

The Voices of Chinese Women Garment Homeworkers



**"No Job Security, No Benefits, No Minimum Pay.
How Do I Feed My Family?"**



Homeworkers' Association



Chinese Canadian National Council
Toronto Chapter

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Helen Laiman Poon

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Helen Laiman Poon
September 2005

Address from Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter

As the chair liaison to the Homeworkers' Association for the past two years, I am proud and privileged to work alongside an outstanding group of women. Together with CCNC-TO, HWA has participated and organized various events and workshops, serving the needs of its membership, while raising awareness of the working conditions of Chinese women garment workers who sew at home. Events such as *Threadbare*, a photo exhibit, as well as workshops in leadership, labour rights have made HWA a vibrant and progressive association.

The women of HWA and I have evolved personally and collectively through our work together. Moreover, the challenges of HWA members are not always evident because the women usually prefer to keep a low profile. Traditionally, many Chinese females believe that they should take on the primary responsibilities of childcare and domestic duties. Similar to other immigrant groups, the women of HWA face language, economic and social barriers, where finding any employment outside the home remains difficult. Although it has taken some time for us to build trust and understanding, we have reached a place where we are comfortable sharing our thoughts and ideas. I have learned a great deal from them.

This booklet highlights the stories of five Toronto Chinese women garment

homeworkers. Each story touches upon their reasons for immigration to Canada, why they entered the garment industries, their involvement with HWA. The women wish to remain anonymous and have identified themselves as **Scarf, Jacket, Trench-Coat, Shirt and Pants**. I would like to acknowledge the generosity of these women in sharing their stories and experiences for this booklet. As well, without the overwhelming support from staff members, volunteers and the HWA advisory committee members, this booklet would not have come together. From the bottom of my heart, I wish to gratefully thank all the supporters of HWA and CCNC-TO.

HWA must continue building its membership and capacity. With increased public awareness and education, HWA hopes that the voices of garment workers and garment homeworkers will not go unheard. HWA wants to ensure that garment workers receive fair pay, job protection, safe working conditions and benefits. With your help and support, we can make a difference to the lives of Chinese women garment workers in Toronto.

Sincerely Yours,

Esther Yip

Chapter 1

Our First Voice

This book is our first attempt to celebrate the voices of the Chinese Canadian garment homeworkers. This group of women has long been silent because of their lack of English language ability to express themselves fluently. We encouraged five Chinese Canadian women homeworkers to tell their personal stories, particularly stories about their work lives. These five women called themselves *Scarf, Pants, Shirt, Trench Coat*, and *Jacket*. Their stories help us explore both the lives of Chinese Canadian garment homeworkers and the impacts of globalization through their own lenses. We hope that this book will raise the awareness of the public and the Canadian government about the issues and working conditions faced by Chinese Canadian garment workers.

Chapter 2 recounts the stories of five women who spoke out and captured images of their lives in a rapidly changing industry. They tell us about their decision on immigration and entering the garment industry. They also describe their working conditions and salary, as well as how globalization threatened their job security and living standards. In a nutshell, *family* is the priority of many garment homeworkers. The five women have no regret at making a living as garment homeworkers because they have not only helped to raise a healthy family and good children, but have also made significant contributions to the garment industry and the overall economy.

We switch to a more academic tone in Chapter 3 where we elaborate the historical development of the Canadian garment industry and the influences of economic liberalization on the mode of operation of the industry. Homeworkers' Association (HWA) was formed in 1992 as a response to the deteriorating conditions of garment workers. HWA was part of U.N.I.T.E. Ontario Council (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees) and is currently housed under the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNC-TO). HWA is an organization for immigrant women who sew garments in their home and aims at helping homeworkers understand and exercise their rights, to share their skills and experiences, and build a community to support them from the isolation of working at home.

In Chapter 4, the five women reflected on their participation in HWA and described what they have learned in the process. They grew as they participated in HWA's struggles for survival. In the process they were empowered to make their own stories, both in their private sphere (about their own future) and in the public sphere (about the future development of HWA). This book is an initial step in empowering Chinese Canadian women homeworkers and raising public awareness. We aim at summoning public and government support for this brave group of women. Your valued support makes a real difference.

Chapter 2

Chinese Canadian Women Homeworkers: Our lives, Our Voices

Introduction

In this chapter, we profile the lives of five Chinese immigrant women who are or were once garment sewers at home. These five women are active members of the Homeworkers Association (HWA). We are grateful and proud that these women were willing to tell and share their personal experiences that bear significant relevance for the recent international and regional economic and political developments, broadly named as globalization. Thus, their stories reflect part of the histories of international migration and re-settlement, international trade and economic liberalization, workers exploitation and labour rights and how all these are intertwined with personal decisions about career and motherhood.

The stories are told in six sections. “*Who Are We?*” tells how the five women homeworkers chose their names in relation to their work lives. “*Crossing the Pacific Ocean — Adventure into the Unknown*” reveals the womens’ and their families’ decision about immigration. The reasons may be economic, political, and personal, and in most cases it was a combination of all. The section “*How did I Become a Garment Homeworker?*” tells the process of how these five women garment workers decided to sew at home. All of them decided to do so in order to take care of family members, mainly children and sick parents as well. We are proud to regard these women as not merely homeworkers but also great caregivers. Without their sacrifice and

commitments, their families may not be able to stay healthy and be functional units of the society.

The fourth section titled “*My Life as a Homeworker in Canada*” describes the working conditions and wages of sewing from home. As Ng (1999) indicated that sewing at home is actually merging the public and private spheres. This means that in many cases women work even longer hours than they do at the factory, grasping the late evening hours to sew when the children have gone to bed. In “*Globalization and Me,*” the women homeworkers told their personal experiences of how global trade and economic liberalization negatively impact on their work lives. “*A Country Called Canada*” is a concluding section in which the women homeworkers reflected on their lives and the decision to immigrate to Canada. This is part of their evaluation of the experiences that they have lived on.

This chapter aims to embrace and celebrate the women homeworkers’ voices and we do so by encouraging the five women to tell their experiences in story format. We want their voices to be heard loud and clear, not only by their fellow workers, but also the general public and politicians. Thus, we deliberately retain as far as possible the words and phrases that these women used when they told their stories, particularly the tone and words that are typically used in Cantonese (all of the five women speak

Cantonese). We add the literal/written Chinese in blankets to the words or phrases that may seem incomprehensible to Mandarin-speaking readers.

Who Are We?

Scarf

I would like to call myself “*Scarf*.” Scarf is so changeable; it can be used as an accessory, it can keep you warm, it can be worn as a belt; they all look very nice. There are a lot of alterations needed if you want to make some changes to clothes, but a scarf can be used in so many different ways. A scarf can be longer, can be smaller, and can be bigger to be used as poncho. I am very skillful in garment making, very versatile, just like a scarf.

Pants

I chose “*Pants*” to be my name because when I first started working in the garment factory, I sewed pants. There are some straight lines in sewing pant. I only know how to sew those straight lines, and nothing else. I once tried to buy some samples to make clothes for my daughter, but I always did it the wrong way. Very often, I had to tear everything to do it again. I have not been working as a garment worker for long, so I am not very skillful.

Shirt

I think a shirt can represent me very well because a shirt is very convenient to wear. It can be matched with either pants or skirts, plus everyone has shirts. Shirts can be traditional, not too fancy, while at the same time can have a lot of changes. Shirts also give you serious feelings, but on the other hand, a sense of

convenience. I am a bit serious and nervous person; sometimes I can change and adapt, but not too much though, just like a shirt.

Trench Coat

I would like to call myself “*Trench Coat*” because my very first job in Canada was sewing trench coats in a factory.

Jacket

I do not know what I should call myself. I sewed jacket when I first started sewing at home, so I would like to call myself “*Jacket*”.

Crossing the Pacific Ocean— Adventure into the Unknown

Scarf

In 1982 I came to Canada because my husband wanted to. In fact I was more or less a “mail order” bride. At that time in China, going abroad was also becoming a trend. Both my husband and I loved to study. Our dream was to go to university, and so we applied to a university in China together. He got accepted into the English program, and I was admitted into the Liberal Arts program of the Television University, a university that provided long distance learning. However, because my husband wanted to immigrate to another country, we both had to give up on this wonderful opportunity to attend university.

I am from Guangzhou (Canton) in China. At that time, everything (education, employment, marriage and so on) was centrally arranged by the government and needed recommendation from the work unit. The

central authority assigned jobs with no prior notification. Some people got assigned to do cleaning jobs; some were assigned to go to other provinces. If you rejected the first assignment, it would be very difficult for you to find the second job. After waiting for job assignment at home for a year, I was called to work in a facility maintenance factory. I started working there in 1975, but I didn't know what kind of situation was inside. I was just being brave to give it a try. I found out it was to learn how to make machine parts, not sewing. I met my husband at the factory. Until Deng Xiaoping announced the "Open Door" policy and initiated restructuring of the economic system, my husband immigrated to Canada. Before I came, I had no idea about western society; everything was so vague.

Pants

I am really a "mail order" bride. I came to Canada by getting married. My dad has two wives; my mom is his second wife. Our uncle was already in Canada, but he does not have any children. So he adopted my elder brother as his son and sponsored him to come to Canada. Later on, my brother sponsored my father to immigrate to Canada too. My elder brother is the first wife's son and as Canada does not allow having two wives, my father could only bring the first wife here. We could not come with them at the same time. My father really wished all of us could come together; however, I was not qualified. So I had to get married in order to come to Canada. Afterwards, I sponsored my mom and my sister to come here too.

