

## **DISCORDANT VOICES: THE HIDDEN WORLD OF JOHANNESBURG'S INNER CITY CLOTHING WORKERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to examine the working conditions of the new informal proletariat—or precariat—that has emerged in the clothing industry in the inner city of Johannesburg. Drawing on the results of in-depth interviews and nonparticipatory observation, we provide a portrait of these workers. We describe the impact of international competition on the clothing industry and show how the production of clothing has changed in the inner city of Johannesburg in the province of Gauteng, South Africa. We argue that a four-tiered employment structure has emerged, with four main types of clothing enterprises in the area, each linked differently into the value chain for the manufacture of clothing, offering different working conditions, and experiencing different challenges. The enterprises that offer the least security are survivalist cut-make-and-trims (CMTs) in which the precariat, consisting of predominantly foreign male clothing workers, work in enterprises that are the least connected to the value chain for the manufacture of clothing. We describe the largely unsuccessful attempts made by the clothing workers' union to close the representational gap by organising informal workers in the inner city. We conclude by suggesting that any strategy for upgrading the industry must not only focus on economically upgrading the value chain but also needs to develop a strategy to improve the working and living conditions of the workers. This will require taking on board the concerns of those who occupy the hidden world of the clothing industry in the inner city.

## INTRODUCTION

Yau starts his day at 5am in Orange Farm, where he catches a minibus taxi to go to work in inner city Johannesburg. Here, amongst fellow Malawian immigrants, he sews jackets in one of the small cut-make-and-trims (CMTs). Like many other CMTs housed in the cramped rooms of the dilapidated building where he works, Yau's CMT is struggling. Yau makes an average of U.S.\$50 per week to support his wife and child, U.S.\$15 of which he uses for transport to and from work. The job does not entitle him to any benefits. Yau hopes that he will be able to access loans so that he can buy enough material to establish his own business. But the enterprise that he currently works for is not registered and it will be difficult for it to obtain a loan.

This is the story of many people working in the clothing industry in inner city Johannesburg, where competition is tight and customers are few. Some factory owners reminisce about the heyday of the district, which was once a thriving hub for the clothing industry in South Africa. Large full-package manufacturers (FPMs), which performed the entire manufacturing process of clothing, dominated the industry and provided employment for thousands of machinists. Today, FPMs are few and the industry is decentralised, with hundreds of small, unregulated, and informal CMTs characterising the industry.

The CMTs that have multiplied in the inner city are either used as subcontractors by larger factories or supply small retail outlets directly. Forced by international competition into the periphery of the industry, they operate in abandoned or "hijacked" buildings in South Africa's inner city. The so-called "Fashion District" in Johannesburg's inner city is one such example.

Johannesburg's inner city "Fashion District" covers 34 blocks in the Johannesburg Central Business District (CBD) and consists of over 1,000 small and medium-sized enterprises, most of which are in the clothing industry. Visually, the district is vibrant and diverse. In the countless small rooms in tall buildings, businesses range from informal driving school offices and nursery schools to traditional healers and CMTs, which sew custom-made garments, bridal gowns, and traditional African dresses, while on the mosaic-patterned pavements, hawkers cook and sell food, informal hairdressing salons offer haircuts, people collect paper for recycling, and women stuff cushions with mattress foam cut-offs.

The Fashion District emerged when the clothing industry moved away from its protectionist past toward a more open and integrated economy (Naumann, 2002; Skinner & Valodia, 2002). From the 1960s to the late 1980s, the South African economy—including the clothing manufacturing industry—was insulated from the global marketplace. The apartheid government had introduced a range of import substitution industries and policies aimed at developing the internal manufacturing industry. One of the main instruments was the use of tariffs. For the clothing and textile industries, high tariff walls effectively prevented imports

penetrating the local marketplace or putting any pressures on local industry. Sanctions, too, helped protect the industry from global pressures (Bennett, 2003).

As the clothing and textile industries had been amongst the most highly protected of South Africa's industries, enterprises from 1994 onward faced intense pressure to become more competitive and cut costs. In 1994, South Africa became a signatory to the Marrakech General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement, in which the country agreed to embark upon a massive liberalization of tariffs on manufactured goods, including those produced by the clothing and textile sectors. Inefficiency and corruption in South Africa's customs administration intensified the impact of tariff liberalization. Large quantities of clothing, mainly from the Far East and from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, entered the country without any duties being levied at all, or without the relevant "rules of origin" being adhered to (Bennett, 2003). An estimated 80,000 clothing workers lost their jobs in the 1990s as cheaper clothing and textiles were imported from East Asia (Budlender, 2009).

Under the impact of liberalisation, labour's collective power was weakened by the fragmentation of the labour market through decentralisation of production, casualisation, part-time work, and the accompanying outsourcing of workers to a third party. Guy Standing (2010) has described this trend in the labour market as the growth of a precariat. "Below the core are the new legions of the precariat," writes Standing, "flitting between jobs, unsure of their occupational title, with little labour security, few enterprise benefits and tenuous access to state benefits. They include the more fortunate of the vast informal economy. . . . [but they] lack employment security, being in jobs usually regarded by employers as short-term or casual, and seen that way by those doing the work. Often they have no employment contract, or if they do it is casual" (Standing, 2010: 110). Following the International Labour Organization, we define work in the informal economy in terms of the precarious nature of the employment relationship, i.e., to include not only self-employed workers but also casual, part-time, temporary, and outsourced workers that may be employed in registered formal enterprises (Devey, Skinner, & Valodia, 2006).

