

Homeworking: Dream Realized

The Globalized Reality

BY ROXANA NG

With the formation of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, garment workers became the few unionized female work force that enjoyed decent wages and employee benefits.

Cet article s'attaque aux conditions de vie des couturières à domicile dans le Grand Toronto. Après avoir interviewé 30 de ces femmes qui sont venues d'Asie, cette étude ajoute à ce que nous connaissons sur leurs conditions de travail et soulève des questions sur l'image populaire du travail à domicile en tant qu'alternative souhaitable à un travail à temps plein, stable, dans un bureau ou dans une usine.

In the 1990s, as employment patterns fluctuate and work place restructuring becomes the norm rather than the exception, homeworking—conducting one's paid employment from the privacy of one's domicile—is heralded as the viable and preferred alternative to a more structured work environment. By examining the working conditions of women who sew garments at home (heretofore homeworkers), this article reveals that this rosy and romantic picture of homeworking, painted by the media and encour-

aged by governments and employers, does not apply to everyone who does homework. Although homeworking seems to provide both the homeworker and the employer/client more flexibility, and certainly reduces overhead costs for the employer, specific conditions of homeworking vary across occupational sectors and from individual to individual. They are shaped by factors such as the occupational strata, education, class, gender, and above all family responsibilities of the homeworker. For example, the experience of a professional man who operates a consulting business from his residence is very different from that of garment workers, many of them immigrant women with low English-language proficiency, who sew at home for subcontractors because they cannot afford daycare services.

This article focuses on the conditions of sewers who are homeworkers in the Greater Toronto Area. Through in-depth and telephone interviews with 30 homeworkers who are immigrant women from Asia (Hong Kong, China, and Vietnam), my study adds to present knowledge on the conditions of homeworkers in Toronto and raises questions about the popular image of homeworking as the desired alternative to full-time, stable, and office- or factory-based employment.

Changes in the garment industry

The city of Toronto has been a major centre of garment production in Canada since industrialization. As an industry that makes use of what are assumed to be women's skills, the garment trade has always been

an employer of female immigrant workers, firstly from Europe and later from Asia. Historically, homeworking and sweatshop operation were an integral part of the garment trade. With the formation of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), firstly in the U.S. and later in Canada, garment workers became the few unionized female work force that enjoyed decent wages and employee benefits. They were protected by labour standard legislation and rights to collective bargaining.

From the early 1980s to 1990s, however, like many other industrial sectors, the garment industry had gone through drastic restructuring. This was the product of many forces: technological changes, changing tariff and trade protection by national governments due to global competition, and a shifting locus of control in the industry itself. Electronic data processing, for example, makes possible the communication of sales directly from retail stores to the factory, enabling manufacturers and retailers to cut down on stock. The opening up of labour markets in the so-called third world, especially the industrialization of the Asian Pacific Rim countries and the establishment of free trade zones there has enabled much cheaper garment production. Trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have made it possible for retailers to order garments from places like Mexico with cheaper labour costs. The shift of control from manufacturers to retailers such as the Hudson's Bay Company (which owns Zellers, Simpson's, Robinson's and Fields, and K Mart) has made it

or Freedom Constrained? of Immigrant Garment Workers

difficult for manufacturers to control the production process. So, many of them either retired and got out of the business altogether. Those who remained scaled down the factory, and became contractors for big retailers or subcontractors for large manufacturers.¹

This story, recorded in Laura Johnson's classic, *The Seam Allowance*, describes this transition well:

Seven years ago, James Morris owned a clothing factory in Toronto. The enormous increase in imported clothing affected his business and he began losing money. He laid off all but one of his 45 workers—a skilled cutter—and started over again, this time without the factory. He began to take bundles of ready-cut cloth to the women who used to sew for him in the factory. They sewed up the dresses and returned them to him for finishing and pressing. Today, Morris runs a highly successful, moderately-sized dress manufacturing business. Says Morris: "Home work is the only way to go in Canada.... I won't replace homeworkers for a long time. I don't want another factory." Morris' workplace now employs only ten workers, who do the cutting, samples, finishing, pressing, and office work. He also uses three contractors who have their own factories and/or homeworkers. Morris does not concern himself with the employment condition of the women who make up his dresses; he cares only that the finished product is made to

his exacting specifications and delivered to him in the time agreed. James Morris finds that the homework system meets his needs. (19)

The effects of these changes were the downsizing of industrial plants and factory closures in Toronto (and elsewhere in Canada). They in turn led to massive lay-off and displacement of garment workers, many of whom are women from Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Vietnam, and India. This did not mean these immigrant women lost their jobs; it meant that they were now sewing garments at home for contractors and subcontractors. This is the context within which my study is situated.

