

## Tales of despair: outworker narratives

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\*I would like to acknowledge the outworkers who agreed to be interviewed in this project.

The following are short, representative excerpts from interviews with 119 outworkers carried out at the start of 2001. Each interview lasted 2-3 hours. These excerpts form the preliminary findings from the second part of the survey.

### THE CONTEXT

'When we were living in Vietnam before the war we were very happy. I had a good job. I was a teacher in the army. Then I was a prisoner of war and I remember when I was released from prison I was so pleased to be with my wife and child again.'

'Here I have freedom ... and I am not afraid of the government ... I prefer to live in Australia.'

'All around me are migrants who aren't Vietnamese, but we co-exist fine together.'

### BECOMING AN OUTWORKER

'I am an outworker because when I came to Australia I didn't have any (Australian) qualifications and I didn't know how to speak English.'

*'In Vietnam I was a teacher.'*

'I am an outworker because I can't find any other job.'

*'In Vietnam I had just graduated.'*

'The reason I am an outworker is because I can't speak English and I couldn't find other jobs.'

*'I graduated as an engineer in Vietnam.'*

'It's easy to become an outworker only the wage is very low. If you agree to the low wage then you have a job.'

*'In Vietnam I was a businessman.'*

'I came to Australia by myself and a relative of mine told me that I should become an outworker because people would deliver the work to me. Because I had just come to Australia I didn't know how to drive or know any roads and I didn't know many people. Becoming an outworker to me was very suitable. Back then, sewing was a booming industry and wages were equivalent to factory workers. But now if I had to pick a type of work to do I wouldn't choose to become an outworker because wages are very low.'

*'I worked in a factory in Vietnam.'*

When my husband and I first came to Australia we knew some people from Vietnam. They lent us money so we would have enough to buy sewing machines, and taught us how to sew.

*'I was a farmer in Vietnam.'*

'The reason I am an outworker is because when my husband and I first came to Australia we didn't have a car and didn't know how to speak English. We were living with my sister in law and she taught me to sew and loaned me money to buy a machine.'

*'I ran a tailor's shop. I taught other people to be tailors.'*

I stayed with some relatives. They lent me enough money for a sewing machine. That cost about \$3,000. It took me over a year to pay that back. You're caught, you see. *(Claps hands together)* Just like that. You've invested so much. You have to stay in the trade to make it worthwhile. It's a trap. Then, for some work, you need specialist machines, so you may buy 1 or 2 more. That gives you a better chance of getting regular work. But that means more debt.

*'I was a student in Vietnam.'*

#### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ...

'I work at night and during the day. I work about 14-19 hours a day. Each day I wake up at 5am, do exercise and have a shower till 6 am. Then I sew till 12pm and then I have lunch. And then I continue sewing until about 5pm. And then I cook and eat dinner until about 6.30 pm and then I sew until 11pm.'

'I wake early at 7am, then brush my teeth, take a shower and go to the toilet. After this it is my children's turn. I wake them up, help dress them in their school uniform and then prepare breakfast. I tidy up the house quickly and then sit at my sewing machine and start to work. I start with the batch that is needed urgently first to get them out of the way, then go on the others. ... If there is a rush job then I eat 2-minute noodles ... just so I can save time.'

'I remember once that I worked the whole day then the next morning at 5am I fell asleep for a few hours till 9 am. After that I worked till 9pm to finish that job. That happens every time there is a rush-job.'

Every day I wake up around 8am and go to the bathroom, etc. I wake my children up and cook their breakfast. When they are done eating I clean the house and then begin to sew. I sew until noon. At noon I rest and cook lunch for my children and myself. After that I continue to sew till 4.30, then I cook dinner for my family. When dinner is over I clean the dishes and when

I am done I have break. At 6.30 I start to sew again. I sew until 12am. When my husband comes home he helps me by folding the clothes or cutting the stitches. My husband also helps me with the children, such as bathing them and putting them to bed. If there is a rush job I work till 2am.'

'I usually have 2-minute noodles or yesterday's rice heated up.'

'I begin work at 8.30am each day and I stop working at around 12.30am (the next day) ... If I had to describe my work-life it would be that my life is quite normal.'

'I wake up at 6.30am and do exercise. At 7 am I wake my children, cook them breakfast and help them prepare to go to school. At 7.30 I begin to sew. At 12.30 I take a break and eat lunch for half an hour. I then sew until 7pm. I cook dinner between 7pm and 8. I then sew until 11pm. I go grocery shopping once a week on Sunday.'

'When there's a rush-job, my husband has to help me. I don't have time to cook food. ... I don't have any breaks at all.'