The main effect of the emergence of this precariat was to reduce wage costs, especially indirect costs, through the lack of benefits. As Castells and Portes (1989: 30) argue, "By lowering the cost of labour and reducing the state-imposed constraints on its free hiring and dismissal, the informal economy contributes directly to the profitability of capital." It also, Castells and Portes continue, undermines the power of organised labour in all spheres: economic bargaining, social organisation, and political influence: undeclared, unprotected labour; small units of production; networks rather than socialised labour processes; homework rather than work in factories; unstable relations of production; multiple intermediaries between labour and capital; segmentation of labour along age, gender, and ethnic lines; dependence of the job upon the absence of legal control

(Castells & Portes, 1989). All these factors, they conclude, “contribute to the de-collectivization of the labour process and to the reversal of the material conditions that historically allowed the emergence of the labour movement as an organised force” (Castells & Portes, 1989: 31).

It also, they argue, blurs class differences through the emergence of intermediaries. There are still exploiters and exploited, hierarchical work relationships, and submissive work, yet between the structural logic of production and appropriation of the product and the actual social organization of these processes, there are so many mediations that the experience of labor and the emergence of stable class positions do not correspond to each other anymore. Thus, the woman sewing at home for a “friend of the family,” who is a middleman selling to a commercial intermediary of a large department store, cannot be socially equated, nor does she equate herself, with a garment-factory worker (Castells & Portes, 1989).

Finally, Castells and Portes argue, the heterogeneity of working situations is generally reinforced by the specific characteristics of the workers who tend to be involved in the informal economy—women, immigrant workers, ethnic minorities, and the young. “It is in this sense that the process of informalisation tends to reinforce some specific social groupings that differ markedly from those associated with stable class lines” (Castells & Portes, 1989: 32).

The aim of this article is to examine the working conditions of the new informal proletariat—or precariat—that has emerged in the clothing industry in the inner city of Johannesburg. We argue that a four-tiered employment structure has emerged, with four main types of clothing enterprises in the area, each linked differently into the value chain for the manufacture of clothing, offering different working conditions and experiencing different challenges. The enterprises that offer the least security are survivalist cut-make-and-trims (CMTs), in which the precariat, consisting of predominantly foreign male clothing workers, work in enterprises that are the least connected to the value chain for the manufacture of clothing.

Drawing on the results of in-depth interviews and nonparticipant observation, this article provides a portrait of work in the clothing industry in Johannesburg. We began our research in 2007 by interviewing 21 workers in different types of clothing enterprises in the inner city of Johannesburg. In 2011, we revisited the area and conducted in-depth interviews with a further 18 workers. These face-to-face interviews were conducted at clothing factories and places where workers ate lunch. From the results of the interviews it was possible to establish workers’ conditions of work according to different characteristics of their employment, regardless of whether they work in formal or informal enterprises (Bonnet, Figueiredo, & Standing, 2003). In addition, a clothing enterprise profile provided us with a micro-level understanding of the shortcomings and advantages of different enterprises in the inner city.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with nine key informants from the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union (SACTWU), and with experts on the industry, a training manager, and government officials. Further

in-depth interviews were conducted with seven CMT owners, nine factory owners, three clothing designers, and a design house owner in the area.

The article is divided into two parts: in Part One we provide a background history of the clothing industry in South Africa, focusing on the impact of the increase in international competition and workplace restructuring and relocation post-1994. In Part Two, four categories of clothing enterprises in inner city Johannesburg are described, each with different linkages into the value chain for the manufacture of clothing, and each with workers who have different working conditions, different levels of unionisation, and different needs. We describe the attempts made by the clothing workers' union to close the representational gap by organising informal workers in the inner city.

Similar to Barrientos, Gereffi, & Rossi, (2010), we argue that studies using value chain analysis have focused mainly on making firms more competitive, often overlooking working conditions and the rights of workers. We conclude by suggesting ways in which the four-tiered clothing industry in the inner city could be revitalised and the value chain upgraded, not only economically but also socially through challenging the decent work deficit and giving these workers an institutional voice.

### **PART ONE: RESTRUCTURING AND THE CLOTHING VALUE CHAIN IN THE INNER CITY**

Before 1994, the clothing industry was highly protected, focusing on import substitution and predominantly producing low value-added clothing for the local market (Vlok, 2006). With the ending of apartheid, and membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the South African clothing economy was opened to international trade. During the late 1990s and the early years of the following decade, exports of low value-added products increased and the industry remained competitive against imports (Vlok, 2006). In part this was the result of an undervalued Rand and the incentivizing Duty Credit Certificate Scheme.

However, with the appreciation of the Rand after 2002 and the influx of Chinese imports, the industry entered its third phase, characterized by unprecedented job loss and reduction of production capacity (Clarke & Godfrey, 2011; Vlok, 2006; Wood, 2001). Currently the industry is battling to compete and to maintain employment levels. The trend with regard to global clothing production networks is that higher skill functions such as those involved in international branding houses are located in countries in the North, while low skill functions such as those found in CMTs are generally located in countries in the South (Anner et al., 2006). Global competition between different CMTs over tenders linking them into these global production networks is tight and usually depends on who can offer the most competitive price in relation to quality. This price hinges on the only flexible input: the cost of labour. In the global apparel industry, the costs of labour are a small proportion of the total costs in the production of clothing. On average, wages constitute less than one-half of 1% of the retail price of branded sweatshirts (Miller & Williams, 2009).

