

Sylvia Walsh

RMIT University, AUSTRALIA

Fashion Hunter Gatherer

Abstract:

Fashion and well-being unite with ethical entrepreneurship at the fashion retailer, Hunter Gatherer, (HG) created by the Australian welfare agency, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL).

From the 1930s the BSL began designing a future focussed on minimising social injustice. Today, the organisation continues to fight for a poverty-free Australia. In practice, the BSL carries out its mission by making sustainable, community contributions. The BSL researches and disseminates its work in publications that document economic and social need and propose reforms for a more equitable and inclusive society.

This paper showcases how the BSL, through its HG stores, provides solutions to environmental, economic and social issues. Workplace improvements originating at HG, promote the well-being of HG clients and staff. At the same

time, HG's ethical work practices are an example for the fashion industry's overall improvement and long-term health.

The BSL's HG stores emerged in the 1980s as an innovative social and business enterprise selling recycled, vintage clothing and new, no-sweatshop accredited clothing for the fashion conscious youth-market. To achieve no-sweatshop accreditation, new fashions made by HG do not exploit outworkers. The BSL was the first Australian fashion business accredited as a no-sweatshop label manufacturer and retailer.

The HG enterprise is proving that within the fashion market, it is possible to offer desirable, ethically made clothing at competitive prices. The BSL's textile and clothing reclamation, recycling and fashion renaissance business runs to high ethical, environmental and production standards.

The HG's story demonstrates a charity maintaining low-overhead activities and sustainable initiatives that respond to the fashion market. The BSL also plays an environmental role by salvaging some of the millions of tonnes of textiles from becoming landfill each year. Simultaneously, the BSL's new fashion manufacturing business discourages the generally poor standards of working conditions in the garment production industry.

Objective:

This paper will discuss the setting up and operation of a unique Australian fashion business driven by a social justice philosophy. It will be shown how this business has grown to become a leader in the Australian fashion industry while, at the same time, meticulously applying the rules set out in mandatory legislation as well as enthusiastically embracing a series of voluntary codes of practice.

Rationale:

With the subject of corporate social responsibility widely reported upon throughout the western world, it is timely to look at one particular initiative in the Australian fashion industry. The case study of the HG may stimulate developments along similar lines elsewhere.

Methodology:

In order to contextualise the HG enterprise, this paper covers the following; the Australian garment manufacturing industry, an employment refuge enhancing well-being; the HG fashion social enterprise and its role in growing well-being; fashion industry homeworker workforce, well-being evolution; mandatory legislation and voluntary code of practice, fashion industry homeworker protection and Australian TCF industry future enhanced well-being.

The Context - Australian Garment Manufacturing Industry, an employment refuge enhancing well-being:

Key to this story is the garment manufacturing homemaker or outworker. In the contemporary Australian context, the term homemaker is interchangeable with the title outworker. A homemaker is someone who works, usually at home, away from the employer's premises, outside the official garment manufacturing factory environment.

The garment sector of the Australian Textiles Clothing and Footwear Industry (TCF) was and is still, an employment haven for new arrivals to Australia. It is a business where new migrants can set themselves up commercially with minimal skills, equipment and basic English language. For migrants, being able to easily blend into a cash economy provides instant economic well-being. On the whole, the migrant workforce was originally escaping from post-WW2 Europe. Subsequent waves of migrants, over the decades and from all parts of the world, take up homemaking, seen by them, as a great start to a better life in Australia.

From the outset, migrant workers were happy to be paid for seemingly easy, lucrative work and any personal costs appeared minimal. By working from home, migrants were able to initially feel less threatened in a new culture where they lacked English language skills and where finding and paying for child-care was a problem if they were to work outside the home. In small,

informal 'factories' as well as in lounge rooms, shop fronts, garages and sheds the garment sewing industry thrived.

Cut and bundled work, delivered to homeworkers, is taken away as finished garments with ease and low-cost, compared to in-factory production. In times when clothing manufacture was booming in Australia, the home and homeworkers were an extension of the official, clothing factory system. Homeworkers handled extra production requirements on a needs basis during busy times. This option made economic sense because homeworkers accepted whatever rates offered and deadlines demanded. Some comfort was found by the homeworkers in the fact that the work distribution networks were established and operated by other migrants, usually from the same language group.