I got married for real. Back in Hong Kong when I was in Grade 10, I switched from

my original school to a new school. In the new school, there were two classes in Grade 10, Class A and Class B. I was in Class A. I was sitting at the back and the classmates were so annoying and noisy in that class that I could not hear clearly during the tests. I even could not hear what the teacher said during dictation. Thus I lost my interest in learning and wanted to drop out from school. But my mom did not allow me to do that. I stayed home for almost a year. At that time, my husband was working at my brother's restaurant in Canada. My father and my brother felt that he was a very nice person. They suggested that we could try to keep in touch by writing letters. There was no way I could be qualified for immigration unless I marry someone in Canada. I came here in 1975 when I was 21 years old. We started communicating by letters to each other when I was 19.

After we wrote letters to each other for about one year and a half, my husband sponsored me to come here. Before I came, I stayed at home doing nothing. I heard I could work as a garment worker in Canada, so I wanted to learn sewing. But afterwards I got into a factory to do packing. There was no chance to learn sewing. After working for a few months, I came to Canada.

Shirt

We immigrated to Canada in the 1990s, after the "June 4th" incident in 1989. In the 90's when we were in Hong Kong, a lot of our friends were in restaurants business and almost all of them immigrated abroad. We could not make up our mind, but after seeing the scenes on TV—those tanks were running towards the people during the "June 4th" incident, we felt

very depressed. We felt it was time to leave Hong Kong. At the beginning, we planned to go to Australia. But the approval for Australia took longer time than the Canada one did, so we came to Canada. However, we couldn't come all together as a family. My husband came here first, and then my children and I came with visitor visas to unite with my husband.

Trench Coat

In 1985 I immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong out of concerns for 1997 (the changeover of government in Hong Kong). Our family, four of us, came here through investment immigration. My husband used to work as a civil engineer in Hong Kong. After immigration to Canada, he worked as electronic engineer to design circuits for radios. We left Hong Kong mainly because we were afraid of the political changeover of Hong Kong back to China. Back in the early days when I was still living in China, my mother worked in business. But because of the Cultural Revolution in China, she was persecuted and imprisoned for 6 months, and was forced to leave her kids behind on their own at home, including a baby at that time. Deeply engrained in my memories were the brutality and misdeeds of the Communist Party of China in the 1950s and 60s. I did not know that from my experience, but I heard about them from my mother over the years.

Jacket

My parents and brother came to Canada in the 60s. I was the last member in my family to come over. I came here in 1987. My life is very simple. I am the middle child in my family. My parents settled everything for me when I was little; so I didn't need to worry about anything. After finishing Grade 9, I felt I would

not do well in study, so I quit school and started working. My mom was doing business in making wigs. I thought it was very interesting, so I learnt how to make wigs from my mom. But I only worked on making wigs for a very short period of time. Back then, my father ran a garment factory; so I started helping him out. However, my father did not allow me to work in the factory; he only allowed me to work in the office. Every time when he was away, I went to the factory to see how those garment workers sew clothes. I learned to sew slowly. I met my husband later, then we got married. I stopped working after getting married. I did not actually learn sewing, but I love sewing clothes. Therefore, I always attend sewing classes in the evening.

How Did I Become a Garment Homemaker?

Scarf

When we first arrived in Canada, I did not know much. Though I had been through schooling back in China, my English was not fluent. While I was seeking employment, all I found in the classifieds were positions in restaurants or garment factories. Knowing that I had some sewing experience in China, I started making calls to apply for sewing jobs. At that time, there were not as many Chinese organizations or settlement services to assist immigrants in finding jobs or adapting to the society. Community news and social networks were not as commonly accessible in those days. So I did not know how to find work. Erratically, I came upon an advertisement about a clothing sale. When my family and I went to check it out, we discovered that there was a factory right

behind the clothing store. So my mother-in-law suggested that I walk in and enquire whether they were hiring. It turned out that the owner of the factory was a very early Chinese immigrant. Seeing that I was young, she gave me a chance and said, “Come and try out this sewing machine” and let me figure out how to operate the sewing machine myself. At first, I did not even know some of the basic steps in operating a sewing machine such as threading. I decided soon in my own mind that she was not going to hire me. Luckily, the worker sitting behind me helped me out and showed me a few things. After sewing for several hours, I was also starting to become accustomed to the machine. Then, the next thing you know I was hired and assigned the easy task of hemming skirts. Fortunately, after working there for a period of time, I was promoted to be a monitor. My boss once said that I was still young and should not focus merely on earning for the present needs but should plan more thoughtfully for my future. Hence, I took her suggestions, went on to learn other different skills and trades when doing my sewing work in the factory.

After all, why did I choose to work in the garment industry? To start out, I worked in the factory. Later, after we had our children, I continued my sewing at home. At that time, in my mind, it was very important for me to raise and bring up my own kids, be there for them and guide them to make the right choices as they grow up. I thought if you neglect your children merely to make a little more of a living, you lose out tremendously on being there for them, raising them, teaching them and seeing them through. The good thing about a sewing job at that time was that it was very flexible. It worked out very well for me because, especially

being a home worker, I could easily take care of my children in the morning, send them off to school, and then start working on my sewing until they came back from school. When they came back from school, I could see them, teach them, take care of them; it was good even just to have them play around me – I could easily talk to them, tell them stories, or simply enjoy being with them. They would be content and comforted simply having *Mommy* around. In the evening it was vital that my husband and I did our own parts and worked together like a team. For example, I would ask my husband to put the children to bed so that I could start my work, i.e. sewing again. In this way, I could work till very late at night – this arrangement gave me much flexibility with my time.

Pants

Since my hope was to stay home to care for my own children, I had sewn at home for a while. At that time, I knew someone who just had a baby. She suggested that both of us try sewing at home for a living. Since I had some sewing experience in a factory before, I told her that I should do fine. Subsequently, I bought a sewing machine and installed it at my home. I thought I could sew, but actually, when I began to sew, I realized I could not. Back in the days when I was working in the factory, I sewed mostly the inseam of pants — simply a straight line. I did not know any better. When my boss assigned me the task of sewing the collars of shirts, I realized that I could not do it myself. So during those days, I could only wait for my own sister to come home from work to complete my sewing assignments for me in the evenings. After several months, I still could not sew properly; meanwhile, I was starting to feel badly for asking my sister to do my job for me. As a

result, I gave up the job, and stopped sewing at home.

Shirt

I am very ordinary. I started working in Hong Kong after finishing my elementary school. I am a girl and my parents did not want girls to have too much schooling. There are three boys in my family. My parents let the boys continue education until high school, and one of them even finished university. But all the girls only had elementary education. My elder sister, for instance, helped out my father at his store. My mother asked me to go to work after I graduated from elementary school. I was 12 at that time; I went to a friend's factory to learn sewing. After getting married, and having kids, I started sewing at home. Because it was very expensive to send kids to daycare in Hong Kong, I would rather take care of my own kids. For me, taking care of my kids was my priority. Working as a garment homemaker, I could see how my kids growing up while at the same time make a living.

My children were too young back in the 90's, just about 6 years old, [when we came here]. It was not very difficult to get into the garment industry in Canada in 1995, but the wage was very low which was only just about \$6 per hour. Our living was not stable at the beginning. My husband worked between Toronto and Manitoba, on and off. Not until 1995 did we settle down in Toronto. I started to pick up my old job, working as a garment worker in 1992. The first five years in Canada was very tough while we were moving around all the time.

Trench Coat

After finishing elementary school, I moved to Hong Kong with my father at the age of 14. In my teenage years, I entered into an apprenticeship program to learn the trade of making knitwear. At that time, my uncle had told me that one could earn very much by making wool sweaters; hence, I went on to do so as he said. Truly, after my apprenticeship I had earned very good money with my new skills; weaving had earned me quite a fortune back then. A few years later, after my father passed away, I took the responsibility of looking after my family. During those years, I could actually afford to buy a condominium for my mother. In those early days the garment industry in Hong Kong was thriving. A monthly income of several thousand Hong Kong dollars was quite extraordinary. You could buy a condo of 600 square feet for several thousand dollars.¹

Back in the 70s, the garment industry in Hong Kong was very prosperous and provided many incentives for workers. If you could work till 8p.m., you could get HK\$5 for midnight snack; if you could work till 10 p.m., you could get HK\$10; if you could work overnight, the boss would be holding a bunch of hundred dollar bills to hang them over to everyone. Back then I tried to work overnight as much as I could to make more money. After working for many years, my kids started to go to school; I stopped working at the factory. There was a sewing machine at my home; people sent clothes to my place to ask me to do the sewing.

¹ In 2001, sample prices for residential areas in Hong Kong ranged from HK\$1,736 per square foot to HK\$3,520. (Source: http://www.properties28.com/eng/news/12_2001.htm)

There were too many clothes to put in my place. I made the same amount of money when I was working in the factory. My boss was very fair. For example, the sewing machine needed electricity and we had to pay for the facility expenses. If he paid us HK\$1,000, there would be another HK\$300 for the electricity expense. Until 1985, my kids all grew up, I went back to work at the factory again, and made a pretty good living on it. I worked as garment worker at the factory after I came to Canada, until my mom got sick. I had to take care of her and I started working as a garment homemaker.