In her assessment of the South African clothing sector, Miriam Altman (1994) asserts that the South African clothing industry is unable to compete with cheaper Asian clothing imports on the basis of price, due to the low cost of labour in Asian countries and therefore the low cost of production with which they achieve a competitive advantage. While it is true that South Africa's clothing industry is battling to compete on the basis of low wages, the low prices of Chinese goods are also due to the fact that the textile and clothing industries in China receive generous state subsidies. Thirty-two percent of enterprises in the clothing/textile industry in China in 2001 were state-owned, with a growing trend of government spending and lending to combat the current financial crisis, while many private sector clothing factories receive tax subsidies, favourable input prices, and preferential loans and grants (Capital Trade Incorporated, 2009; Mbaye & Weiyong, 2008; Wines, 2010).

South Africa's clothing and textile imports are growing significantly faster than its exports. China is the most important source of clothing imports, making up about 74.3% of imports, while India is the second largest importer at 5.4% and Hong Kong is third at 4.6%, while imports from other African countries are shrinking to the detriment of regional development (Vlok, 2006). Official data underestimate the level of imports, due to under-invoicing and other forms of illegal importation such as changing the labels of origin. The level of illegal imports has been conservatively estimated at between 10% and 30% of total clothing and textile sales. According to Vlok (2006: 243), "even at 10% of domestic production this would amount to 15,000 jobs."

In response to competition in international and local markets post-1996, many South African factories downsized through retrenchments or closed down altogether. Other factories relocated, either to rural areas in South Africa where Bargaining Council wage rates are lower than in urban areas, or to countries such as Botswana, which offer government incentives such as subsidised wages for the first five years and fabrics brought in from neighbouring countries are not charged import duty. The largest clothing factory in Gauteng, the province in which Johannesburg is situated, which employed about 600 workers, moved to Lesotho in 2003, where, according to one factory owner, "there are no unions or any of that nonsense and wage rates are very low."

Through the restructuring of the industry, the value chain for the production of clothing is becoming more and more decentralised, with retail chains and big branding houses controlling the network of links between small, "informal economy" CMTs, FPMs, and "formal economy" CMTs.

## **PART TWO: WORKING IN THE FASHION DISTRICT**

Factories in inner city Johannesburg are generally linked to small, primarily domestic value chains, and there are few production links from larger factories in the district to value chains and few production links from larger

factories in the district to the micro-enterprises in surrounding areas. For the most part, factories in inner city Johannesburg are neither export-oriented nor linked to international brand names (with the exception of some exporting links to other African countries such as Angola). Many CMTs and other enterprises in the inner city produce corporate and marketing clothing, traditional African clothing, and bridal wear, in high-end fashion boutiques, while the largest factories manufacture clothing for a large branding house that owns a number of retail chains, the Edcon group.

### **Enterprises and Workers in the Inner City**

Four main types of FPMs and CMTs were identified in inner city Johannesburg. These enterprises are categorised according to their links to the value chain (market access) and the conditions of work in these enterprises in the enterprise profile, as illustrated in Table 1.

Interviews with workers in these different types of enterprises demonstrate that worker insecurity (the process of precarianisation) tends to increase from enterprise Type 1 to Type 4 as the enterprises become increasingly detached from the formal chain/s of production (as indicated by the arrow in Table 1). Conditions of employment in Type 1 (FPMs) and Type 2 (connected CMTs) are covered by the Bargaining Council, a statutory body representing employers and unions designed to set employment standards in the clothing industry. The result is that these enterprises have more regular working hours and standard employment relationships (SERs). We would locate the precariat in Type 3 (piecework CMTs) and Type 4 (survivalist CMTs), as workers in these enterprises lack employment security and enterprise benefits and are casually employed. In Type 3 (piecework CMTs), the individualisation of compensation through piecework erodes the sense of common worker interest. While the blurring of the employer-employee relationship in Type 4 (survivalist CMTs) leads to a sense of workplace solidarity, it similarly erodes workers' sense of class opposition to the employer. The result is that trade unions have made little headway in these enterprises. Below is a description of the workers in each type of enterprise.

#### **Type 1: Workers in Full-Package Manufacturers (FPMs)**

In recent years, the number of FPMs operating in the Fashion District has decreased, due to factory closures and relocations to areas where wage rates are cheaper (e.g., rural areas within South Africa or Swaziland, Lesotho and Botswana). The remaining FPMs perform the entire manufacturing process of clothing, occasionally outsourcing parts of the work to large CMTs when orders are too big to finish on time. FPMs are well linked into the value chain for clothing, and are registered and regulated. However, since the value chain is buyer-driven, FPMs are still controlled by the buyers (the branding houses, retail chains, etc.) and subject to tight competition. FPMs supply large retail chain stores, corporate