At first, homeworkers' production supplemented factory output in times of high production but began to replace mainstream production when the costs of keeping large Australian factories operating did not compete well against off-shore production rates. Homeworkers are valued for cheap skills and compliance to the employer's demands. They were often less trouble than the official, unionised workforce because they did not try to negotiate better deals because of fear of jeopardising the flow of future work.

While some workers may prefer to work from home because it enables them to generate an income while meeting family responsibilities, most homeworkers cannot get work elsewhere and have little choice but to work from home at the rates set by the companies. The well-being originally provided by working in garment manufacturing has been eroded by economic forces.

In recent decades, various investigations have been carried out and published regarding the state of the Australian TCF Industry. The 2008 TCF Industry review, *Building Innovative Capacity*, was published and key stakeholders are responding to the recommendations. Several previous Government reviews have been undertaken and representatives from across concerned society have contributed. Investigations combine the efforts of the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA), peak TCF Industry employers' bodies, social justice organisations such as the BSL, TCF education and TCF companies. The focus is on collecting and data on human resources and social justice issues from National and International economic perspectives. A range of mandatory and voluntary measures have been developed support employers and TCF employees alike. Corporate responsibility has emerged as a growing area of importance.

The Hunter Gatherer (HG) - Fashion Social Enterprise:

In summary, the BSL is committed to achieving decent, sustainable employment as a core human right and so providing social and economic benefits across the community. The BSL Vision and Mission are based on a commitment to supporting and improving the well-being of all workers including those employed in the TCF Industry, particularly the Garment manufacturing sector.

Overall, the BSL vision is of an Australia free from poverty lead by informed, collaboration. A respectful, inclusive, sustainable society; that challenges inequity; shares prosperity and emphasises society and corporate responsibility, is an overall aim. Through the BSL policies and strategies, the organisation supports social change; builds community capacity; and develops sustainable, enterprise projects and ventures. The BSL promotes and leads by example in corporate responsibility.

A socially responsible enterprise sets out to become a business where profits are reinvested into community services and resources. A social enterprise is responsible for sustaining society in its operations, providing established and new, innovative services and products for the community. Within the terms of social enterprise, the BSL run their own responsible businesses that, additional to recycling second-hand donated goods, include an optical frames

wholesaling business, Modstyle, and no-sweatshop accredited fashion retail and manufacturing company, HG.

Hunter Gatherer Fashion Business, Growing well-being:

The first HG store opened in St Kilda, 1998, specifically selling second-hand, vintage clothing selected from donations. By 2001, HG began designing and manufacturing its own clothing range to compliment the second-hand stock. The launch of the no-sweatshop label coincided with the opening of the second HG store in Fitzroy.

The BSL HG stores have become innovative enterprises offering an assorted fashion range based on recycled, vintage clothing mixed with new, no-sweatshop labelled, fashion clothing and accessories. Using limited edition prints and one-off fabrics and other unique design elements, the range is made locally in Melbourne. HG's retro. inspired creations have attracted interest from the media and public alike and the no-sweatshop brand label is an additional encouragement for socially conscious consumers to purchase. Responding to consumer demand, HG was well positioned to provide for changes in customer and community mood that included; increased social conscience; changes in consumer priorities, tastes and budgets.

BSL HG is a true 'rags to riches' story. The path to no-sweatshop manufacturing is a story from 'rags', items that started out as charity donations of discarded second-hand clothing, emerging as a desirable fashion label. The growth in numbers of consumers purchasing recycled fashion stretched the supply of BSL donation supplies indicating potential to manufacture. HG went into production to keep up supply of stocks in their original store and subsequently opened another store because of growing demand. At the same time, the BSL closed its network of kerbside collection bins so keeping up the flow of donations of quality textiles and clothing, remained and increased as a priority. Australian businesses responded to the new need for alternative donation collection by having their own donation bins on their sites.

