge as the following:

Radio – own language	75
Newspaper – own language	45
Friend(s)	44
Union	41
Husband	17
Children	8
Employer	6
Accountant	6
Radio/TV – English language	5
Newspaper – Australian	4
Other	7

Pay

The payment system was piece-rate. They were asked what they were paid for each garment they were currently sewing and it ranged from twenty cents to \$5.35. There was one outlier of \$9.50. The largest group – 15 – was being paid 50 cents, the next – 12 - \$2.00, then 8 at \$4.00 and 6 at \$5.00. The garments took between 3 and 90 minutes to sew. From the information they gave, it was possible to calculate their hourly pay. The average rate was \$3.60 per hour. The highest was \$10, while several earned below a dollar.



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They earned per week between \$60 and \$500, the largest group – 23 – earning \$300, with 17 on \$250, 16 on \$200 and 15 on \$350. In 105 cases, these wages were used only for essential expenses. They were asked the following questions about their pay. They were clearly very vulnerable.

	Yes	No
Usually offered regular work?	26	89
Wages paid on time?	28	88
Know pay before start job	62	53
Employer set finishing time	113	5
Paid different from agreed price	60	46
Paid holidays	3	115
Sick pay	1	114
Paid public holidays	2	113

Wages ever been unpaid	62	54
Why?		
Employer unfair – said quality was poor	32	
Employer unfair – gave no reason	29	
Employer unfair – said work was late	19	
Other	12	
Your fault – quality was poor	3	
Your fault – work was late	2	
Employer rewarded you for speed	2	
Employer rewarded you for high quality	2	

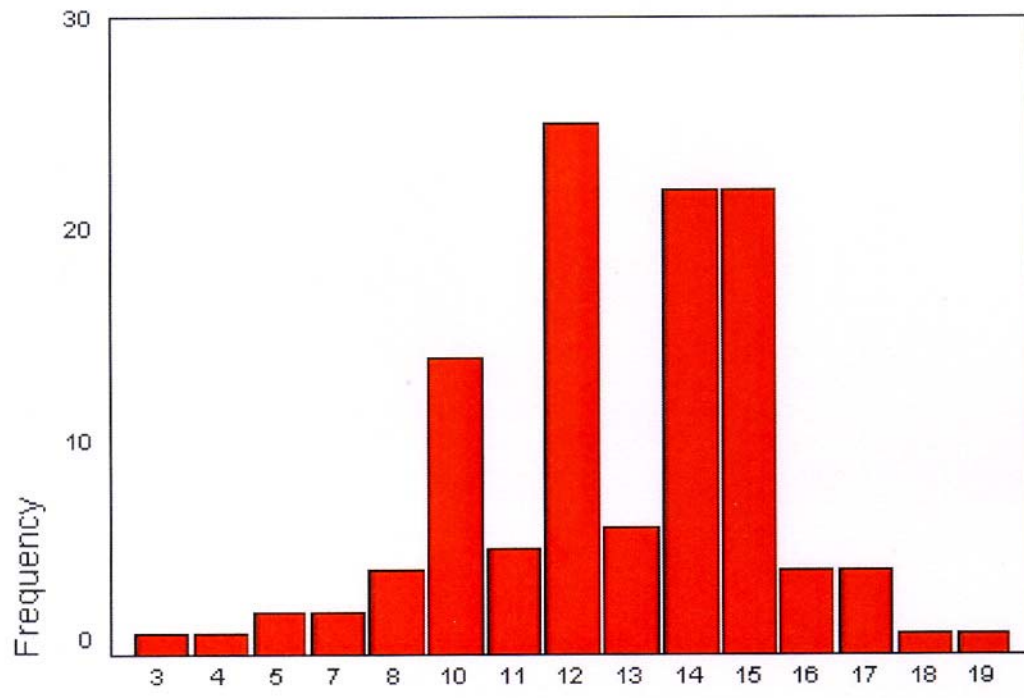
Resistance was low. Fewer than 10% had ever kept back work to ensure pay. One said she did this 'when I began outworking'. Only a fifth had ever tried to negotiate the price of the job, and in most cases the negotiation was carried out by the woman herself.

Pay was only delivered in 20% of the cases by the employer. It was more likely to be picked up by the husband than the wife, maybe to guarantee payment..