Table 1. Profile of Clothing Enterprises in Inner City Johannesburg

Type of enterprise	Links to the value chain	Workers	Precarianisation
1. FPMS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connected to value chain</li> <li>- Receive regular orders from large retail chains, branding houses, designers, and corporate companies</li> <li>- Registered and regulated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bargaining Council wages</li> <li>- Regular working hours</li> <li>- Unionised</li> <li>- Mostly local workers</li> <li>- Standard employment relationship (SER)</li> </ul>	<p>Increasing precariousness</p>
2. Connected CMTs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connected to value chain</li> <li>- Linked to a design house, or to a designer, or subcontracted by a larger FPM</li> <li>- Usually registered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bargaining Council wages</li> <li>- Regular working hours</li> <li>- Not unionised</li> <li>- Local and foreign workers</li> <li>- SER</li> </ul>	
3. Piecework CMTs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rely on irregular orders</li> <li>- Registered/unregistered</li> <li>- Supply designers, small retail chains, and corporate companies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Paid per piece (piecework)</li> <li>- Irregular hours</li> <li>- Not unionised</li> <li>- Local and foreign workers</li> <li>- Casual employment</li> </ul>	
4. Survivalist CMTs and other Micro-enterprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Detached from formal value chain</li> <li>- Supply small retail stores, street traders, and individual customers</li> <li>- Unregistered and unregulated</li> <li>- Cannot access loans or tender for contracts because they are not registered for VAT</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor, irregular wages</li> <li>- Irregular hours</li> <li>- Not unionised</li> <li>- Mostly foreign workers</li> <li>- Casual employment, often with close-knit ties (family or friends)</li> <li>- Strong sense of entrepreneurship</li> <li>- Blurring of employer-employee relationship</li> </ul>	



companies, and a few independent boutiques through large-scale tenders over which they compete based on quality, price, delivery time, and design (often in collaboration with the branding company).

Most workers in these FPMs are unionised, work regular hours, and are paid according to the Bargaining Council minimum wages. Nonetheless, many of the interviewees from these factories were disillusioned and frustrated with their wages, which did not stretch far enough:

I am looking to other less hectic things. . . . Here we run around like headless chickens and earn nothing.

There is not enough money. . . . I have just been wasting my time for 19 years and still they have not changed my job as a machinist in the factory. I only realise I am wasting my time now.

I work only for food and transport. I cannot reach it all. I have worked in this for 15 years now and I do not even have my own house anymore. I can only afford to rent.

This could be an indication that as the South African clothing industry shrinks with foreign competition, so does people's desire to work in the industry. It became apparent that many of the younger workers had recently begun working in the clothing factories and expressed the desire to move into different jobs when the opportunity arose:

I am not going to work in this factory for many years. This is not my dream job and I am still young.

We get peanuts here and although it is better than nothing it is not enough. I am still young and I have got skills. I will move on.

This was fine for my mother in her age, but now the standard of living is higher and it demands more education and money. I must still finish matric—it is an obligation.

Young people entering the labour market seem to have higher aspirations than to enter a demanding factory job with low pay and high levels of job insecurity resulting from factory closures and downsizing. Many of the women in their 40s and 50s working in the FPMs had worked in the same factory for up to 19 years, performing the same job without any opportunity for career advancement. In large part, this is because of limited opportunities in a relatively stagnant industry.

Despite their disillusionment, these workers have the most secure jobs in clothing enterprises in the inner city of Johannesburg. Most of them said that it is difficult to find a job like theirs because there are so many people looking for jobs, and it would be difficult if they were to lose their jobs. Five of the female workers interviewed had up to 10 dependents because they were providing for a sister's children as well as their own, illustrating the pressure on these workers as the breadwinners for their households.

### **Type 2: Workers in Connected Cut-Make-and-Trims**

The second type of enterprises, connected CMTs, are linked into the formal clothing production chains. In all cases in the Fashion District, we found that these CMTs were producing clothing for niche designer markets in South Africa, and in rare cases for international markets (e.g., the Maldives, the Seychelles). Most of these CMTs had a built-in “design house” component, which is where their competitive advantage lay. They were owned by South Africans or foreigners and hired both South African women and Malawian, Zimbabwean, and Mozambican men. Most of these CMTs were registered.

We found that the majority of the interviewees working in these CMTs were not unionised, but they had regular hours, had indefinite contracts, and were paid around or above the agreed Bargaining Council minimum wages. In these enterprises there was a perception that belonging to the clothing union, SACTWU, was expensive, could make things worse, and had not helped underpaid workers in clothing factories in the past. One worker, aware of the competition for stable jobs like hers, said, “I hold this job like eggs because I know that if I lose this job I am going to suffer.”

A designer working in a small CMT with its own retail outlet noted that “you cannot start your own business because of the costs involved and it is tough to get into other businesses because there is a lot of competition.” One worker who has been working in the clothing industry for 11 years said that previously it was easy to find a job, and “you could walk to the factory next door and find another job like yours if you did not like your job, but now it is so hard to find a job because everyone is looking.” This is an indication that the labour market is difficult to enter because there is a surplus of labour and a limited number of jobs available.

We found that workers in these enterprises were aware of the fact that China sets the price for clothing. Even if the prices of textiles, food, petrol, and electricity had gone up, the sale price of the garment that their factory made would stay the same, and therefore they said that they did not expect a wage increase from their bosses. Of particular concern was the high cost of transport, which sometimes accounts for one-quarter of a worker’s weekly wage. The legacy of apartheid geography continues to separate places of work from places of residence, resulting in heavy transport costs for many workers. One of the workers, who lives in Vereeniging, nearly 60 kilometres away, earns U.S.\$51.25 per week. If she catches the train (a reportedly unreliable and dangerous mode of transport), she pays U.S.\$15 per month. She gets into trouble at work if she is late and has her wages deducted because the trains often run late. If she catches a taxi it costs her U.S.\$5 per day (U.S.\$25 a week, which is about half her weekly wage).