Jacket

I started sewing at home after I came to Canada in 1987. The reason is that my daughter was very little and I had to take care of her at home. After sewing for about nine years, we moved to an apartment. It is not allowed to sew in the apartment, so I went back to work at the factory where I got my assignments from before I started sewing at home. After a year, the factory was sold. I went to work at another factory. My husband has been commuting between Hong Kong and Canada ever since, even up till now.

My Life as a Homemaker in Canada

Scarf

I immigrated to Canada from China in 1982. At the end of 1982, I got my very first garment job, which I worked on my own, got paid by items. I switched to a bigger unionized factory in 1983, which paid me hourly, \$3.50 per hour. A year later, I went back to work at the first factory because the boss could pay me

\$5 per hour. A few months later, the whole factory was restructured and we all lost our jobs. Until the end of 1985 when I had my first baby, I started working as a garment homemaker so that I could take care of my baby. If there was someone who could help me look after my baby, for example, when my husband or other family members had a day-off, I would go to work at the factory and get paid hourly. Therefore, other than the weekends, at any time as long as I had free time, or when the factory needed my help, I would work at a factory. I could get hourly paid by working in a factory; but if I worked at home, I could only make about \$3 per hour. At home, I tried to sew as much as I could once I had time, normally after my kids had fallen asleep. After I gave birth to the second child in 1989, I started working at home regularly. When my kids started going to elementary school, I went back to work in a factory. I worked between home and factory, that is, worked at the factory if the factory was busy, but usually I worked at home. Later on, I started making samples for garments. Making samples must be done at the factory as often you have to follow the designers' requests. The time required for making samplings varies; sometimes you spend the whole day cannot even get an evening gown done. If it is for t-shirts or pants, you can get two or three done in a day.

Pants

I came to Canada in 1975 and started to learn sewing in 1978. I stopped working two years later. I picked up sewing at home for a few months in 1982 and thereafter I stopped sewing again. I have been working as a cashier since 1992 up till now. My pay is \$9.74 per hour, much better than sewing. For sewing, you get paid per item and thus you have to keep

working on it non-stop. Being a cashier, I don't need to work too hard. The job is not too hard either and a bit more stable too. Nowadays, a lot of garment workers cannot even get minimum wage on piecework.

Shirt

I came to Toronto in July 1990. I was trying to adapt to the new life in the first two years, so I did not work during that period. We moved to Winnipeg in 1992. With the help of social workers, I was able to locate a garment job and started working in a garment factory. My major job was to sew tops and short jackets, counted by items. The basic wage was \$5.50 per hour, but if you worked quickly, you could make up to \$9 per hour. We moved to Vancouver in 1994 and I continued to work at garment factories as well. The basic wage was \$5.50 per hour, but there was no way you could make up to \$9 per hour, no matter how quickly you work. We moved back to Toronto in 1995. I had to take care of my son because the cost of childcare was very expensive. In addition, we did not know where to find daycare services. Thus, I started working at home so that I could take care of my son easily.

From 1995 to 1998, I sewed garments at home. I started working at a factory in 1999, 8 hours per day, \$7 per hour. I had to work very hard in order to earn up to \$10 per hour. For example, in order to squeeze more time for sewing, I would not go to washroom, take only half an hour lunch break and so on. Later I switched to work at a furniture factory to make covers for leather sofa. The basic wage was \$10 per hour; later I got a raise to \$12 per hour, but without any benefits. The leather used to make sofa covers is very heavy, a lot of workers

injured their hands; so did I. However, as we had no benefits, we did not get any compensation for this kind of injury. On the surface the hourly pay at this furniture factory seemed to be pretty good, in reality half of the year was slack season. The employer terminated us during the slow season. During this period of time we had to live on EI (employment insurance). The employer would hire us to go back to work again during the peak period. So throughout the year, on the average we were paid \$7 or \$8 per hour.

In April 2005, the furniture factory was shut down, I went to work as a cashier at a restaurant. However, as I could not adapt to this new job, I quit it after working there for less than a month. I switched back to work at a garment factory in July (2005) to sew shirts and pants, mostly orders from designers. There are only 5 or 6 Chinese workers in the factory and our pay is \$9 per hour. Since the job is sewing for designers, the procedures are very complicated. I did not meet my quota after working there for about two months. I had the feeling that I would be laid off soon.

Trench Coat

I came to Canada on June 3rd, 1985. I did some sewing when I was in Hong Kong, but mostly I was an apprentice for wool sweaters. In October 1985, I found miscellaneous jobs in a factory, \$5 per hour, 8 hours per day, 40 hours a week. It is a simple math that my wage should be \$200 a week. But my boss always counted me 36 hours a week. Every time I asked him to pay me back the hours he owed me, he always said next time. When he actually paid me back, he *only paid me 3 more hours*, still owing me 1 hour. I was a new immigrant back then and I felt embarrassed to ask him for the 1 hour

shortage. I felt my boss was not honest so I quit the job after 2 months. Later on, I found a sewing job in a factory owned by a Canadian. Since I never worked on men's jackets before, they only paid me \$5 per hour; but I got a 50 cents raise the second week, which meant I got paid \$5.50 per hour. I was a newcomer back then, so they paid me a basic salary for three months. After that, I was paid on piece-rate. I tried my best to work as fast as possible. There was a raise of 0.25 cents per piece for every three years. However, the raise was so minimal that we really did not care. At that time, we made about \$8 or 9 per hour, plus benefits, which included overtime paid, prescription, dental, and prescription glasses. I was very happy for that, so I worked there for 17 years. I did not want to leave the factory. But my mother was getting older and becoming very sick and I had to stay home to look after her. I stopped working and took care of her till she passed away. I did not work for 2 years, until my friend asked me to work at a factory to sew sports wear last year. I was treated as a newcomer there. My working hour is very long, sometimes had to work 12 hours a day. Sometimes I went to work in the morning, got off after 12 midnight, and worked 7 days straight. The paid is not as good as what I could get in some Canadian garment factories, not even mentioning the benefits. Although the working hour is very long, I can learn a lot. Now I can operate 5 different types of sewing machines. As for the pay, it is all about luck. It depends on what kind of sewing you get. For instance, sewing elastic bands can make more. But the rate is not stable; the highest can go up to \$8-10 per hour, the worst can be just a few bucks.

Jacket

I immigrated to Canada on December 19, 1987. I started working as a garment homemaker in January 1988. Back then I did not sew for long hours, about six hours at home everyday. I spent the rest of my time with my daughter taking her to school or taking a walk around. I could make \$4-\$6 for sewing a pair of pants or a skirt, \$14 for sewing a suit. For a very simple suit, like the hotel uniforms, I could make about \$7 or \$8 per item. Sewing a suit took about two hours, sometimes I could get it done in about one hour too. But sewing dress skirts could make more money. Factories sent those already cut items to my place and they would pick them all up once I got them done. On the average, I could make about \$80-\$100 per day, that is, about \$2,000-\$3,000 per month. The income was not bad. However, I moved to live in an apartment in 1996 where sewing was not allowed because it would be noisy for other tenants. I signed the contract saying I would not sew at home. Thus, I sold one of my two sewing machines, keeping the other one at home. Then I started working at the factory. I have been working there ever since. I was paid \$8-9 per hour, 5 days a week, 8 hours per day. The situation was better back in the 80's and the 90's. Now we only work 4 days a week, 6 hours per day due to lack of orders. The work hours will be shorten in the near future since most of the orders have been assigned to Indonesia or China. The overseas labour is paid really low; in a way, making the Canadian garment industry going downward. No job security, no benefits, no minimum pay. How do I feed my family?

Globalization and Me

Scarf

There are very few workers who can make up to \$2,000 or \$3,000 per month. To earn that amount, you really have to work very hard, and the order must be easy to finish. In addition, you have to work at least 10 hours per day, trying to shorten your time to go to washroom, or even just spend 10 minutes for lunch, etc. I think the situation was better before the 90's; it should be 1987 to 1990. I still remember back then the garment workers were in demand. You always could hear the boss saying: "If you can come to work at my factory, I can pay you extra." They even hired some aged workers; 40 plus could work on packaging, cutting edges, sewing buckles, or inspection. If you could refer newcomers to come to work at your factory, you could get additional \$50 or \$100. Therefore, garment workers were so in demand during the 90's; and the factories were much bigger in size.

Right now, most of the factories do not have basic salary. Normally workers are paid by piece rate. On the other hand, the pay is really low. The most you can make is just \$7 per hour. It is even harder for those new garment workers to get this pay. If the order is easy to finish, workers can make more money. But then the boss will try to lower the piece rate further next time so that workers can make no more than the minimum wages. I just wonder how the government let this kind of situation happen.

On the other hand, it is very hard to hire skilled garment workers. The major reason is there are not enough orders. Workers are asked

to work for only a few hours every day. Therefore, they will switch to factories that have more orders; especially those skilled workers, they tend to leave faster. For example, if a factory receives a huge order, say more than 10,000 shirts, workers will go to work at that factory because they can be busy working for the whole week. After the big order is done and only small ones are left, workers will try to switch to another factory. Generally speaking, the garment workers who work on making samples tend to be more stable as they have pretty good basic salary.

I feel that the workers who make samples have to work very closely with designers. They have to know what results the designers are looking for. Designing is one thing, whether it is "doable" is another thing [sewing feasibility is another thing]. Designers do not know everything. Sometimes, workers may know more about the materials than the designers do. Some materials cannot get the results designers are looking for. For example, velvet which only can be used in some simple patterns is not suitable for complicated styles. On the other hand, chiffon can be used to make some complicated and fancy patterns. Therefore, workers who make samples need to discuss and communicate with the designers. The two need to be good working partners.

