

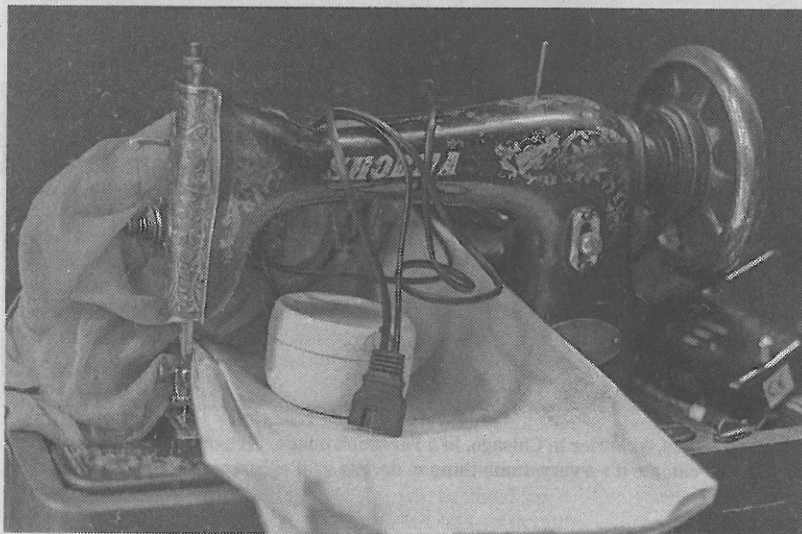
15 cents an hour to meet fashion's needs

BY ELIZABETH PATON

Ever since the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, Western fashion brands have been under pressure to investigate and police their own supply chains. Now, a new report from the University of California, Berkeley, shows just how shadowy those supply lines are, as scores of labels rely not just on factories in India but also on exploited home workers.

India is the world's second-largest manufacturer and exporter of fashion garments after China, with some 13 million people working in factories within its supply chain alone. But millions more are employed in less formal settings and, according to the report — titled “Tainted Garments” and written by Sidharth Kara, an expert on contemporary slavery — many are women and girls from historically oppressed ethnic communities or Muslims who work from home, the majority for long hours and in hazardous conditions, earning as little as 15 cents per hour.

Researchers working with Mr. Kara spoke to 1,452 home workers for the report, published in January, “in the hopes that their otherwise silent voices would be heard and might motivate others to take action to ameliorate the exploitative working conditions many of them endure,” he wrote in the introduction.



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A sewing machine at a home in India. A study on home-based garment workers in India found that 99 percent were paid less than the state-mandated minimum wage.

“Due to the lack of transparency and the informal nature of home-based work, which takes place right at the bottom of the fashion supply chain, the worker has virtually no avenue to seek redress for abusive or unfair conditions,” Mr. Kara said in a phone interview this week. “The situation is wors-

ened by the fact that there is little to no regulation or enforcement from the state regarding their work.”

In South Asia, Mr. Kara added, the informal economy is populated almost entirely by low caste or religious minorities, who lack access to social systems, education and opportunities.

“These people are the most vulnerable of all. They currently have no other choice other than to accept the exploitative labor conditions offered to them by these fashion sub-suppliers,” he said.

Home work — working from home or a small workshop as opposed to in a factory, often for a subcontractor who is then employed by a supplier for an established company or brand — has long been a cornerstone of the fast-fashion supply chain. It is particularly prevalent in countries such as India, Bangladesh, Vietnam and China, where millions of low-paid and predominantly female home workers are among the most unprotected in the industry. However, there is also evidence of exploitation in global fashion more broadly. An investigation into the rights of home workers employed within the shadowy luxury industry in Italy was published by The New York Times last September.

The findings from the University of California report constitute some of the most comprehensive assessments of conditions facing home-based garment workers to date. The report shines fresh light on the harsh realities of the practice, including the use of child and forced labor. In northern India, where most of the 1,452 workers interviewed were located, about 76 percent started their
INDIA, PAGE 8

15 cents an hour to produce garments

INDIA, FROM PAGE 7

home-based work because of "some form of duress," including severe financial hardship, family pressure or lack of alternate income. The youngest individual interviewed was 10 years old; up to 19 percent of the workers were between 10 and 18 years old.

Most of the women and girls interviewed for the report said they are tasked with the "finishing touches" of a garment: embroidery, tasseling, fringing, beadwork and buttons. None belonged to a trade union or had a written agreement for their work, and more than 99 percent were paid less than the state-stipulated minimum wage under Indian law. Minimum wage for an eight-hour work day ranges from the equivalent of \$3.08 (39 cents per hour for unskilled work in the state of Rajasthan) to \$8.44 (\$1.05 per hour for work in New Delhi). According to the report, most home workers received between 50 percent and 90 percent less than they were owed. And approximately 85 percent ex-

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clusively worked in supply chains for the export of apparel products to the United States and the European Union.

"Their days amount to little more than running the home and working as many hours as they can to meet these orders, cooped up inside," Mr. Kara said, noting that injury and chronic illness, including back pain and diminishing eyesight, were common complaints as a result of the monotonous work.

"We cannot leave this work, even though we are treated so badly. If we leave this work, the company will never give us work again," said one 36-year-old garment worker from near Jaipur whose account was detailed in the report. None of those interviewed were named, for fear that they would lose their livelihoods or their families would be punished for speaking out. The women said that labor subcontractors, who typically are male, were often verbally abusive or intimidating to secure compliance.

The report also stated that few of the brands or companies who employ these workers in their supply chain were aware that this work was being outsourced to home workers, or of the conditions many home workers faced. Foreign brands found to be involved — "largely household names," said Mr. Kara — were not named in the report in an effort to discourage them from pulling out of contracts or from limiting economic opportunity.

"We could name and shame them, but it could be more successful to try and take a more constructive avenue here," Mr. Kara said. "These women and girls may only earn pennies but they are crucial ones. If the brands simply pulled out and they lost their home work, it could be disastrous for them and their families."