### **Type 3: Workers in Piecework Cut-Make-and-Trims**

The third type of CMT does not usually have a “design house” component and relies on orders from local designers, retail chains, and corporate companies who

award the contract based on fast turnaround times and good quality. Yet we found that the tenders were much smaller than those for the FPMs, and the pattern and material for the required clothing was provided by the buyer, making these enterprises CMTs, not FPMs.

Workers in these enterprises are not unionised. They are paid per piece, and as a result their income and their working hours are irregular, with workers often working through the night to complete orders on time. One self-employed interviewee, who owns and runs a CMT, said, “There is too much stress here. Sometimes we sleep here overnight when it is too busy but sometimes there is no business for the whole month.”

Both the owners and the majority of the workers in the enterprises in which we conducted interviews were males. The concentration of men is the result of the entry of relatively skilled foreign male migrants into the South African labour market.

The foreign-owned, unregulated, and noncompliant CMTs, which pay their workers per piece, are seen as unfair competitors by compliant South African CMT owners. One local CMT owner (enterprise Type 2), who complies with the set Bargaining Council minimum wages, indicated that he is battling to compete because he takes only a 30% mark-up, while the foreign-owned CMTs take a 100% mark-up on each garment because they pay their workers R15 per completed garment and receive R30 per unit from the customer.

Another challenge for many foreign workers in piecework and survivalist CMTs is that they live or work in the “hijacked” buildings in the area. These buildings are easy to identify, with their rundown facades with peeling paint, crumbling walls, broken windows, and dingy entrances. Usually, the property owner has left the country and abandoned the building, neglecting to pay for electricity, water, or maintenance. Sometimes corrupt managing agents “hired to squeeze out rents” collect huge profits by overcrowding rooms and therefore accelerate the “downward spiral of ruin and decay” (Murray, 2011: 147–148). In other cases, people “hijack” the buildings by illegally charging unauthorised squatters rent if they want to stay in them. Along with this “hijacking” comes a complex process of illegal ownership of these buildings and control over them.

Many of the people living in these buildings are undocumented foreigners who have been forced to migrate to South Africa to escape political turmoil and economic crisis in their home countries. Foreign migrants are attractive to employers because they are more vulnerable and are often more willing to work for lower wages and to work longer hours than local workers. A recent Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) survey showed that 49% of the respondents in such buildings share a toilet with over 100 people and 84.5% are living below the standards of minimum crowding, pointing toward a health crisis in inner city Johannesburg, which the survey links to high rates of dermatological and respiratory illnesses (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2010). MSF has identified 82

overcrowded buildings in inner city Johannesburg in which an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 people, mostly foreigners, live.

#### **Type 4: Workers in Survivalist Cut-Make-and-Trims**

The fourth type of enterprise is detached from the formal value chain of production and is neither linked to a design house nor do they obtain any orders. These are the most common types of CMTs in the Fashion District. We found that the majority of these survivalist CMTs in our study were owned by foreign males, employed foreign males, and housed their employees in small rooms in high-rise buildings in the inner city. Although affordable, such rooms are cramped, stuffy, and dimly lit.

Due to the fact that these CMTs in our study usually consisted of fewer than five people, a closeness seemed to have developed between the workers and their employer. When they spoke about the business, the workers and the self-employed entrepreneurs who hired them spoke as though all of the people in the CMT made up a unit, which “works as a community” to make a profit and to help each other. One of the CMTs run by a Malawian male had five other male workers in it, all of whom were immigrant workers and friends. All of the workers received a wage, but the closeness of their relationship to their employer meant that contracts seemed unnecessary for employment security. None of these workers were unionised.

The customers of such enterprises are individuals. These enterprises sell clothes either through word of mouth or through the small Pakistani clothing shops lining the streets of the Fashion District. One man who supports six dependents said, “It is difficult. You have to sew and then go out there and talk—market yourself, in the hope of making a sale.” One struggling entrepreneur was uncertain about his future, noting that “business is difficult.” Two main reasons why these CMTs are unable to expand is that they are unable to register for VAT, which would enable them to submit tenders for contracts and they are unable to obtain loans to expand their businesses. Both of these limitations are linked to the status of the workers and owners associated with such CMTs as foreigners, often undocumented. One Malawian man illustrated this sense of isolation when he remarked, “No one supports us—we are foreigners . . . We don’t have the papers.”

The exclusionary power of authority, as demonstrated by foreigners’ lack of access to most formal banking services and the abuse of this lack of access by police officers who often refer to foreigners as “mobile ATMs,” coupled with the xenophobia of locals, gives foreigners “a deep existential apprehension over the meaning of belonging” (Landau, 2009: 203–204). This also explains the suspicion that foreigners (especially undocumented foreigners) may harbour of trade unions in the workplace as organisations that may bring them closer to the authorities.

Both the workers in these Type 4 enterprises and the owners of these enterprises make very little money, sometimes less than U.S.\$31.25 per week per worker.

Considering that transport costs sometimes amount to U.S.\$15 a week, this is very low. However, many foreigners working in the industry live in the high rise buildings in inner city Johannesburg rather than in the townships on the outskirts of the city; therefore their transport costs are usually lower than those of local South Africans. On the other hand, local South Africans working in the clothing industry often have a pooled household income that also includes social grants such as a child grant, a pension, or a disability grant. Foreigners do not have access to government social grants, which reduces their potential pooled household income.