For HG, maintaining stocks and filling fashion gaps in the donated goods range with new, original designs, minimising the impact of environmental waste combined with support of disadvantaged people and improving well-being, was the goal. HG staff became designers while keeping informed of customer requirements. With a small, efficient design team doubling as sales staff, HG met the design challenge of creating and developing items that could be resourced quickly and easily and that had a point of design difference. Reducing design complexity for ease and therefore economy of production combined with minimum overheads; small, quick production runs; ethical conditions and fair wages ensures low retail prices without exploitation

of any workers or waste of resources. All HG proceeds then return to fund BSL programs and services.

BSL also wanted HG's new fashion items to meet the new, no-sweatshop label criteria. Fashion manufacturing was new to the BSL and posed some challenges for the organisation. Being aware of controversial issues relating to working conditions in the garment production industry in Australia, directed the BSL to action consistent with their vision and mission. Finding suitable resources to produce their fashions took HG into the area of the homemaker manufacturing. Sourcing and coordinating of materials, systems and expertise to ethical production standards and to no-sweatshop criteria was demanding. No-sweatshop accreditation compliance for HG, brought with it unique workforce challenges as a clearer awareness of poor working conditions emerged.

Following up no-sweatshop label accreditation in real manufacturing practice, meant a steep learning curve because HG started from scratch as a garment manufacturer without much industry knowledge. Working through and completing accreditation was reported by BSL staff, as a valuable learning curve, a lengthy and problematic process though positive in the end, that was documented and shared in BSL research presentations and publications.

Since March 2002, the BSL has been one of only four no-sweatshop accredited textile manufacturers in Australia, and the only accredited retailer through the two HG stores. This accreditation enables use of the no-sweatshop label in all garments, an important and symbolic label which guarantees that all garments are made in Australia under conditions which support the provision of award wages, workcover, superannuation and other legal work entitlements for both factory and home based outworkers.

Significant publicity, that assisted the HG establish a place in the Australian TCF Industry was obtained in 2002 when HG was invited to show at the Melbourne fashion festival. From then onwards, HG went from fashion strength to strength parallel to raised consumer interest and up-take of positive social and environmental action. Being acknowledged at the Fashion festival raised the profile of HG within industry and with local and international, designers, manufacturers and fashion consumers. Now, wearing the HG style of fashion has become a badge of honour for fashion followers who want to show that they have chosen not to buy new, that would probably support unethical practices, but are proud to buy 'second-hand'. Ethically produced and re-cycled fashion is now, often worn to display positive social images.

The research division of BSL is been active in social and economic investigations, publishing and sharing data and recommendations for government and other organisations. The Australian TCF Industry has been studied over recent years, comprehensive documents produced and ongoing action recommended. There have been a range of economic and social changes that have driven positive promotion, such as in the HG case.

One such BSL enlightening publication is, *Ethical Threads*, 2007, a report of a unique investigation of the Garment Industry particularly homeworkers and role of its own fashion social enterprise, HG. *Ethical Threads* highlights a consumer perception that there are no sweatshops producing garments in Australia when they are common practice. When this misconception was publicised, support for ongoing investigation and action was provided.

Protecting workers, the environment and therefore the entire community have been generally embraced as sustainable improvements for overall well-being.

The *Ethical Threads* report had a significant launch at an annual, Australian fashion event, Melbourne cup carnival in November 2007. Cup carnival is the time that the Australian TCF industry gathers with the Australian racing industry and general public, to celebrate fashion and horses. Important economically for the fashion industry and a great publicity opportunity, the

Cup carnival showcases established and new fashion. The celebration also hosts related fashion events and competitions. Timing the *Ethical Threads* report launch at Cup carnival provided a great opportunity to draw the attention of the assembled Fashion consumers and businesses to important issues and challenges facing the Fashion Industry workers.

Ethical Threads reported a generally low awareness of labour right issues; companies had lack of knowledge of local and international mechanisms monitoring labour rights in their supply chain. In other reports the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia (TCFUA) estimate that there are over 140,000 home-based outworkers in Victoria, just one state. It is also reported that a significant number, about 40% of Australian TCF workers are homeworkers. According to the TCFUA, wages are often as low as \$A3.70 an hour and most homeworkers do not receive sick leave, annual leave, superannuation or work cover. These homeworkers, predominantly women, have little opportunity to raise concerns, regulate workloads and lack employment security. The hours are long, often in excess of 14 hours a day, 6-7 days a week.