How to become a highly-skilled garment worker? I think the major element is experience, and you have to be interested in sewing. If you are not interested in it, there is no way you will spend time to learn those skills. Secondly, it depends on if you are faithful and enthusiastic to your job; if you are enthusiastic, you will try your best to get your job done well.

Unfortunately, there are very few chances for upgrading our skills nowadays. Before, if you are talented, and the boss appreciated your work, he/she would train you by giving you more chances to work at different departments. Just like me, after I started working for my third boss in the factory, he gave me a lot of chances to learn and practice at the same time. Finally I learnt overlock, flatlock, placket, and collar and so on. The most important thing is that you love your own occupation. Some workers treat sewing as a transitional job, just a way to make a living and do not put their hearts to their work. For some skilled immigrant workers, sewing is not in their field, but for some reason they cannot get a job in their own field. They start working as garment workers, just to make some money. In this way, how will they intend to upgrade their skills?

Sometimes the situation is ironic. If you work at a small garment factory, there could be more chances to let you learn how to sew different styles or parts. Right now there are mainly small factories left. However, small factories might not have enough man power to do the training. Nowadays, the factories normally have different divisions. There are barely any chances to let you try different positions so you cannot learn different skills. A lot of designers lament about the lack of skilled garment workers. There are few workers who are willing to or have the luxury to upgrade their skills. Furthermore, there is *no* training offered from the Canadian government—something like the Vocational Training Institute in Hong Kong that is dedicated to upgrade the skills of garment workers. Even if there are classes, they are very basic training, mainly on training to sew straight lines and overlock. Few

courses offered to teach workers to sew a whole piece, not to mention evening gowns, wedding gowns or making samples for designers

Trench Coat

Right now, a lot of the garments are made outside of Canada. Since the free trade in the 90's, the situation has been going downwards. Right now the condition is even worse than ever. In fact, factory owners do not want to see this kind of situation either. But the global trend is to outsource to places like China and Mexico. The wages in these places are so low that the Canadian garment industry cannot compete with. In China, it costs only \$6 or 7 RMB to sew and deliver a shirt; and the shirt can be sold for \$60 Canadian dollars here. Therefore, globalization has a huge impact on the garment workers. The only thing local factories could do was to try to lower the wages of garment workers. That makes the garment workers who are already live in the lower class start to lose their interest working in the industry. We feel so helpless. It is even harder for some elderly workers who do not have much skill to get a job.

My co-worker's sister is a garment worker in the United States. The factory owner always leaves the key of the factory to the employees so that they can work as late as they want. They earn only US\$3 per hour. Everyone is trying to work as much as they can, usually up till 11p.m. or 12 midnight. The one leaves the latest locks up the door. The competition is so intense in the States, let alone the Canadian garment workers. There are a lot of new immigrants joining the industry in Canada, which makes the wages even lower. Some of these workers want to take on the job just for

transition, to see if they can make money from doing it; and they keep switching factories very often. However, if they can pick up their work quickly, start to make some money, the boss will cut the wages.

It is very hard to make money at my husband's factory. There are fewer orders than before, and the workers are scheduled to work for only a few weeks since the Chinese New Year (until March 2005 now). The boss does not care whether you can make any money and just let you live on your own. If you cannot bear with it, you can leave on your own. In this way, the boss does not need to compensate you anything as the worker resign voluntarily. Luckily, my factory has a lot of orders because it makes down jackets and sports shirts. However, generally speaking, I am quite disappointed with Canada. The government has been saying that they will increase the Old Age Security, decrease income tax, more supports for childcare and so on all the time. The costs for transportation and education have been increasing over and over again. The tuition fee was only \$2,000 to \$3,000 when my daughter started university; right now, it costs more than \$5,000. What an irony.

Jacket

I have been working at this factory for 8 or 9 years. The wage is about \$8 or \$9 per hour. I am getting pretty much the same pay as working at home. However, right now it is not stable working in the factory. For example I only work four days a week, and six and a half hours per day. How much can I make for this kind of shift? You cannot even finish your job in the six and a half hour; you have to start packing home already. We produce trench coats,

and sell them locally. A lot of the orders are sent to other countries already, like China. However, my boss still wants to have a factory here since some procedures need to be done here at the final production stage, for example, pressing. Therefore, there are not that many local employees. Actually, his business is pretty big by sourcing offshore. According to my estimation, from the beginning of this year till now (May 2005), we have received 30,000 coats from Indonesia and China; but there were a lot of workers got fired in the two local factories here.

Of course I do not want to retire because I am still able to work and I need to make money. But there is nothing I can do if I am forced to retire. If the government wants me to retire, I would rather do so. Nevertheless, we have to wait till 65 years old in order to get retirement compensation. How can we live on our lives from now to 65? My legs are hurting me a lot, but I still have to bear with the work. At our age, the most needed thing is medication. The factory I am working right now has benefits for prescription drugs and glasses, but they might cut them off at the end of this month. Union and the employer are still trying to negotiate; maybe they will cancel all the benefits for prescription drugs and glasses. Most of the workers in our factory have been working here for decades; however, there are very few orders now. If the workers are in need for money, they cannot hold on for too long. Having no choice, they could only go to work somewhere else, leaving the work voluntarily. In that way, the employer does not need to pay any compensation. Right now, there are a lot of factories using this tactic, same as my factory. It is very miserable. The prices for public facilities have been rising all

the time but our wages have been decreasing. It is really hard to keep up with the commodity price, especially that housing is expensive. The money we make hardly covers our expenses; we need to withdraw our savings.

My co-workers try to make as much money as they can by working up to 7p.m., which is time to get off and they still do not want to leave. Even workers are willing to work during the evenings, and only spend 10 minutes on meals and then finally they can make up to \$80 a day, the boss will lower your wages again. The competitions between workers make the situation very miserable.

A Country Called Canada

Scarf

When I first immigrated here, I did not know what it was like to live in a Western society. I was relatively naïve in my thinking. Immigration was popular, and so I just went with the trends. Now as I think of it, I still ask myself, “Is Canada that good?” In general, I would say it is good, at least for the next generation, my children. My friends joked with me and asked me why I did not learn my English well before I ran a million miles away with my husband to a distant place like Canada or shortly after we arrived here. Personally, I think when first arriving in Canada, every new immigrant goes through countless struggles and hardship. For the first couple of years, immigrants move enduringly from one milestone after another, using all the strength, stamina and resources they have, to keep the family and a proper home together before they have the luxury to learn English.

Pants

If you ask me how to evaluate my decision on immigrating to Canada, I really do not know how to answer. Because when I came here, I was really young. I had not even finished my high school; neither had I worked in Hong Kong. There is no way I can compare living in Canada and Hong Kong. Maybe my whole family, including my husband and my children, is all in Canada; therefore, I will still choose to live here. On the other hand, the education system is better than that in Hong Kong. It is less stressful to study here and that is good for my children.

Shirt

Thinking back about my past experience, I think I like the life in Canada better. I got used to it already. The living condition is better here while Hong Kong is too crowded. For my husband’s career, there are not too many differences between Hong Kong and Canada. But for my son’s education, it is better in Canada. The education system in Canada is more reasonable and has less pressure. For myself, I feel half and half. The environment is nice here, but due to the language barrier, I have difficulties in communication. Compared with Hong Kong, it is hard for me to travel around or to get a job here, and thus I do not feel included in the society. In Hong Kong I have no communication problem and I have a lot of relatives. But after all, I still like Canada better.

Trench Coat

My family, the four of us, came to Canada. I am thankful for the education my children have received in Canada. Both of them graduated from universities. My daughter is quite successful; she studied accounting and obtained the designation in the Institute of Chartered Accountants both in Canada and the United States, and other qualifications to work in financial institutions. They were only about 9 and 10 years old when they first came to Canada. I thought if they stayed in Hong Kong, they probably would not have the opportunity to go to university because the academic competitions are too rigorous. Here, in Canada I think that if students are willing to work hard, they can complete their post-secondary education. My husband had been very strict in disciplining my children. It is only recently that we have installed Cable TV at our home. We had always insisted that we would not install Cable TV, and we would not watch TV until our children graduated from university. Emphasizing how much harder we needed to work in Canada, my husband always said, "We immigrated here from Hong Kong. Compared with the kids who grew up here, we are quite behind in our English language abilities. Children who have grown up here simply need to walk in order to get by, whereas for us we have to run very hard in order to keep up with them, let alone to thrive." Hence, I made it clear to my children that we would not install Cable TV or watch any Chinese channels. Now as we look back, we still believe that we had made good choices in order to help my children to succeed. I believe truly that our children's future is more important than ours.

Jacket

My daughter has been able to take the initiative and be conscious about study. I did not spend too much time in monitoring her. Looking back to the immigration decision, I like Canada. I think it is because all my family members are here, and I like it to be quiet. My husband does not want to stay in Canada. Even we are apart, it was tough at the beginning; but it is not a big deal now. We got used to it, and it seems normal now.

What Do the Stories Tell Us?

The stories shared by the five garment homeworkers shed light on the macro-economic and political changes that occurred both in China and Canada. The women immigrated to Canada either for fear of political changes in Hong Kong or for family reunion. All of them regard family and their children's education as their priority. They would rather sacrifice their own career for a better education for their children. They have no regret making a living as garment homeworkers because homeworking allows them the flexibility of both taking care of their family and contributing to the garment industry. All of them appreciated the Canadian education system that provided optimum opportunities for their children to learn and develop. All of the second generations of these five women are able to obtain professionals and continue to contribute to the Canadian society as their parents did. Thus, one thing we can learn from these homeworkers' stories is that we should value our education system and to improve it further. In fact, many immigrants choose to immigrate to Canada mainly because they value Canadian education.