#### **Comparing Workers in Clothing Enterprise Types 1 to 4**

Security in terms of wages and regular working hours tends to decrease from enterprise Type 1 to Type 4. However, interestingly, many workers in smaller CMTs indicated that they believed their future in their job was promising and that they were learning different skills, which they would be able to use in different jobs. They believed that the CMTs in which they worked were growing and would become increasingly successful. This can be explained by the fact that an increase in profit in such enterprises is a mutual achievement from which everyone can benefit. This is especially the case in those CMTs in which the employees are closely knit circles of friends and possibly even family members.

Most respondents running their own CMTs were hopeful that their businesses would grow (“It is in my heart” and “I am definitely going places”). They were confident that it would not be easy for other people to take over their jobs because they were the ones teaching the other workers in the CMT how to sew and come up with ideas. One of the employees in a CMT said that she has a good future in her job because “I will adjust to what they are looking for as I am hoping to grow into it and expand with the company.” Although workers in the CMTs earned little money and had no medical aid, holiday breaks, or leave, overall job satisfaction (a component of job security) was higher amongst CMT workers than it was amongst workers in FPMs.

Many workers that we interviewed in the FPMs were negative and frustrated about their careers and their ability to transfer their skills, as they had remained in the same job for up to 19 years with no promotions. Unfortunately, for workers working in a larger factory, an increase in the profit made by the factory does not necessarily directly affect them and their career. As one young machinist observed, “The women here have worked in this place for too long and it has shortened their minds. They have low self-esteem and do not believe that they can do better than this. If you are negative in everything no one can invest anything in you.” Although workers in FPMs had better working conditions, their opportunities for career advancement and, linked to it, work satisfaction, were fewer than those of workers in CMTs, who gained job satisfaction from their

experience as independent entrepreneurs but often had insufficient work and poor working conditions.

The area (inner city Johannesburg and its outskirts, New Doornfontein) is unsafe. Five of the workers said that they felt unsafe at work. Some mentioned that the water is dirty and their factory is dusty and unclean. One interviewee explained that “there are robberies at the factory. They come in, we get held up, and they take all of our phones and everything. Crime is the highest in Doornfontein. Sometimes they hit the car windows on the corner here and take the stuff. It is not right at all here. . . . You must be careful.” Another interviewee explained that it is very unsafe in the factory where she works because of electrical problems: “Sometimes these big shocks come down from the ceiling.”

Many interviewees also pointed toward health problems associated with their work. These include tuberculosis (TB) from flaky material, spinal cord problems from sitting with a bent back, leg aches from standing all day, and fumes and dust causing asthma. Arguably, health and safety risks are higher in unregulated enterprises, which are often cramped, cannot afford security and other safety measures, and fall under the radar of the Department of Labour’s Occupational Health and Safety inspectors.

Another area where there was a deficit in decent work, particularly in the FPMs, was in skills reproduction security (SRS). One worker indicated that working conditions in the factory in which she worked would improve if the owners tried to “help the staff pay for training and courses.” She indicated that currently staff must save up for the courses and pay the full amount, but if the employers just paid half of that amount it “would make it easier for everybody to improve themselves and learn.”

A key difference between the workers in FPMs and those in CMTs is that all of the workers we interviewed who work in FPMs are South African citizens, while the majority of workers we interviewed in the CMTs are foreigners, mostly men from Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique, and Botswana. This is to be expected, given the conclusion, drawing from work done by Kagiso Urban Management, “that pockets of inner city Johannesburg are 60% foreign” (Landau, 2009: 199). What is striking is that both South Africans and foreigners working in the CMTs said that there are no organisations, even apart from the union, representing their work interests. The only community groups that any of the interviewees belong to are religious congregations at churches and in two cases, at a mosque.

Nzayabino (2010) suggests that religion has particular relevance for the lives of migrants, as is shown by the fact that migrants become more receptive to religion in host communities than in their home countries. For migrants in inner city Johannesburg, churches have a particular pull because they offer social recognition, a “new spiritual form of citizenship” in a global community in the midst of a hostile South African citizenry, as well as concrete opportunities for economic mobility in a largely exclusionary capitalist economy (Jeannerat, 2009; Landau, 2009; Vasquez, 2009). As Nzayabino (2010: 5) indicates, pastors and fellow

church members are the first port of call for immigrants in need of employment: “it is often in this way refugees have managed to find jobs or contacts to obtain a foothold in the business market in Johannesburg.”

This was confirmed by some of our respondents in the inner city, who belonged to a variety of faith-based organisations (FBOs). They saw their FBOs as primarily performing a spiritual function and stressed the fact that they are not business organisations. However, it is clear that for members of FBOs, these organisations play a central role in integrating newcomers into city life. In particular, our respondents emphasized the help FBOs give members in finding jobs and accommodation. Job vacancies are often announced at the FBO and in some cases FBOs are able to provide access to both jobs and accommodation. Some FBOs assist members to access social grants and official documents such as birth certificates and identity books. FBOs also facilitate contact between members and their home countries or villages through providing a free land line telephone. Respondents described a system of informal banking designed to overcome their lack of trust in the formal banking system in their home countries. One respondent described how she trusted only members of her church to remit money home on her behalf.