Wages and working conditions of homeworkers

By the 1990s, sweatshops and homeworking are once again an integral part of the garment industry in Canada. This article reports on a study done in the spring of 1999, as part of a larger project I am doing in collaboration with the Homeworkers' Association (HWA). The objective of the study was to see whether wages and working conditions of homeworkers have changed since the early 1990s, when the HWA did two surveys on homeworking in Toronto in an attempt to discover the work reality of increasing number of garment workers who had become homeworkers.²

My study found that the wages of sewing machine operators have not risen since the 1980s. Laura Johnson's 1982 study reported that the piece

rate for skirts was \$2. Today, workers also make \$2 for a skirt. A shirt is around \$3, and a dress pays \$4 to \$5. This is clothing that retails for up to \$200. For section work (that is, sewing on pockets or collars), workers make between 20 to 50 cents per piece. Based on the piece rate and number of items completed per hour, we estimate the average hourly rate to be between \$6 and \$8.³ The highest hourly rate reported is \$17 per hour for evening gowns, and the lowest is \$2 per hour.

What is more critical to note is that as homeworkers become skilled at what they are sewing, and begin to make more than minimum wage, the employers drop the piece rate so their earning is effectively reduced. For example, one woman reported that depending on the complexity of the design, she used to get \$3 to \$4 per skirt; now she is paid \$2.80 to \$3. This finding concurs with a larger study on the garment trade, which reported on a decline in the piece rate (Yanz).

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Another strategy used by subcontractors is to not disclose the piece rate until the batch of garments is completed, as the following interview shows:

The lowest salary I earned was about \$3 per hour, with the same employers I'm now working. [I

"One time there was this employer who owed me about \$500 to \$600. He admitted to it and kept saying sorry. But I still haven't got any pay from him. It was six to seven years ago."

asked why she didn't complain about the low rate.] I didn't say anything at the beginning. I dared not. But now I start to talk to them about this. The kind of pocket-cover sewing I'm now doing also requires me to cut certain fabric before I can start sewing. But the employers don't count the cutting time. I told the employers about this. But they said that almost every homemaker asks them for a raise. But they get no raise from their contractor who gives them the fabric. I don't know other homeworkers who also work for them. It would be better if I know. Their factory is very small. They only have two workers in their factory, plus some part-timers, and the two owners. The highest salary I earned was around \$8 per hour. That was the beginning when I first worked for these employers, when they let me know the piece rate before I sewed. But now they don't tell me the piece

rate before I sew.

Every time I ask them for the piece-rate, they always say they haven't had time to think about it yet. At the beginning they gave me the piece-rate before I sewed. But now they don't. They never tell me the piece-rate until I finish sewing the garments.

In other words, contrary to the common notion that as workers become more experienced and skilled, their wages increase accordingly, homeworkers are being punished for being productive and skillful.

Most workers are paid by cheque every two weeks, and have little problem getting paid. Some receive cash payments occasionally. Several workers did report on late payment or not being paid at all, as this woman told us:

I don't have very serious problems with getting paid. What sometimes may happen is getting late payment. One time there was this employer who owed me about \$500 to \$600. He admitted to it and kept saying sorry. But I still haven't got any pay from him. It was six to seven years ago. He later referred me to another sub-contractor, who sent the fabric from Montreal to his place. So I would go to his place to pick up the fabric and my pay. Another time, he asked me to lend him money. I did. And he has never paid me back. I still see him from time to time, but I do not work for him anymore.

According to the Employment Standards Act of Ontario, homeworkers are entitled to four percent vacation pay, which must be included in the paycheque. They are also entitled to over-time pay if they work more than 44 hours per week. In reality, they are treated by employers as if they were self-employed. My study found that only two workers receive vacation pay; none receive overtime pay. In other words, most,

if not all, employers violate provincial labour standards legislation. In these situations, the women felt that their only recourse, after pursuing the employer repeatedly, was to discontinue work with a particular employer.