'I am a single mother with three children. I wake up at 4am and sew and at 8am I take my children to school. When I get home I begin to sew again. At 12 I eat lunch and sew again. At 2pm I cook food for my children and at 3 I pick them up. When they get home I feed them and after that is done I begin to sew again till about 11-12am. If there's a lot of work, I work until 2am.'

'Usually I eat the food that remains from previous meals.'

'I wake every morning and cook breakfast for my children. My husband does the garden. Then we do housework together and begin to sew at 7am. My husband and I sew till 12pm and then we cook noodles for lunch. Sometimes we work till 1-2pm before we have lunch. Then we sew till 5pm. We always stop at 5 because my children eat dinner with us. My children take turns to do the washing up while my husband and I go back and sew until 12am. I don't do a lot of housework because when my children get home from school, they do it.'

'Being an outworker I often help out other outworkers because they help me when I need help.'

'I never dress up or put make up on during the day. I barely have enough time to sew the clothes.'

'I never have any leisure time.'

'Ever since I've been in Australia I have never taken a holiday.'

'I don't ever have holidays.'

#### CHILD LABOUR AND FAMILY LIFE

'When there is a rush job my husband and my two children stay up all night to do the work. At times my husband and I have stayed up for two nights. We are afraid that if we don't complete the work we will have to pay for the clothes.'

'Working at home has affected my children. When they get home from school, they do homework eat dinner then help my husband and I for two hours each day. On the weekends they help me sew all day. I feel sorry for my children because they can't go out and be with their friends.'

'When there is a rush job my husband and my daughter sew all night and eat tinned food so that I don't have to cook or clean the dishes.'

'My daughter helps me to sew when there is a rush job. Sometimes she has school-work to do but she doesn't do it because we have to get the work completed.'

'My job has affected my children because they have to share the noise, dust and my bad days.'

I'd rather my children didn't have to help 'because I want them to concentrate on their study.'

'I wake up early in the morning and go to school. Then after school I go down to the garage to help my parents until dinner-time. After dinner we continue our work till about 9pm. I juggle school-work while I do my sewing. Often, when the day's been rough, I still have to stay up and finish my homework for the next day. Sometimes I have to skip school because I can't get up for the next day.'

'When I have a rush job I make my children help me so they don't have time to do homework.'

'After I come home from school my parents give me time to do my homework. After I finish my homework I help my parents from four hours to six hours of work. I basically do some of the sewing and help my parents pack up. ... When there's a rushed job I spend more time helping my parents and sometimes ... I stay up really late to help them finish. Sometimes until one or two in the morning. At other times I go on all night. I can't go out with my friends. My only fear is that I can't make it into higher education and have to do this for the rest of my life.'

'Occasionally my children stay at home and help me.'

'I wake up early in the morning to go to school. Then after school I go down to the garage to help my parents sew until it's time for me to prepare dinner for the family. After dinner, we continue to work till about 11pm. My parents work from about 8am till 9pm every day. As for me, I only do six hours straight. I cook and clean and do all the other household chores to help my mother out. Meanwhile I juggle school work while I take care of my brothers and sisters. ... I check the weather reports for to-morrow's weather to know what to dress my siblings in and when to put out the laundry. ... I'm the eldest sister in the family and so it is my responsibility to take over the position as a mum when my mother is not present. ... My work is very tiring. At times I feel really tired and I just want to run away, away from everything. But I would always think of what it would be like for my parents if I should be absent and I would see images of my siblings and how they would feel so hurt and neglected.'

#### THE MARKET RATE OF PAY

'We're poor. Both of us are outworkers.'

'I sew a shirt and get paid \$5 and I see the shirt retailing at \$100 that it takes me an hour to get completed. But there's nothing I can do about it because everyone gets paid the same amount to sew the same clothes. It's not like I get paid \$5 and someone else might get paid \$6 (*for the same item*). That's the reason why I have been sewing for 12 years.'

'At times I see the clothes that I was paid to sew and I can't afford to buy them.'

'The price they pay is very low ... they said it's because the big factory pays them lower all the time.'

'I get worried because the work time is getting longer but our wages are becoming lower. I also worry for my children. I know they need more from us but we both don't have time for them.'

*Several respondents:* 'It works out at about \$3 (\$3, \$3.50, \$4, \$5) an hour.'

'I think what my boss pays me is too low. I am paid \$1.20 for a shirt and that shirt will sell for about \$50 in the stores. I think the difference is too big. But what can I do? If I don't accept the work then someone else will.'

'If I don't take (the wage) someone else will and it will be my loss.'