As expected, unionisation in the inner city is much higher amongst workers in the FPMs than amongst workers in other types of enterprise. Of the 14 workers interviewed who worked at FPMs, 12 were unionised. In contrast, of the 19 workers who worked at CMTs, only one was unionised. One explanation for this is that FPMs are usually larger than CMTs and are established through their links in formal production chains, making their workers easier to identify and organise. On the other hand, CMTs, especially the survivalist type, are smaller and their workers often work irregular hours, making them more difficult to locate and organise.

Recently, SACTWU has begun to recognise the different needs of these workers and has introduced new organisational strategies and modes of representation (Skinner, 2006). In order to attract home-based workers to join the union, SACTWU now offers a number of “carrots.” These include easily accessible clinics, optometrists, and dentists as part of SACTWU’s healthcare provision. Medical aid, funeral benefits, the provision of HIV/AIDS testing, education, and a pilot antiretroviral (ARV) programme have also been negotiated at the Bargaining Council during wage negotiations. In addition, education bursary programmes, under which workers’ children can study at any recognised tertiary institution, have been implemented. In order to finance all of these benefits, contributions are made by the employer and sometimes also by workers as part of their union membership fees. SACTWU also assists owners and managers of CMTs by providing services such as managing account books in order to ensure that the CMTs are conforming with the law.

In spite of the resources SACTWU has put into organising nonstandard employees and small enterprises, the obstacles to organising informal workers

remain formidable. Four obstacles have been identified by SACTWU according to a union informant: firstly, there is the ability of small enterprises “to pack up and move the next day in order to evade union membership.” Secondly, there is the blurring of the employer-employee relationship as “many of the managers are also sitting at the machines working alongside the other workers.” As a result “there is a different type of loyalty to the manager in such a factory. Often the designers are also the employers.” Thirdly, many home workers are resistant to unions because they feel they are better off working from home where they do not pay taxes and do not have to pay travel costs. In some cases they are also disillusioned with unions because of unions’ failure to defend their rights. Finally, informal workers are often difficult to unionise as they often work irregular hours. “They may have to work this week. Suddenly they might start working in the evenings to finish off orders but then next week there is no one there because there is no work. This makes them difficult to locate and track down to organise. A recruiter might go there today and tomorrow there is no one there because there is no work.”

### **CONCLUSION: UPGRADING THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY IN INNER CITY JOHANNESBURG**

We have identified a four-tiered employment structure in the clothing industry in the inner city of Johannesburg, with four types of clothing enterprises, each linked differently into the value chain, with different needs and working conditions. We conclude the article by identifying the different challenges the four types of enterprises face.

At the macro-level there are challenges that need to be addressed for the benefit of all four types of enterprises. The current economic climate in South Africa is characterised by high unemployment and, linked to it, a labour market characterised by low skill levels. In this climate, upgrading any industry is a challenge. Despite this, the clothing industry does have the potential for job creation due to the labour intensive, low skill requirements of the industry. Along with other manufacturing sectors, clothing has been earmarked as a priority sector in the government’s 2011/2012–2013/2014 industrial policy planning, due to its potential for growth and employment multipliers in the economy (Department of Trade and Industry, 2011).

Much of the potential success of the clothing industry relates to the competitiveness of the industry locally and internationally. In the local market, the sale of illegal clothing imports (mostly from Asian countries) is extensive due to under-invoicing and other forms of illegal importation such as changing the labels of origin. Official data conservatively estimate the level of illegal imports in the local market at between 10% and 30% of all clothing and textile sales. This poses a huge challenge to local manufacturers, with about 15,000 jobs lost per 10% illegal import penetration into the domestic market (Vlok, 2006).



Additionally, the implementation of preferential procurement policy locally (e.g., involving local retailers, government contracts) is poor, severely affecting the market access of clothing enterprises in the industry. Although it is a primarily low skill sector, skills upgrading is necessary in higher-end clothing products, often involving the operation of complex and costly imported machinery. This is a challenge that is being taken up in part by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) with the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) for the clothing, textile, footwear, and leathers sector and the DTI's Innovation and Technology Programme for the industry. Groups that should be targeted for skills upgrading in the industry are artisans (such as pattern-makers), senior managers, professionals, technicians, and skilled trade workers, such as machine mechanics.

The DTI programmes and strategies for the clothing industry under the 2011/2012–2013/2014 Department of Trade and Industry Industrial Policy Action Plan, particularly the Clothing, Textiles, Footwear and Leather Competitiveness Programme (CTCP), the Illegal Imports Programme, Skills Development, Innovation and Technology, and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), require provincial support and coordination. All of these programmes have the potential to boost employment, competitiveness, and growth in the clothing industry. For B-BBEE compliant clothing retailers, percentages of local product procurement should be monitored. As indicated, the illegally imported goods flooding the market pose a significant threat to the local industry. The DTI's strategy is aimed at clamping down on illegal imports at the point of entry into the country. Another, complementary approach would be to clamp down on these goods at the point of sale, particularly those easily identifiable as counterfeit goods, as has been seen throughout retail outlets and pavement stalls in the inner city of Johannesburg.

A key strategy could be the creation of a platform for key stakeholders in the local industry to discuss ways to strengthen the industry and improve its products and market access. Key stakeholders would include suppliers, enterprise owners, customers, service providers, designers, workers, organised labour (in particular SACTWU), and various government departments. Assessing the exact needs of specific clothing enterprises in inner city Johannesburg will be essential for aligning the Gauteng Employment Growth and Development Strategy (GEGDS) objectives with concrete implementation strategies, which can only be done in partnership with business owners and organised labour.