In order to be employed as homeworkers, women must own industrial quality sewing machines. All the women we interviewed own their sewing machines. A few also own a serger, which enables them to sew a larger variety of garments. The prices of their machines ranged from \$300 to \$2800, depending on when they purchased them and the type of machine purchased (for example whether it has auto-thread cutting). The woman who paid \$300 for her machine purchased it in 1982 when she began working at home.

Although considered employees under the Ontario labour legislation, homeworkers are nevertheless responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of their machines. The woman who paid \$300 for her machine said that she had been very lucky with hers, which needed very little upkeep until recently. She also had a very good and reasonable repair man, who did not charge a lot for house calls. Another woman, on the other hand, has purchased three sewing machines since she began working at home.

In addition, women pay for other overhead costs such as lighting and hydro. Some women have learned to deduct these expenses from their income tax claim, but others are either unaware that they can do so, or think that claiming expenses is too much work due to their lack of familiarity with English and dealing with bureaucratic procedures. Usually, threads for the garments are supplied by employers. However, one worker has to supply threads for the clothing she sews.

To be homeworkers, women have to have a designated area for their work. Most of the women in the study have a designated work space, usually in the basement of their

homes. However, some women have to share spaces with other family members, such as occupying a corner of the family room. The women who live in apartments use part of the living or dining area for their home work.

Operating a sewing machine is repetitive work that requires attention to details. It is therefore not surprising that most women, like other workers who spend long hours doing something repeatedly, suffer from different kinds of repetitive strain syndrome. By far the greatest complaint is back pain, reported by 15 workers. Four reported on shoulder pain, three neck pain, one knee pain, four numbness in arms, hands, and fingers, and one eye strain. Another health issue concerning homeworkers is allergy due to the dust produced by the fabric in the sewing process. Nine out of the 30 workers reported fairly serious allergies, such as itchiness, rashes, and stuffiness resulting from fabric dust. These findings are consistent with the two surveys conducted by ILGWU in the early 1990s. Whereas allergic reactions were the chief complaints in the 1991 survey, both the 1993 and the present surveys found that back strain is the major concern.

Most women do not tell their employers work-related health problems, because they don't think anything would result from complaining. Homeworkers are explicitly exempt from the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act. This means that they cannot claim compensation from the government in work-related injuries.

The women interviewed use a combination of methods to help alleviate problems associated with their work, including medication, physiotherapy, exercise, and rest. To reduce fabric dust, women vacuum often and keep the work area as dust free as possible. One woman, whose work space is a closet in the basement, closes the door to her work space as much as she can so other family members are not as affected by the dust.

In addition to these physical problems, women talked about the psychological pressure generated by work and family demands. Again, this is consistent with previous studies, as well as studies on women's paid and unpaid work in general. One woman said she even dreamed about sewing when she had to meet a deadline.

Working hours: merging the public and private spheres

It is when we examine the working hours of homeworkers that the romantic myth of homeworking is completely shattered. Although women felt that they could make more money working in factories, especially in unionized plants, women knew that this is not an option. Why?

The single most important reason given by women for homework is child care, or rather the lack of affordable child care. Since wages for garment workers are low, they cannot afford to put their children in daycare centres or to hire private care. From their point of view, homeworking is a reasonable compromise that enables them to combine paid work and child care.

Closely related to child care is the fact that although women's paid work is central to sustaining the family income, they are also responsible for the lion's share of household duties and caregiving for their family. Thus, they must find ways to meet the multiple demands placed on them. It is in this context that homeworking becomes a viable, rather than desirable, alternative for women in the garment trade. The women in the study gave three reasons for preferring homework:

- homework is more flexible ;
- no supervisor and more able to manage own time;
- able to combine paid work with child care.