'I want to find a factory job but this field of work is becoming worse and many factories have had to close ... In recent years the price of work has slipped. Several years ago you'd get \$5/6 (for a particular item). Now it's \$2 so I must work more hours to receive the same amount of pay I used to have.'

'I could be doing the same garment as I worked on last year and they have taken 50 cents or \$1 off the price.'

#### AND HOW IT'S SPENT

'I never treat myself with my earnings. My earnings go to pay our bills and there is never any money left.'

'I am paid so little I can't take my family out and do simple things such as seeing a movie together or going camping.'

'We've never taken a family holiday because we can't afford one.'

'I bring money into the family so we have enough money to buy nappies for our children.'

'Without this money my brothers and sisters won't be able to get into higher education.'

'Occasionally I treat myself out of my earnings but only to buy cheap make-up and jewellery.'

#### UNPAID AND LATE WAGES

'If you want to be an outworker you can find a job easily. But that doesn't mean you'll get paid (*laughs*).'

If I had to describe my work-life it would be that I am a worker who is always being cheated.

'Most of our friends are outworkers. Their bosses have cheated them all. Their bosses have so many reasons and excuses and the excuse they use most is that the companies haven't paid them yet and any day now they will pay.'

'Employers make excuses by saying: you've not met the due date, you've made lots of mistakes. But in reality you did nothing wrong. In the end your wage gets deducted and you can't do anything about it.'

'In general my boss has ... paid me what he said. Not like the other bosses who run away with workers' money by shutting the factory or moving house.'

'My boss said that the company hadn't paid him so he couldn't pay me.'

'My boss has cheated me. He kept saying to-morrow and then he moved away.'

'I don't know about anything. All I know is that my husband collects the work from the factory. We sew the work and maybe get paid, maybe not.'

## CONTROLS

'I think that the smaller companies take orders from the larger firms and the larger firms sometimes rush the little companies and complain about slow progress. This in turn puts pressure on outworkers.'

'In general my work is very accurate ... because I am scared if I don't do the work properly my boss would give me a bad name and no-one would give me work.'

'My work is usually good because if it weren't ... my boss would make me redo all the sewing, make me pay for the clothes or not give me any more work.'

'Well if we do good work then naturally the employer provides us with a lot of jobs. If we do something 'wrong' then we have to wait longer for work. ... Sometimes they deduct money because they say they need to do repairs. I know this isn't true.'

'I am always afraid of not receiving work - my workload isn't regular.'

'Generally I can take on high quality work because I have a sharp eye for details.'

'I rarely do high quality work because of the fear that I will do something wrong.'

'I work at an average pace and do basic sewing. I don't do higher quality clothes because of the fear that I will do something wrong.'

'If I sew quick and beautifully then he gives us a lot of work to do. But if something is done wrong then I have to wait longer for work.'

'I am afraid that I won't get work because I am getting less and less work. (Nowadays) when I finish a workload it's 2-3 weeks before I get another job.'

'I have worked for quite a number of people and the way they treat me is all the same. When there is a lot of work and when there is a rush job my boss becomes very nice to me. But when there isn't a lot of work to do my boss becomes horrible.'

'All bosses are like that. When there is work they are very nice, but when there isn't any they become fussy.'

'I depend on my personal relationship with my boss ... I listen to my boss like a child would listen to a parent.'

'Sometimes they yell and shout at you.'

'I've heard my parents being threatened by their employer that they would cut down my parents pay and would not give us any more work.'

'Home-working doesn't allow women to control their lives because if they want to go out on a specific day they can't because they have to sew and even if they are sick they still have to sew.'

'I think that home-working doesn't allow women to control their lives because with this field of work the time of work that you do is never definite. ... In a perfect world I would be a teacher.'

## HEALTH

'Sometimes I get back pain and also sore dry eyes and my leg is like dying and my finger feels as if it doesn't belong to me anymore, too painful.'

'I only have breaks when I can't continue sewing anymore because my back is so sore. I do some stretches to ease the pain. That takes about two to 15 minutes.'

'I exercise everyday because I have so many aches and pains.'

I go to the doctor's every month. He's told me to exercise to get rid of the pains caused by the sewing, so my husband and I go for a walk for thirty minutes every day.'

'I don't have time to exercise because I am too busy looking after my children.'

'There was one incident when my child was sick and there was a rush job ... it made me feel guilty because I had to sew and couldn't look after my child.'

Child respondent: 'There was one time when I sewed my fingers together. It really scared me from coming back to work.'

Child respondent: 'I've had an experience when the side of my arm was sewn and got caught in the sewing machine and I had to have specialists come to get me out.'

## ISOLATION

'There was once a strange person who knocked on the door. I did not dare to answer because of the language. I was afraid and don't know English.'