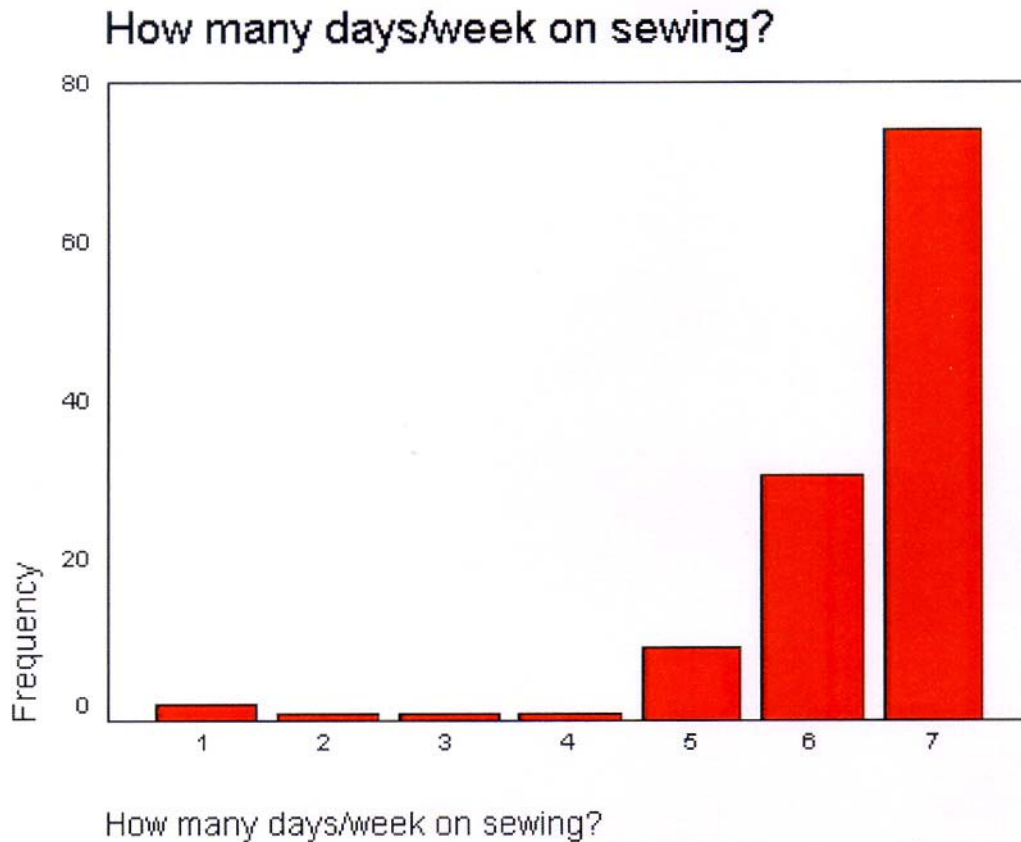
Hours

The hours a day spent on sewing ranged between 3 and 19. The largest group – 25 – worked 10 hours, the second largest – 22 – were in the 14 and 15 hour bands. Three-quarters spent between 2 and 4 hours a day on household duties. 74 – 62% spent 7 days a week sewing, with a further 26% on 6 days.

How many hours/day on sewing, etc?



How many hours/day on sewing, etc?



They were asked how many hours a week they spent on themselves. The largest group – 27 – said none.

The next – 21 – said 2 hours. The next group consisted of students.

Almost all of them wanted regular work, ranging from 20 to 52 hours a week. There was an outlier of 98.

This person worked those hours and clearly relied on that money. The largest group – 30 – wanted 40 hours, the next – 24 – 30 and 11 wanted 50. It is interesting that two groups emerge again. One is prepared to work very long hours. The other wants part-time work to fit round family duties.

The work consumed their lives.

	Yes	No
Do you work in the school holidays	105	8
Do you work on Saturday	104	10
Do you work on Sunday	100	15
Do you work on public holidays	105	13

In about 70% of households, other family members helped:

	<i>regularly</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>only when necessary</i>
Husband	47	9	8
Children	6	18	13
Mother	7	-	9
Father	5	-	5
Everyone at home	5	5	7
Neighbour	1	-	10
Friend	1	1	27
Other	2	2	10

In 90% of the cases, the work was delivered and picked up by the worker or partner, usually the worker.

Improvements

The outworkers were asked the following question. How important is each of these to you for your life as an outworker to be improved?

	<i>Very important</i>
Factory owners to be made to follow law	113
Higher piece rates	109
Regular & prompt payment	109
Paid the same as factory workers	106
Guaranteed regular hours each week	105
Superannuation paid by employer	97
Paid public holidays	97
Paid sick leave	97
Workcover paid by employer	94
Understanding my legal rights	93
Four weeks paid holiday each year	91
Retailers to sign outworker code	80
Training to get other work in the future	74
English classes	70
Knowledge about legal rights at work	55
Flexible work – only when I want it	54

Policy implications of the preliminary set of findings

This empirical study gives weight and substance to the claims of the TCFUA and outworker groups who have reported that these workers are among the most disadvantaged in the Australian labour market. The preliminary findings demonstrate unequivocally that outworkers in the clothing industry do not own a business. These are low-income earners. Because they are not classified as 'employees', they fall outside the award system and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. An outstanding characteristic of this investigation was the fear of the outworkers. Even though their wages are so low and their hours of work so long, they were frightened that they would lose their job if they talked about it. Many more were

contacted but refused to talk.

The clear policy implication from these findings is that state and federal governments should intervene to ensure that outworkers will be covered by awards and legislation in state and federal jurisdictions.

Moreover, Australian women consumers should have deep concerns about the female 'sweated' labour that makes their clothes.