These issues lead to the BSL to sign the Homeworkers Code of Practice (HWCP) and become the first fashion brand in Australia to be accredited as a

no-sweatshop label manufacturer and retailer supporting employment conditions that respect the labour rights of all workers. BSL staff is represented on the HWCP committee together with TCF and educational organisations; fashion and textiles companies; and Fairwear administration, all contributing local and international input.

Increased interest in recycled, vintage fashion developed parallel to concern about all aspects of fair-trade. Interest in Fairtrade fashion and textiles has continually gained momentum and support from the press and fashion leaders and followers. For example, a Fairtrade fortnight in Melbourne in May 2008 featured a well supported parade and exhibition showing a variety of labels and fair-trade, ethically produced, textile products, including HG fashions.

Due to increased awareness and publicity, the TCF industry and its workers' situation is making positive progress but stakeholders recommend continued vigilance. Campaigns, such as that of the BSL, are increasing interest within up-and-coming fashion industry members. New labels, independent designers and design businesses are being supported by HG and in turn they are supporting improved social, economic and environmental conditions for the industry of the future. Ethical behaviour at all levels and corporate responsibility is becoming attractive to younger generations. HG has shown

that there is scope for organisations and individuals to improve awareness and increase action with improved policies and strategies and therefore, better well-being overall.

Fashion industry homeworker workforce, well-being evolution:

Research indicates that over the last two decades, the number of home-based outworkers has significantly increased. The garment industry has become increasingly globalised. In Australia, tariff reductions and increased monopolies by large retailers have contributed to the closure of factories and the shift to homeworkers, paid below the award, as a cheap option for the industry. In an industry where rock-bottom costs are the goal to maintain profits, managers become ruthless and workers can be vulnerable to unrealistic pressures.

In the TCF industry as a whole, conditions are bad physically for workers health and social well-being. Long hours worked for minimal pay has been the norm and with a piece-work system, where speed completing high numbers of units means higher rates of pay, repetitive strain injuries common and conditions around machines are dangerous, often non-compliant to safety regulations.

Throughout history, an uninformed, unorganised homeworking workforce has faced insecure employment. Homeworkers have not have the time, confidence, language or support to organise. Even if they can communicate with other workers, as well as lacking English skills the workforce comprises around 10 language groups other than English. Initially the TCFUA organisers found it difficult to identify and infiltrate the home-based workplaces hampering the aim to inform, organise and protect workers. Homeworkers were reluctant to communicate with the Union and activate because of feelings of vulnerability. Contractors or those distributing work and enforcing deadlines, exert pressure for homeworker compliance by not providing amounts of work to achieve liveable remuneration.

Mainstream manufacturers easily ignored homeworker's issues and became dependent on utilising homeworkers because they were a cheap, quick, accessible means of production. Factories now advertise for machinists to work at home which reduces costs of overheads compared with employing full-time workforce, and for home-based outworkers may be paid less than the award wages. This means that there may be four to five homeworkers working for the price of one award-paid factory worker.

There are often unfair expectations placed on homeworkers, who are usually women from non-English speaking backgrounds, to have in place the infrastructure and systems of a small to medium factories. For instance, the micro-scale of homeworkers businesses means that the outlay on computer systems, other technical resources and skills-building may be prohibitive for them but demanded by employers for continuity with factory operations.

Occasionally, small homeworking businesses became better established, knowledgeable and prosper through up-skilling. For instance, subsequent generations of the original, migrant founders, might undertake educational programs to value-add the family business. Up until recently, the migrant culture is to aspire for more lucrative and academic careers for their offspring. Developing skills growth opportunities have been recommended by industry studies.

Mandatory Legislation and Voluntary Code of Practice, Fashion industry
homeworker protection:

In 1994, Australian Homeworkers Campaign was initiated by the TCFUA. The campaign was based on a review of homeworkers and the Union commissioned document entitled *The Hidden Cost of Fashion*, subsequently

published in 1995. The TCFUA joined with community partners in 1996, for an expanded campaign, including the Fairwear campaign. Community partners were sought to gain access and expertise to enter into the homeworker area of employment that had not been officially open or formally investigated. The TCFUA, Fairwear and other contributors have used the information gathered to organise homeworkers, establish legislation and install a Retailers, Manufacturers, Homeworkers Code of Practice (HWCP).