But upgrading should address the needs of workers in the industry in all four types of enterprises. What emerges from our research is that enterprises such as those in Type 1 and Type 2, which have better access to the market through the value chain, also have better working conditions. Conversely, those that have less access to the value chain, and in some cases no access other than selling clothing on the street, have worse working conditions, such as with Type 3 and Type 4 enterprises. Some needs concern all of the enterprises: for example, informants reported being robbed even inside their factories. Many of the enterprises in inner

city Johannesburg supply pavement retail outlets in the area which need to attract customers. This becomes a challenge when the area is perceived as unsafe.

A central challenge for the FPMs, our Type 1 clothing enterprises, lies in the inordinate amount of power that branding houses and retailers have in the buyer-driven clothing value chain. Many larger branding houses are supposed to procure proportions of their stock from local producers for their retail stores, but quote the FPMs really low prices for the order. If an FPM fails to meet the quoted price, the branding houses threaten to source their goods from China or actually do this. Related to this problem, another complaint was that the branding houses often place large orders for garments. The factory pays the input costs for making these garments and invoices the branding house once the garments have been made. Often, the branding house will cancel the order when the FPM has already made the garments, leaving the FPM to shoulder the expense and wastage. While this is reportedly a frequent occurrence, the FPMs do not take legal action for fear that they will not receive any more contracts.

One way of empowering compliant enterprises—Type 1 (FPMs) and some Type 2 (connected CMTS)—would be to disrupt the flow of goods to the retail sector from those clothing manufacturers that do not comply with minimum standards. Stakeholders could explore a system, already successful elsewhere, of regulating tax compliance and labour standards via supply chains. This system, introduced in the garment industry in Los Angeles and New York, involves combining public enforcement of labour standards with private market leverage to impose workplace compliance (Weil & Mallo, 2007).

Currently the system operates through the ability of the U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division (WHD) to disrupt the flow of goods from those manufacturers that do not comply with minimum standards in the retail sector. The innovative component in this system is that the monitoring is done by the manufacturers themselves, who are required to subcontract only to those suppliers that conform to the industry standards. The system includes a negative sanction via the Department of Labor, and a positive incentive in that it prevents competitors from outsourcing to sweatshops that pay below minimum wage and impose excessive work hours.

Another way of influencing the supply chain is to incorporate labour clauses regulating compliance in government procurement contracts. In Chile, for example, a new law requires compliance with labour law of all enterprises that operate as suppliers under government contracts (Fenwick et al., 2006). Government departments should ensure that they should procure locally all the items of apparel they supply to their employees. This is also a way of encouraging noncompliant enterprises, CMTs and others, to register for VAT in order to be able to tender for contracts from both private business and government.

The hijacked and overcrowded buildings pose a health risk particularly for workers in Type 3 (piecework CMTs) and Type 4 (survivalist CMTs). They have an impact on respiratory disease in the area, not only for people who reside in these

buildings but for people who work in the area. On a micro-level, some workers reported that within their workplaces health and safety regulations are poor, with electric shocks being experienced due to electric current leaking from inaccurately wired workplaces. This was visible in a number of enterprises and buildings housing enterprises, which were cramped and poorly maintained. The Department of Labour will need to strengthen its inspections of the clothing enterprises in the area according to the guidelines laid out by the Occupational Health and Safety Act.

The piecework and survivalist CMTs and other micro-enterprises are often unable to access contracts from compliant retail stores, design houses, corporate companies, and government departments because they are unregistered. Registration is one way to encourage such CMTs (which also provide the least secure working conditions) to formalize in order for them to gain market access. The levels of unionization and compliance are low in these enterprises, which also poses a threat to registered compliant enterprises. However, it is clear that many of these enterprises, particularly the survivalist enterprises, are unable to comply because they do not have a large enough turnover to pay their workers (who are often relatives) sufficient and regular wages.

Since the clothing industry in Johannesburg is dominated by CMTs and other small, micro and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs), these enterprises should be targeted for incentives and support in formalising (for informal enterprises) and upgrading their skills and product-base to more high-end skills and value-added products. Importantly we found higher levels of job satisfaction, intimacy, and a commitment to a collective goal, particularly amongst the piecework and survivalist CMTs, which highlights the value in entrepreneurship. The Gauteng government has already made a policy commitment through the GEGDS, which includes the provision of sustainable, accessible, and equitable services to SMMEs, also entrepreneurship, innovation, and technology transfers to SMMEs, and the monitoring and assessing of SMME growth and contributions to development goals.

If the challenges identified in this article are to be met, it will require coordinated action at a number of levels and by a number of actors. What is clear from our findings is that any strategy of upgrading will need to take account of the views and interests of the hidden world of the clothing workers in the inner city of Johannesburg. At the centre of these findings is that there are discordant voices and, while there are some overlaps, not all enterprises in the Fashion District have the same needs and face the same challenges. We have identified a process of precarisation in the clothing industry in the inner city of Johannesburg. While remnants of a traditional working class remain, a growing number of enterprises consist of casual workers that are outside the regulatory net of both the state and the unions. We have described these workers as a precariat. If employers, unions, and local government adopt the economic and social strategies of upgrading that have been identified in this article, the clothing workers' precariousness will be

reduced. Whether such upgrading is realized depends on the political will of the key actors in the inner city of Johannesburg.

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