Another insight is that many immigrants are hardworking people who try their best to lead an independent and respectable life, even in face of exploitation and hardships. For the five women described in this chapter, all of them did not want to live on social welfare although their hourly wages were minimal and very often below minimum wage. As the homeworkers are not allowed to unionize and thus not able to exercise collective bargaining, they are often exploited by employers who have total control on setting wages for them and who may also withhold wages. Their stories call for government's responsibility to ensure equal and free of exploitation employment opportunities for immigrants, particularly women and other disadvantaged communities. Also, they call for government to create skills training in the garment industry.

The five women fully understand the global economic trend of the garment industry through their own personal experiences. *Scarf*, *Trench Coat*, and *Jacket* compared the downsizing and restructuring phenomena of the garment industry that occurred in Hong Kong to that of Canada. They realized that Canada's garment industry is a reflection of Hong Kong's garment industry in the 1980s when the industry started to move north into Mainland China while employment in the Canadian garment industry began to decline during the early 1990s. With the new challenges brought by the lifting of apparel and textile import quotas in January 2005, this group of homeworkers still insist to make a living as garment workers built on their skills and knowledge. Like *Scarf*, she is still paid very reasonably because she has all the skills required for sewing high-end products. She intelligently suggested that the Government

should provide training to upgrade garment workers to become highly skilled sewing machine operators. We discuss the global trend of economic liberalization and its impacts on the Canadian garment industry in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

The Personal is Political:

Impacts of Globalization on the Lives of Homeworkers in Toronto

Introduction

In this chapter, we will review the changes that occurred in the Canadian garment industry in the last two decades. In particular, we examine how the impact of economic globalization has directly affected the mode of operation of this industry. As a result of these economic and political changes, the personal work lives of garment workers in Toronto are forced to adapt.

Impact of Economic Globalization on Canadian Garment Industry and its Workers

Due to economic liberalization through various free trade agreements and deregulation of labour standards over the past two decades, many factory jobs are outsourced and garment jobs are transformed into homework (Klein, 2000). In industrialized countries, the decline in manufacturing as well as the waves of downsizing and cutbacks in the public sector have resulted in dramatic growth in service-sector jobs. For instance, in the United States, there are four and a half times as many workers selling clothes in specialty and department stores as there are workers stitching and weaving them (Klein, 2000).

Overview of Canadian clothing industry

Today, the manufacturing industry of the clothing sector is confronted with an erosion of job opportunities. Statistics show what 23,000 jobs were lost in Canada's clothing industry between 2002 and 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2005). In December 2004, 71,000 people were employed in the Canadian clothing industry accounting for 3% of the total manufacturing sector. Before 1990s, employment had been increasing until 1988, when it peaked at 115,485. Over the next four years it declined by 27 percent, falling especially during the recession of 1990-1991. Subsequently, employment has declined more slowly, mitigated in part by an upsurge in exports (Klein, 2002). Yet still, even in the most recent years, the clothing industry remains to be Canada's eighth largest provider of manufacturing jobs and a leading employer for women and immigrants men and women

Immigrants and women have traditionally dominated the garment manufacturing industry. In 1994, the garment work force consisted of about 50 percent immigrants and 76 percent women (Ng, 2002), versus 24% immigrants and 26% women for the rest of the manufacturing sector (Secretariat

of the Commission for Labor Cooperation, 2000). In regional terms, 95% of the jobs in the Canadian apparel industry in 1996 were concentrated in four provinces: Quebec, 58 %; Ontario, 28%; Manitoba, 5%; and British Columbia, 4%.

At the same time, Canada's clothing manufacturing shipments declined gradually. According to Statistics Canada's Annual Survey of Manufacturers (ASM)¹, Canada's clothing manufacturer shipments were \$6.5 billion in 2004, declined by 18.4% from \$7.9 billion in 2000. The clothing manufacturing shipments accounted for only 1% of total shipments in 2004, down from 1.4% in 2000. As showed in Table 1 and 2 **clothing exports in Canada declined by 16% while imports increased by 24% between 2000 and 2004**. U.S. and China remained Canada's largest trading partner in clothing exports and imports, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2005). In the following sections, we discuss how changing economic and political milieu influences the mode of operations in the garment industry.

Free trade agreements

Before 1980, the government protected the clothing industry through a tariff and quota

¹ The Annual Survey of Manufactures (ASM) is a survey of the manufacturing industries of Canada conducted annually since 1917. Data collected by the Annual Survey of Manufactures are important because they measure production of the industrial sector in Canada as well as provide an indication of the well-being of each manufacturing industry, and its contribution to the Canadian economy.

system in which imported textile and clothes were subjected to import duty and quotas. However, the rapid technology advancements in communications and transportation in the past two decades expedited the development of global trade and consequently brought about an ever increasing pressure for trade liberalization among countries and regions. Various regional and international trade agreements were signed and implemented, transforming the clothing industry into "a worldwide network of production and trade [that is] conducted by national producers or under international subcontractors, franchise agreements and strategic alliances between firms in various countries" (Secretariat of the Commission for Labor Cooperation, 2000: 10). For instance, the US-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed between Canada and United States and the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) were signed among Canada, Mexico and the United States of America. Under NAFTA (Annex 300-B), the tariffs for clothing trade between Canada and the United States were generally to be eliminated in three stages between 1994 and 2003. Custom user fees were eliminated as well. Together with the Agreement on Textile Clothing (ATC) initiated by the World Trade Organizations (WTO), these trade agreements had affected the operation of the industry severely (Secretariat of the Commission for Labor Cooperation, 2000).

According to the World Trade Organizations' Agreement on Textile and Clothing (ATC), which was signed in 1995 and came into force in January 2005, bilateral quotas between countries were to be ended

Table 1 Five largest export destinations of Canadian clothing industry in 2004

CANADA'S FIVE LARGEST EXPORT DESTINATIONS, 2004				
CLOTHING MANUFACTURING				
Rank	Country	2000	2004	% Change
1	United States (U.S.)	\$2,928,145,385	\$2,343,760,004	-20%
2	Germany	\$5,406,354	\$47,101,374	771%
3	United Kingdom (U.K.)	\$29,026,963	\$41,405,069	43%
4	Japan	\$18,358,921	\$16,464,927	-10%
5	Netherlands	\$3,838,306	\$10,686,293	178%

Sources: Statistics Canada, Industry Canada – Trade Data Online

Table 2: Five largest import destinations of Canadian clothing industry in 2004

CANADA'S FIVE LARGEST IMPORT DESTINATIONS, 2004				
CLOTHING MANUFACTURING				
Rank	Country	2000	2004	% Change
1	China	\$1,339,149,942	\$2,336,850,371	75%
2	United States (U.S.)	\$769,893,823	\$583,407,899	-24%
3	Bangladesh	\$154,620,548	\$451,694,129	192%
4	India	\$365,522,804	\$407,507,782	11%
5	Mexico	\$206,253,167	\$353,149,454	71%

Sources: Statistics Canada, Industry Canada – Trade Data Online

progressively over a 10-year period and by the same time customs tariffs would be reduced. ATC aims to benefit those countries providing low wage labour and production cost. Abided by the ATC, Canadian government has to lift the quota system and exempt import duty on fabric and yarn to the local garment industry starting from January 2005. In 2000, 94% of the textile and clothing products were still subjected to quotas (Secretariat of the Commission for Labor Cooperation, 2000). Thus, the full-swing implementation of ATC in January 2005 marked the beginning of profound transformations for the apparel industry and world clothing trade as all quotas were lifted since then.

Trade agreements such as NAFTA and ATC make it possible for Canadian clothing retailers to order garments from countries with cheaper labour costs such as Mexico, China and India. The local garment industry has no choice but is forced to compete with these cheap producers. In fact, Mexico has become a major source of garment and textile production in the Americas. Consequently, manufacturers in Canada and the US have shifted their production plants southwards, and retailers have augmented their transactions with businesses south of the border. Finance Minister, Ralph Goodale, admitted that the Canadian garment industry is facing the severe challenges caused by the global trade in clothing and textile sectors. The challenges have become much crueler after the Canadian government exempted the import duty of textile and garments in January 2005 (MingPao, January 10, 2005). The shift of production mode has severely undermined both manufacturers and workers across Canada.

Downsizing and Restructuring of the garment industry in Canada

As mentioned before, since the 1980s, the garment industry has undergone major changes caused by four interlocking processes described below:

- (1) shifting locus of control of the industry from manufactures to retailers due to economic liberalization,
- (2) technological innovations that enable retailers keep fewer stock and make faster orders,
- (3) trade agreements between nation-states that remove quotas between countries and accelerate the restructuring process, and
- (4) shifting labour standards in Canada that endorse the extension of work week and loose labour standards monitoring system by the provincial government due to financial cutbacks (Ng, 2003).

The consequence of these four interlocking processes is an expansive restructuring of the garment industry. According to Yanz, Jeffcott, Ladd, & Atlin (1999) and Ng (2003), the restructuring include:

- (1) a shift from manufacture-led garment production to retailer-led production, with a concomitant plant closures and downsizing. Consequently, 300 plants closed down between 1989 and 1993 and small production factories with fewer than 20 workers increased from 22% in the early 1970s to 75 % in early 1990s, leading to a loss of 33,000 employment

opportunities.