However, women also express the internal pressure they feel from having to meet the multiple demands of household, family, and employment. Although women are not supervised

directly, they have to meet the deadline set by employers, or they may not be given more work. Almost half (13 out of 30) women work ten- to twelve-hour days on their sewing. Seven work eight to nine hours. Seven work five to six hours. We do not have information on the remaining three workers. The narrative of this homeworker illustrates the pressure women felt combining paid employment and household responsibilities:

I work eight to nine hours a day, about six days a week. My daily schedule usually starts with getting my kids ready for school at about 8:00 a.m., preparing their breakfast. After washing their dishes, I eat something and start working at about 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon. Then I eat something and go back down to work until the kids come back from school at about 3:00 p.m. I would make something for them to eat and get back to work after that until 6:00 p.m. Then I have to start preparing for dinner. If I do not have a rush job, I usually do not go back to the basement and work. But if it's in a rush, I would have to work again after dinner until 1:00 a.m. It's in fact quite often that we have to rush.

The major problem of homeworking is that it blurs the division be-

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tween paid work and family life. Women tend to organize their sewing around the schedules of children and other family members, thus frequently sewing late into the night when they have to meet employer demands. Given a choice, some of the women said that they would prefer to work in a factory, because there is a clear beginning and end to the work day. Some of the problems raised by the homeworkers interviewed are:

- irregular working hours and having to work all the time;
- less focused when sewing because of distraction by household chores and children;
- less stable income;
- feeling confined at home and lack of knowledge of outside world except through the radio.

One homemaker expressed her sentiments thus:

I do not like to work at home. Working outside, I can meet and know more people. I also learn different things. Working at home, I only see my family members. And you don't have much time concept working at home. Sometimes you go to sleep, or watch TV in-between. There is no work routine, I don't like it. When I was young, I liked to go out. I didn't like to hide and confine myself at home. I felt bored. And I felt that when I didn't have a chance to go out and meet more people, I felt out of touch with the society.

Contrary to the two earlier surveys by the ILGWU indicating that family members were frequently involved in helping with homework, most workers in this study do not involve family members in their work. Three workers said their husbands help with delivering the garments. Three have their children help them turn clothes inside out. In fact, many said family members help out minimally in other family duties as well. This means that women carry a double burden, taking almost total responsibility for

waged and unwaged work.

In conclusion, whereas homework may be a dream come true for people in professional occupations and a solution for employers who want to downsize their operations, this work organization has a different impact on working-class immigrant women's lives. My study reveals very clearly that homeworking merges the public and private spheres, creating additional pressures for garment workers who have to juggle the demands of paid work and family responsibilities. They are an increasing number of women in both the first and third worlds, whose waged and unwaged labour provides the underpinning of a globalized economy with profit augmentation as its ultimate goal. The everyday reality of homeworkers in Canada and elsewhere is a poignant reminder that equality and quality of life for working people are never part of the corporate and state agenda for globalization.

This article is based on a presentation given at the symposium, "Women and Their Sewing Machines: From Home to Factory," organized by the Canadian Museum of Civilization on March 7, 1999, in celebration of International Women's Day and the official opening of the "Fabrications: Stitching Ourselves Together" display curated by Kathryn Church and Tina Bates. Data for the article come from a four-year study entitled, "Labour Adjustment and Job Training Programs: Implications for Immigrant Women Workers" funded by the SSHRC Council's Network for New Approaches to Lifelong Learning at OISE/UT. The study was conducted in collaboration with the Ontario District Council of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees and the Homeworkers' Association. I thank Renita Wong, Angela Choi, and Alex Dagg for their invaluable contribution to the project.

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¹For a fuller discussion, see Ng.

²The Homeworkers' Association (HWA) began as an affiliate of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in 1992. In 1995, the ILGWU merged with another union in the garment industry to form UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees). The HWA remained an affiliate of the Ontario District Council of UNITE after the merger.

³The two surveys are "Working Conditions of Chinese-speaking Homeworkers in the Toronto Garment Industry: Summary of the Results of a Survey Conducted by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union" by Barbara Cameron (1991), and "ILGWU 1993 Homeworkers' Study: An Investigation into Wages and Working Conditions of Chinese-Speaking Homeworkers in Metropolitan Toronto" by Jan Borowy (1993).

⁴The minimum wage in Ontario is \$6.85 per hour. Legally, homeworkers should receive ten per cent more than this amount to cover overhead costs, bringing their minimum wage up to \$7.54 per hour. As seen from this calculation, most homeworkers made less than minimum wage.

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