The HWCP, a voluntary accreditation, operates parallel to the Federal Clothing Trades Award 1999, a legal requirement. The Award stipulates the basic conditions and entitlements manufacturers are required to provide employees and homeworkers. For example, all homeworkers are legally considered to be employees and are entitled to Award rates and entitlements such as superannuation, sick leave and a minimum of 20 hours work per week.

The Clothing Trades Award 1999 also requires all business that out-source any of their work to contractors or homeworkers, to register with the Board of Reference (BOR). Businesses registered with the BOR are required to supply quarterly lists of all suppliers in their manufacture network. When a manufacturer gives work to another business that officially employs a number

of people and receives work from a range of sources, that business can be considered as a contractor. Companies participating in the HWCP, need to acknowledge when a 'contractor' is not another 'business' but is actually a homemaker.

The Federal Government's Independent Contractors Act preserves the rights and entitlements of homeworkers outlined in relevant state and federal legislation. To become accredited to the Code, a manufacturer must install a series of agreements with all of its contractors that commit all parties to the set conditions. The contractor's sub-contractors must also enter written agreements and so on down the supply-chain, until all components of the process have been covered by agreement.

While the Award states that outworkers must be paid the Award pay rates, it is not translated into homeworkers' piece rates (rates of pay calculated on the breakdown of costs of producing separate parts of operations that combine to make up the total tasks needed to complete the whole item) and does not provide a method to do so. To assist accredited companies with this, the HWCP is developing a unique tool to translate the Award pay rate into outworkers' piece rates, the Garment Timing Manual.

The main function of the HWCP is to ensure a business's production-chain remains transparent. Accredited manufacturers need to take responsibility not just for their own behaviour, but to also for contractors'. Each party in the production-chain must provide information about the type and quantity of work distributed to other businesses, contractors or homeworkers, along with proof that any homeworkers involved have received at least the Award rates and conditions. This is the process that the BSL HG fashion business undertook to achieve its no-sweatshop label accreditation.

The HWCP as an independent incorporated body supported by union, industry and community associations. The HWCP and the no-sweatshop label are governed by the HWCP Committee Inc. which includes various representatives including from the BSL. The HWCP has been developed to assist businesses operate in an ethical fashion. The HWCP provides practical mechanisms for manufacturers to ensure consumer confidence that garments produced by accredited businesses have not been made to no-sweatshop labour standards.

The Future - Australian TCF collaboration, planning on enhanced well-being:

From the current research viewpoint, the problems of homeworker exploitation are reported to be entrenched in the core of the Australian TCF industry.

Ways to eliminate exploitation have been researched in recent years, recommending concerted effort by industry, unions, governments and consumers to ensure that businesses provide more than the minimum to meet their legal and ethical obligations to all workers, particularly homeworkers.

Mandatory measures are the law and voluntary systems are promoted to further help protect all workers in garment manufacturing. Socially responsible enterprises such as the BSL HG fashion business, lead the way for others. HG demonstrates that an enlightened fashion enterprise can operate commercially and ethically. The BSL HG enterprise has tapped into the current social mood that promotes ethically, sustainable well-being in the workplace and overall lifestyle benefits. For ethically motivated consumers finding original, one-off fashions has become a sign of fashion and social avant-garde and pride in leading the fashion responsibility stakes. HG portrays itself and has been publicised as a pro-active enterprise offering desirable products. On many levels HG is a fashion and social justice trend-setter.

The BSL HG no-sweatshop label appeals to the current Australian feeling that society should be fair, respectful, inclusive, and sustainable. Many Australians consider that social and corporate responsibility should challenge inequity, share prosperity, protect the environment and minimise the impact of waste

while building community capacity and sustainable enterprise. HG's socially conscious policies and strategies are pushing practical opportunities and achievements towards a future that promises enhanced well-being.

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