(2) rapid increase in offshore sourcing. Label checks indicate that about 60% or more of major labels sold at Canadian department stores are made in Asia. Many Canadian retailers such as Sears Canada and the Hudson's Bay Company have established buying offices in various Asian countries.

(3) increased penetration of the Canadian garment retail industry by US retailers who are gaining an ever larger share of the retail market. Say, for Wal-Mart only, its department store market share increased from 16% in 1994 to 40% in 2000, not to say the acquisition of majority ownership of Club Monaco by Ralph Lauren in 1997 and the introduction of Old Navy discount retail stores to Canada in 2001.

(4) increasing apparel imports resulted from the lifting of textile and clothing quotas stipulated in the different trade agreements. As a result, imports increased by 24% between 2000 and 2004.

(5) shrinking of work force and expansion of the informal economy through contracting out. While there was a loss of almost 50% of the workforce between 1984 and 2000, there has been a steady growth in the use of home-based workers, undocumented workers, and contract employees as well as re-emergence of sweatshops.

(6) decline in wages. The average annual salary in clothing manufacture industry had remained consistently lower than the overall manufacturing sector. In 2002, average salary in the Canadian clothing manufacturing

industry was \$23,175 when compared to \$41,541 in the overall manufacturing sector. (Industry Canada, 2005).

All of the above changes have consequently brought about massive lay-offs and displacement of garment workers in the early 1990s. Many of the workers are women from Asian countries such as Hong Kong, China, Vietnam and India. Given the challenges of the industry, many women find themselves in the difficult predicament of sewing garments at home on a piece rate basis.

The five Toronto immigrant women garment homeworkers in Chapter Two, known as *Scarf*, *Jacket*, *Trench-Coat*, *Shirt* and *Pants*, all had personal experiences of the restructuring of the garment industry. Their work lives reflected exploitative labour standards, low wages, and no job security. These five women immigrated to Toronto in different period of time and thus witnessed the ups and downs of the clothing industry. Four out of the five women, *Scarf*, *Jacket*, *Trench-Coat*, and *Pants*, immigrated to Toronto in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the Canadian garment manufacturing was blooming. These four women found it very easy to enter the clothing industry where the salary was fairly reasonable. Even for *Pants*, who knew little about sewing, was recruited by a garment factory. Contrary to *Shirt*, who came in the early 1990s, not only experienced difficulties in locating a job in the garment factory, but also faced low wages. This time coincided with the first stage of restructuring of the industry. Currently, all of them are either in a stage of under-employment or at the edge of being lay off. The socio-economic challenges faced by

these five immigrant women again reveal how the personal living standard is affected by political and social context of globalization. In the next section, we describe the working conditions of homeworkers in the context of globalization.

Working Conditions of Homeworkers

In order to meet the challenge of the ever-increasing global competition, home-based work became the prevailing form of informal employment, in particular, for the manufacturing of women's and children's wear (Secretariat of the Commission for Labor Cooperation, 2000). Although the number of homeworkers is difficult to estimate, studies illustrate that there is "a ration of one job in the informal [contractual, precarious jobs] sector to three or four jobs in the formal sector" (Secretariat of the Commission for Labor Cooperation, 2000: 43). In 1991, there was an estimate of 20,000 homeworkers in Canada. In the informal sector, the labour laws and income tax system are often violated.

Earning at minimum wage

Clothing has been characterized as low-wage and labour intensive industry. Historically and presently, the industry offers low wages as its competitive advantage, and women and immigrants are employed as a pool of inexpensive labour. As a matter of fact, the industry is internally differentiated by gender and ethnicity (Eaton & Dagg, 2004; Ng, 1999). As a whole, homeworkers earn less than the minimum wage, face more workers' right

violation and suffer high level of psychological stress (Ng, 1999).

A study of 25 garment homeworkers in Toronto over a five year period by Ng (1999) indicates that the wages of sewing machines operators have not arisen since the 1980s. In fact, the five women featured in Chapter 2 reported a gradual decline in the piece rate over the years. For instance, *Jacket* complained that she used to get \$3 to \$4 for sewing a skirt 10 years ago. Now she is being paid \$2.8 to \$3 per piece. In Ng's (1999) study, the average hourly rate reported is 6 to 8 dollars, with a lowest hourly rate of 2 dollars and a highest 17 dollars. While the lowest \$2 and the highest \$17 are unique cases, the wages reported fall within the range of \$3 to \$ 12. On the whole, the wages seldom exceed the minimum wage stipulated by the government. Furthermore, the Employment Standards Act also stipulates that for homeworkers, 10% should be added to cover overhead costs. Currently, the minimum wage set by the Ontario government as at September 2005 is \$7.45 per hour while the minimum wage for garment homeworkers is \$8.25. The five homeworkers profiled here earned around \$7 per hour to a maximum of about \$10 per hour. The picture is obvious that the minimum wage becomes the maximum wage for the workers. In addition, all of the five homeworkers complained that once they become skilled at what they are sewing, and begin to make more than minimum wage, the employers drop the piece rate so their earning remains at the level of minimum wage. In addition to low wages, homeworkers also face challenges of late payments or being paid less than the agreed upon rate (Ng, 1999).

Although in Canada, homeworkers are generally entitled to the same rights as all other workers do, including minimum wage and all statutory benefits, these employment standards are either not being enforced or are not enforceable. For instance, most employers regard homeworkers as self-employed and do not provide vacation pay, over-time pay, unemployment insurance, and other medical benefits. Basically, homeworkers are a group of precarious workers who are most vulnerable to employer exploitation.

Personal investment and overhead costs

There are a lot of personal investments required of the homeworkers before they can start sewing at home. First, they need to amass money to purchase at least one and normally two industrial quality sewing machines. These machines may cost \$300 to over \$3,000 each, depending on whether they are brand new or second hand. The homeworkers also have to pay for the overhead costs such as lighting, heat, and machine maintenance fee. In many cases, they have to pay for thread. Figure 2 (2.1 – 2.7) and Figure 3 (3.1 – 3.8) show the working environment of the homeworkers and the sewing tools respectively. As illustrated in the photos, the homeworkers have designated part of the basement for their work where they install two sewing machines, a table for pressing the finished garments, and cabinet for storing the different types of thread. All these are not paid by the employer.

Physical and mental health issues

Homeworkers suffer from a variety of physical and mental health threats due to the

repetitive nature of their work and the isolated working environment. Physical health issues include different kinds of repetitive strain syndrome such as back pain, shoulder pain, neck pain, knee pain, and arm pain, numbness in arms, hands, and fingers as well as eye strain (Ng, 1999). Like *Shirt*, *Jacket*, and *Trench Coat*, they all reported various degree of injury and pain in their body. *Shirt* talked about the hurt in her hands and arms she got from handling the heavy leather sofa cover. *Jacket* complained about the pain in her feet and knees while *Trench Coat* grumbled at her back pain. Some homeworkers in Ng's (1999) study suffered from allergies such as itchiness and rashes, and also stuffiness due to the dust produced by the fabric in the sewing process.

In addition, being the major care-giver for the family, the homeworkers worked for long hours between housework and sewing. For instance, *Scarf* sewed when her children had gone to school or after they had gone to bed. In between, she took care of the children and worked on household chores. In the long run, this merging of the public and private spheres resulted in extremely long working hours and consequently created psychological pressure that may affect the women's mental health in an unconscious way. Not only do homeworkers work for long hours, they also work in isolation. As the five women homeworkers described, the employers deliver the cut garments to their home for them to sew and come to collect the finished products. Basically, the homeworkers do not need to leave their homes. Being confined at home, the homeworkers experience a great sense of isolation and the radio becomes the major channel of getting outside information.

Consequently, the social isolation escalates the degree of exclusion from the society, making it more difficult for the women to re-enter the formal labour market. All these labour rights and health issues were brought to the attention of the union organizers and social activists. In order to fight against injustice and empower the homeworkers to face the challenges, a Homeworkers Association (HWA) was established. In the next section, we tell the story about this organization.

History and Functions of Homeworkers' Association (HWA)

Since the entry into World Trade Organization, many Canadian garment and textile closed down. During the period from 1989 to 1993, more than 300 garment factories closed, losing 33 thousands of employment opportunities (Ng, 2003). At the same time, factories tended to reduce in size. In the early 1970s, only 22 % manufacturers employed workers less than 20. The rate rose to 75% in the early 1990s. In 2000, the data reached 85%, among them, nearly 80% employed workers less than four (Ng, 2002a; Yanz, Jeffcott, Ladd, & Atlin, 1999). However, the export of garment from Canada did not dropped during the early 90's but was on the rise. A research study found out that instead of being displaced due to closing down of factories, many women sew garments at home (Poon, 2004; Wong, 1999). In reality, many of the garment women workers became self-employed as home-based workers. There gradually emerged a large informal "underground" (secret) family operated garment factories, taking orders from larger garment manufacturers (Ng, 2002a; 2002b). In the meantime, these subcontractors

reduced salary to improve their competitiveness. In other words, more and more sweatshops appeared, which became the major employers of Asian immigration women originated from Hong Kong, China, India and Vietnam. As it is difficult for them to keep surviving at this industry, they could only be pushed to the edge of society and intensely exploited by the subcontractors.