'I go to the shops every week on the weekend.'

'I know what the weather is like because I always watch it on TV everyday.'

'I mostly find out the weather through the radio.'

'I usually don't know what time or what day it is because I am too busy sewing.'

'I always listen to the radio so I know what the weather is like so I can tell my children if they need to wear a coat or not.'

'I watch the world outside from the window all the time.'

'Sometimes I really don't know the weather, even whether it's a hot or cold day.'

'At times I feel lonely because I work all day in the house and see no-one.'

## IF I LOST THIS JOB ...

'If I lost this job ... I would have to go on the dole.'

'If I lost this job ... then I would have to go to Centrelink for the unemployment benefit.'

A lot of friends ... won't go to Centrelink because they are too ashamed

'If I lost my job I would have to go on the dole. I don't like that way. The people in the social office look at me like prison officers. They ask so many stupid questions.'

'I don't want to go on the dole but if this field of work doesn't improve then I would have to.'

'I'm afraid of losing this job. If I lost this job then my family will struggle. We really need the income as it is currently.'

## PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS

'In a perfect world I would become a nurse.'

'In Vietnam I was a teacher. Now I just hope that I have regular work so my family will be happy and healthy.'

In a perfect world: 'In Vietnam I was a student ... I would like to go back to school and get a degree.'



'If I could change my work I would become a journalist.'

'I want to go to school and earn a degree ... I would love to teach. I know that I can't teach high school but I would like to teach younger students ... but I don't have any spare time to go back and get a degree.'

In a perfect world: 'I would like to be a doctor.'

'I would like to finish university and be a teacher, but that's impossible.'

'While I sew I often imagine seeing people who have an office job answering phones and it makes me want one of those jobs so badly.'

'I just want a job that provides enough for my family and to give me enough to live on when I retire.'

'I just hope that that I keep getting regular work and that the prices stay the same, not decline.'

'Well, before 1975 I was a government official. Now I sew, but it's very much better compared with our lives after 1975.' (*Was in prison camp.*)

Child: 'I see myself graduating from some really awesome course in Uni and when I go out to work I will earn lots of money and my parents will never have to work again.'

#### ATTITUDE TO CURRENT SITUATION

'I live in the dark world, no future.'

'I would describe myself as a machine that runs after time.'

'I am the lowest person in the work ladder.'

'I am a slave to work.'

'My main feeling is that the sacrifice I have to pay for my life in Australia is too hard.'

'I see my future as becoming bleaker.'

'I work as hard as cattle.'

'If I had to describe my work life it would be an endless struggle to make ends meet.'

'Pains, aches. Depression.'

'My fear is that I won't get work and that the payment will get lower and my family won't have enough to live on.'

'Religion does help ... I just have to accept that I have been dealt a life of hardship.'

'My life right now isn't exactly good. Sometimes I get upset because of all the pressure I am under. And then I want to quit the work that I do but then when I think about it again. My life isn't that bad. I have a happy marriage and I can always share problems with my husband.'

'Before I came to Australia I knew that life would be hard because I would have to start all over again but I'm doing this for my children's future so I accept it.'

'Regardless of how hard life is here in Australia I still would have definitely come here because I have freedom. My children can have a better future. ... If we were in Vietnam, that wouldn't be possible.'

'I have accepted that my own life is dead and with no future. My only hope is for my children to be happy and successful.'

'I do all this for my children. When my children smile then I smile as well. Their happiness is very important to me and I am happy when they are happy.'

'I hope that my daughter never becomes an outworker.'

'In the beginning when I first came to Australia I would weep about my life a lot but now I am used to it so I don't weep as much.'

## REMEDIES?

'I would like to go to school and learn English ... But I am too busy.'

I feel I'm trapped because I can't speak English so I can't get a better job. English is the key. But I need to work all the time so I don't learn it. I listen to SBS radio and talk in Vietnamese at home. My children act as interpreters to the outside world.

'I am not learning English ... because my husband and I are too busy.'

'The main things to change to improve an outworker's life is to let the outworker receive regular work, get a pay rise, get the benefits that factory workers receive (such as work cover and sick pay) and always get paid on time.'

'I think outworkers should be paid the same as factory workers. ... They have to pay for their own sewing machine and electricity and there is more pressure on outworkers.'

'The main thing to change to improve an outworker's life is to stop big companies sending their clothes overseas so outworkers would receive more work.'

'I do think that outworkers should be paid the same as factory workers because outworkers have to buy their own sewing machine, pay their own electricity and sew to meet the standards of our boss.'

'My work is very hard. I just want people to know that we are very poor workers who do not deserve to be treated by people in this way. Please speak up for us.'