From Fall 1991 to 1993, a series of workshops and conference were conducted and sub-committee formed by various social advocacy groups such as Workers' Information and Action Centre of Toronto (WIACT), International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) (which joined with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, ACTWU, to form UNITE, Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, in 1995), Apparel Textile Action Committee (ATAC) and so on to study and publicize the deteriorating homeworking condition. For instance, a documentary produced by French CBC -Zone Libre vividly described the persistent and worsening situation of home-based workers.

The establishment of Homeworkers' Association (HWA)

As a result of the concerted efforts by unions, community and church groups, the Homeworkers' Association (HWA) was formed in May 1992. These concerned groups of activists continue to speak out against deteriorating wages and employment prospect of garment workers due to globalization and work restructuring. The HWA is the first Association for homeworkers ever formed in

Canada. When HWA was first formed, it was housed within the ILGWU. This affiliation was a landmark in labour movement as the labour laws in Ontario did not facilitate unionization of homeworkers and it is still true nowadays. Thus, the formation of HWA within ILGWU, acting like an “associate” local of the union, signified the inclusion of non-unionized workers in some form of collective bargaining and union benefits. In 1995, Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) was established by the amalgamation of WIACT and ILGWU, and naturally UNITE became the umbrella organization for HWA.

By 2003, however, in consideration of the persistent negative changes in the garment sector affecting the composition and demographics of the union movement, the leadership of UNITE had to reassess its relationship with HWA. HWA officially became a part of the Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNC-TO), a Chinese Canadian social justice group for several logistical-cultural reasons as follows:

- (1) UNITE itself experienced difficulties as they faced decrease in membership and funding as the garment industry was downsizing rapidly.
- (2) Over 90% of the members of HWA are Cantonese-speaking women of Chinese origin. They know little English. There was a cultural gap between HWA members and the leadership of UNITE who tended to be English-speaking. UNITE thought that a Chinese organization may be more compatible with HWA and be able to better serve their needs.

Thus, CCNC-TO was approached because it is a Chinese Canadian organization serving the Chinese community. The CCNC-TO office is located downtown, a place that is welcome and convenient to the HWA members. Based on this cultural match, an agreement between UNITE and CCNC-TO was reached that HWA would be transferred from UNITE to CCNC-TO with a one-time funding of \$50,000. In July 2003, HWA was formally transferred from UNITE to CCNC-TO.

Mandate and services of HWA

The purpose of the HWA was to raise awareness of the working conditions of home-based workers and to provide a reference point and support group for these workers. HWA volunteers organize sewing skills training, ESL classes, and social activities for its members, who are largely unorganized. The objectives of HWA are:

- (1) to inform homeworkers about their workplace rights and assist them in exercising these rights,
- (2) to provide support to homeworkers and help them overcome extreme isolation through organizing social and recreational activities,
- (3) to be a vehicle where homeworkers can come together to develop their own capacity to respond to issues, share strategies and find collective solutions,
- (4) to provide an opportunity for sharing skills and experiences between homeworkers and other factory workers.

In compliance with its mandate, HWA provides the following services and activities:

- (1) Free referral and information on work related issues such as employment standards, health and safety.
- (2) Information on employment insurance, welfare, and other social services.
- (3) Recreation activities such as summer picnics and holiday parties, field trips, socials, etc (See Figure 8, 9, 10 & 13).
- (4) Newsletter in Chinese.
- (5) Leadership training, workshops and seminars on health, labour rights.
- (6) Skills training and upgrading classes such as sewing, pattern-making, and advanced sewing skills (See Figure 6).
- (7) ESL classes to upgrade members' English proficiency (See Figure 4).
- (8) Interest classes for adult members such as Mandarin class, foot massage class, computer class, etc (See Figure 5 & 7).
- (9) Summer classes for members' children such as art and crafts class, math, Mandarin etc.
- (10) Research and information on the garment industry.
- (11) Community development, human rights and advocacy (See Figure 14).
- (12) Provision of childcare when mothers were taking classes (See Figure 11 & 12).
- (13) Filing complaints for workers on back wages, injuries, unjust lay-off, etc.

The biggest challenges in organizing homeworkers are locating them, as they are working in their own homes scattered over the whole Toronto region, and understanding the disperse network of contracting and homeworking. The other major problems are funding and identifying strategies for further development for HWA. In the next chapter, we

outline the process of how HWA struggled to survive and how this process at the same time empowered its members. We hope that the story of struggle for survival will arouse social awareness about the future of HWA and stimulate more thorough and sympathetic discussion on helping the women homeworkers to face their challenges.

Chapter 4

Our Struggles, Our Learning, and Our Future

Introduction

In this last chapter, we tell the stories about how HWA (Homeworkers' Association) struggles for survival for the past few years and what the members of the Executive Committee (hereafter called the Executive) of HWA had learned when they tried to tackle all the challenges in a committed and courageous way. In a situation of stringent financial resources and deteriorating labour market, the Executive have strived very hard to keep the organization running, to continue to provide services while at the same trying to secure funding for maintenance and development. Although the challenges were enormous, and the struggles had been difficult, members of the Executive have learned a great lesson in the process and subsequently acquire surprising and amazing personal growth. In the following sections, we tell stories about their struggles and learning.

Our Struggles

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the major consistent challenges of HWA have always been lack of funding and internal capability of the Executive. These challenges lead to a further threat that is lack of confidence in designing a direction for future development. The HWA Executive had been led by the management of UNITE for almost 10 years. Because of the language gap there was not much high level communication between the

anglophone union leaders and the HWA Executives. The HWA coordinator who spoke Cantonese became the major communication bridge and the chief administrative officer. Ever since the transfer of HWA from UNITE to CCNC-TO, CCNC-TO has adopted a community-based participatory action approach to work with the HWA Executive. Community-based participatory action approach emphasizes "the active engagement and influence of community members in all aspects of the ... process" (Israel et al., 1998, p 177) and involves shared ownership, research, community-based analysis and community action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). There are two reasons that the Board of CCNC-TO adopts this approach:

- (1) CCNC-TO knows very clearly that in order to empower the members of the HWA Executive and to build the capacity of the organization, a high degree of involvement and rich opportunities of action are needed to nurture that the capacity. It is a consistent belief of the Board of CCNC-TO that capacity building needs nurturing more than mere leading.
- (2) For long term development, HWA needs to become self-funding and autonomous. It is hoped that HWA will finally become an independent Chinese women workers organization, no longer a subordinate under CCNC-TO.

However, the road to independence is difficult and full of obstacles. As HWA is

housed under CCNC-TO since July 2003, both the HWA coordinator and the Executive Director (ED) of CCNC-TO are assisting the HWA Executive Committee in its planning and administration. As the ED of CCNC-TO during the period from September 2004 to June 2005, I had the privilege to stride with the Executive through the struggles, to experience the challenges, to learn together, and to share our joy, anxiety, and lives together during the most difficult period of the time. At a time when there was no funding for HWA and thus no coordinator could be hired. In order to survive, we strived to sort out a plan for further development in the midst of financial uncertainty. I am thus in a position of the immediate past ED of CCNC-TO during this difficult period of time to tell the stories of HWA's struggles.

In September 2005 when I first assumed the ED position, I had the first meeting with HWA Executive. It was a time when the project coordinator had to leave the organization because the funding transferred from UNITE had been used up. New funding was not available yet. The Executive had just attended the first leadership skills training workshop in July. In that first meeting, I could feel the depressed mood and lack of confidence among the members of the Executive. As the project coordinator had left, the Executive was asked to try their best to learn to take up some of the tasks of the coordinator such as chairing meetings, deciding the agenda, taking minutes, and so on. It was a pressure for the members of the Executive as they are highly skilled in sewing but lack of organizational skills. The strategies that CCNC-TO adopted in that critical situation were on one hand working

more rigorously on writing grant proposals and organizing art auction fundraiser for HWA while on the other hand trying our best to equip the Executive so that they could develop confidence in taking up a leading role in the organization.

As a result of our efforts, three grant proposals were approved and HWA was able to secure some funding for next year. This boosted the Executives' morale and confidence. Next we worked on capacity building and strategic planning which were actually integrated in the grant proposals. In terms of capacity building, we made use of shared decision-making, story telling and photo exhibition to facilitate members of the Executive. Through shared decision-making, members of the Executive were given the power to make informed decision about personnel, financial and planning issues. Through story telling, five members were encouraged to share their personal stories and to make their voices heard. This was a very empowering process and expedited the process of them knowing each other. Through the stories, they realized that their problems were not their own. There were a lot of commonalities in their lives. This book is the outcome of this story telling process.

In addition to telling stories, the Executive shared photos of their home and working environment. The photo exhibition of their homes, sewing tools, and sewing products (See Figure 1) in public venue was an affirmative process of their contribution to both family and society.

In terms of strategic planning, CCNC-TO, on behalf of HWA, invited community members to form an Advisory Committee of HWA to give advise on the future development of the association. The Committee is composed of people of such various expertise as university professors, labour rights workers, community development workers, human right lawyer, union leaders, fashion designer, and economic analyst. At the same time, we urged the members of the Executive to elect among themselves office bearers so that there could be clear-cut division of labour among themselves. There were no office positions within the Executive until March 2005. All members refrained from taking up any obvious responsibility and always acted as a group. Only after consistent persuasion and encouragement, were they willing to elect among themselves office bearers. As a result, the Executive became a real formal Executive Committee. This was a big leap. As the ED, I was surprised by their growth and commitment.

The first task on strategic development for the Advisory Committee and the Executive Committee was to study the feasibility of setting up a garment co-operative by HWA. At the very beginning, we endeavored to get as much involvement from the Executive as possible, although the task may be too difficult for them. I tried to deliver and explain all information to the Executive related to the nature and operation of co-operative, research studies in this field and the success and failure of co-operatives in Toronto area. Members of the Executive and I visited garment factories and talked to the management of the factories as well as some self-employed fashion designers to discuss the feasibility of

collaboration. I interviewed various co-operatives in Toronto to learn from their experience and shared the information with the Advisory and Executive Committees. One executive member, *Scarf*, went with me to deliver a talk on HWA to students in George Brown College and promoted the idea of setting up a co-operative. All these efforts aimed not only to gather information to facilitate the decision-making on the establishment of garment co-operative, but also to demonstrate CCNC-TO's commitment in empowering the members of HWA.

Due to the modeling effect on capacity building from CCNC-TO and the Advisory Committee, members of the HWA Executive were able to regain confidence and willing to face further challenges with courage and commitment. I am proud to say that I have witnessed the personal growth among the members of the Executive that can be described as surprising and extraordinary. *Scarf* showed a great leap in her growth. At first, all members of the Executive would say "NO" to many forms of interviews or public sharing of their work lives. They were extremely suspicious about the media because they were scared of being targeted at the workplace if they were exposed publicly in the media. They lacked the confidence in their ability of expression. In cases when they agreed to attend the media conference, they insisted that only the lower portion of their body, say their feet, to be shown in the newspapers or TV. But at the later stage, some of them were able to muster the courage to take a little step forward— two members of the Executive accepted radio interview. This was a

strong positive reinforcement for the Board of CCNC-TO and myself.

What was more surprising and encouraging was that *Scarf* was able to take the initiative. She has a lot of potentials. She was the first one who was willing to be interviewed in person by TV and had her face shown on the screen. This was an unbelievable jump. Next she was willing to take up the Chairperson position in the Executive. She has set a good example for other members. The members' stories about their learning are told in the next section.

HWA: Our Home for Learning

From its inception, HWA has been providing a much needed reference point for garment workers to discuss their common conditions (either through social activities, cooking classes, or information sharing and discussion of their working conditions), and to obtain further training and skills (through English classes and training sessions such as pattern making and sewing machine operation courses). The HWA served an important function for this group of Canadian garment workers, many of whom are immigrants, by breaking down social isolation, promoting community cohesion, and enhancing their skills and self-esteem in a hostile and depressing work environment. As a result, members of the Executives are willing to spend much of their precious time to manage the Association. Some of them have been participating in HWA for five years and beyond. At HWA, their needs for socialization, support, information sharing, and after all, need

for learning, are met. HWA is their second home where they can lead an active learning life. In the following section, we focus on the learning process and outcome of the five HWA executive members profiled in Chapter 2.

Our Learning

Shirt, Pants, and Jacket had participated in a computer class offered by Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of University of Toronto. They all gladly admitted that they liked the computer course very much. They were able to overcome the phobia about using computer and through manipulation of the computer "monster" they had developed a sense of competence and pride in their learning ability. In another leadership skills training course offered to the Executive members in July 2004, the five women came to know themselves and each other more. It is how *Jacket* reflected on her own learning in the leadership skills training course:

Jacket: The leadership skills training workshop helped me a lot. Now I know that there is such a thing as "division of labour." When you run an organization, you need to divide the tasks up among the members and to motivate people to take up the different tasks. I knew none of these ideas before participating in the workshop. Moreover, I learned how to organize and conduct meetings.

In another occasion, *Pants* represented HWA to participate in the task group on Art Auction fundraiser organized by CCNC-TO during the period from July 2004 to February 2005. The Art Auction aimed to raise funds for HWA. In the process, *Pants* realized that the

more you give, the more you get. She explained that:

Pants: *Besides the computer course and leadership skills training workshop, I have learned much in the process of helping the fundraiser, the Art Auction. Although I am a girl-guide leader, I have never participated in a fundraising activity in such depth. In fact, I did not help much because I know nothing about art auction. But I tried my best to attend every meeting. I loved to hear what people talked about the alternatives, how they solve problems, and how they reach decision and agreement. Also now I know how much preparatory work is needed to organize such an activity. I really enjoyed the process. One important learning is that I realize that when you work more and participate more, you get and learn more.*

As mentioned in the previous section, **Scarf** is the one who showed the greatest degree of personal development. She is very reflective and able to think several steps ahead. Here is what she describes her learning:

Scarf: *At HWA, I got the opportunities to know other workers. I felt much less isolated as before. HWA provided me a lot of educational information. For instance, I became more informed about issues related to labour rights, health, computer, and leadership skills. Most importantly, working at HWA exposed myself to the society and stimulated me to think more about my own future. Now I always contemplate on what I should do next and what I really want to do later on. Right now, I want to improve my English first. After that, I want to further study. Ideally, I want to study at the*

college to get a degree. I am very interested in fashion design and I have been imagining that I may get a degree in fashion design. Currently my English standard is only at Grade 3 or 4 level. I have a lot to work on. Ah! Today I just got the brochure from the Toronto School Board about the courses on English and other adult education courses. I am going to study the brochure in depth when I get home and most probably I will enroll in several courses.

An amazing experiential learning that has occurred is the Executive's participation in the recruitment process for the new project coordinator. The Status of Women Canada² has generously funded HWA to develop its capacity and HWA can make use of the financial resources to hire a part-time coordinator. With deliberate efforts, CCNC-TO tried its best to involve all members of the Executive in the hiring process. Four of the members sat on the interview panel, asked questions in Cantonese and Mandarin, and reported the interviewees' performance to other members of the Executive. As a team, the Executive decided on whom to offer the appointment of the position. In the process, they discussed what HWA's priority should be, what skills are required of the project coordinator and what the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate possessed. At the end of the recruitment process, we found out that it is one of the most empowering activities in which members of the Executive not only practiced and exercise what they had learned in

² Status of Women Canada (SWC) is the federal government agency which promotes gender equality, and the full participation of women in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the country.

the leadership skills training workshop, but also experienced in the first time a gorgeous sense of ownership and self-determination. For instance, **Jacket** recalled that:

Jacket: *At first, I didn't expect that I could learn so much from the interviewing process. I myself have never had gone through any interview process. I did not know what an interview would look like. I also did not know what questions to ask the applicants. After having sat on the interview panel, I now know what to do in an interview. I got more confidence in myself if I need to go through the same process in future. Furthermore, the more people I met, the more I found myself ignorant. When I talked with the applicants and found that they knew so much, I felt that I am ignorant. I found it was quite ironic that I was the one who knew so little to sit on the interview panel. Anyway, it is a very exciting and eye-opening experience.*

Pants and **Scarf** echoed a similar learning experience. **Scarf** added that:

Scarf: *I realized how simple-minded we had been at the beginning of the interview. At first, when we tried to select among the applicants, we only focused on their past experience in sewing and knowledge about the garment industry. Later on, we found out that a project coordinator needed more than just working experience in the garment factory. In the second round of the interview, we looked for different things in the applicants. The talking among the Executive was very important in helping us to clarify what we really want from the project coordinator. We now know how to make decision about personnel issues.*

The rich learning experiences shared by the five women homeworkers are strong evidences supporting that CCNC-TO is right in adopting the community-based participatory action approach. Learning can become very empowering if it is grounded within the learning community and if the learners take the lead and initiative. Based on all these learning, what is the next step for HWA? With the limited resources available, how can HWA continue its development and benefit the community of garment homeworkers? The discussion in the next section tries to throw some light on these questions.

Our Future

After a series of brainstorming sessions and review of the recent development of HWA, the Executive agreed upon the following priorities:

- (1) to launch a new wave of membership drive to recruit more members,
- (2) to connect and consolidate existing members and to attract new members through various social activities,
- (3) to upgrade and empower the Executive and the general members on public speaking skills, organizational and leadership skills,
- (4) to further develop the Executive's capacity through more thorough implementation of community-based participatory action approach,
- (5) to offer regular sewing skills training courses to upgrade members' skill levels,
- (6) to assess the needs for advanced sewing skills and pattern-making skills

through survey and interview,
(7) to advocate for more substantial support from the government and the industry in upgrading workers' skills level. This is necessary if Canada's garment industry want to gear to the high-end garment production.

One area of need identified from the whole process of struggling and learning is the need to upgrade their skills so that they can be as versatile in sewing as possible. All of the five women homeworkers, particularly *Scarf*, have reiterated the existing gap in skills level among the garment workers (refer to Chapter 2) and the importance of skill upgrading for garment workers' survival. There is a *great need for workers who can sew high-end garment products and who can sew samples for designers*. Advocacy for resources on advanced sewing skills training will thus become one of HWA and CCNC-TO's short-term priorities.

HWA and its umbrella organization, CCNC-TO, will work hand-in-hand to actualize the above tasks through various strategies. Publishing and launching this book about HWA is one of the strategies. Holding a photo exhibition in public venue is another strategy to raise social awareness about the situation and challenges that are facing the homeworkers. The next activity aims to raise HWA's visibility and recruits new members by holding a fashion design contest for homeworkers in the near future. This contest will showcase homeworkers' talents in sewing and design.

What HWA needs most in accomplishing its goals is community and

government support. We take this opportunity to summon support from all levels of government in assisting this vulnerable group of women garment workers to develop and upgrade themselves so that they can continue to contribute to the society, just as what they had been doing over the past two decades.

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