

Mary Scott
President
Provincial Council of Women of Manitoba
630 Westminster Ave.
Winnipeg, MB R3C 3S1

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Dear Ms. Scott,

I have recently completed my Master of Arts thesis entitled, "Experiences of Immigrant Women in the Winnipeg Garment Industry: Gender, Ethnicity and Class in the Global Economy." As discussed in the fall of 2005, I am providing you with a summary report of my study's major findings.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of immigrant women who have recently worked, or are working, in the manufacturing sector of the Winnipeg garment industry. During the fall of 2005, I conducted interviews with twenty-three participants who were asked to share their experiences of coming to Canada, working in this industry, and balancing work and home life. They were also asked to share their views and opinions on the local impact of the World Trade Organization's Agreement on Clothing and Textiles (ATC). This agreement set out a ten-year transitional process for the phase-out of previously imposed import quotas on clothing and textiles, which resulted in their ultimate elimination on January 1st, 2005. Consequently, the Canadian garment industry has declined by over 25 percent since January 2004, and this reduction was intensified with the lifting of global apparel quotas. In Winnipeg, shortly before the elimination of quotas on clothing and textiles, a number of garment companies shut down local plants and laid off their workers, often to relocate overseas and take advantage of lower wages in places like Guatemala, Mexico, Bangladesh and China. The loss of jobs for garment workers in Winnipeg has been drastic. In 2003, Manitoba had approximately 6,000 workers in the garment industry. By 2005, the estimated employment of sewing machine operators in Manitoba was 2,965 positions with the expectation that work in garment manufacturing will eventually move offshore. In my study, immigrant women garment workers discussed the changes currently taking place in the garment industry, how these changes have affected them and their co-workers, and where they might be looking for other job opportunities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with fourteen current and nine former garment workers employed as designers, pattern-makers, sample sewers, quality inspectors, sewing machine operators and sorter/helpers at a total of 31 different companies, ranging from small shops to large factories. The participants emigrated from a total of thirteen different countries in wide variety of regions, including Asia, Eastern and Southern Europe, East Africa, South America, and the Caribbean.

Experiences of Immigration and Transition to Canada

The immigrant women garment workers in this study came from a variety of countries and had a range of educational and work experiences before arriving in Canada. Their transitions to living in Winnipeg often involved facing the challenges of cold weather, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the city, and homesickness and family responsibilities. However, many were able to access support from family and friends that facilitated this transition. Most of these women found their employment choices in Winnipeg to be very limited. This was often due to a lack of English skills, recognized credentials from their home countries, and awareness and access to training programs. Indeed, ten of the twenty-three participants in this study said they were unaware of any training programs when they first came in Canada. As a result of such constraints, these women found themselves working in the local garment industry in order to support themselves and often their families.

Work Experiences in the Winnipeg Garment Industry

In their work at different garment factories and in different positions, the workers in this study often experienced many challenges while working in the garment industry. While many were able to gain employment in this industry through social contacts of family and friends, it now appears to take longer for new immigrants to find work in this area, and they are more likely to find work at smaller rather than larger factories. Long hours, job-related fatigue, and eye and joint strain continue to be difficult aspects of garment work. Pay is also relatively low for sewing machine operators; those in this study were paid around \$10.00 per hour on average (if paid by piecework rate) or \$8.00 per hour on average (if paid hourly without piecework), which is not very far from Winnipeg's minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour in 2005. As well, over two thirds of research participants stated that there were no opportunities for job advancement in their current or former company. Only five of the twenty-three women in this study experienced upward mobility with respect to positions either within one factory or between factories while working in the industry. Those able to advance had background education or work experience in garment construction in their home countries, or were able to use social contacts to move up at their companies. Workers frequently moved between factories because of layoffs, but they also relocated to pursue better job opportunities in the industry. In the garment factories, workers are subjected to discrimination from superiors and co-workers, often based on ethnicity, language, and seniority. Almost half of those interviewed (11 of 23) noticed a great deal of layoffs recently or in the last few years they worked at a particular company. Five women in this study were no longer working in the garment industry because they were laid-off from their jobs in this field.

Household Responsibilities of Immigrant Women Garment Workers

On average, the women in this study described spending fifteen hours per week on housework, and (for those with children) forty hours a week on childcare. Thus, the work carried out by immigrant women garment workers in their households involves a large time and energy investment. Despite their fatigue from working outside of the home, as well as living with a number of other capable individuals, fourteen of the twenty-three interviewed women said that they are responsible for most of the housework in their households. Similarly, of the nine participants in my Winnipeg study with children under

the age of thirteen, five said they are responsible for most of the childcare in their households. These unequal responsibilities are related to gendered ideas about women's and men's roles in the household, which also shape the division of household labour. Often, women workers turn to others for assistance with their household tasks. While the support of family and friends is significant, especially with childcare, access to affordable daycare is sometimes difficult.

World Trade Organization Removal of Quotas: Worker Views on Impacts

Garment workers are becoming increasingly concerned about the future of their jobs and the garment industry itself in a context of growing numbers of layoffs and factory closures. While this insecurity has an impact on workers' emotional well-being, it also affects their bargaining power with employers in the garment industry. Due to the decline of this local industry, garment workers were asked about the areas outside of garment work they might consider pursuing. The fields most often discussed included health care, especially work as a health care aide, as well as restaurant work, retail work, and cleaning or housekeeping. This was often due to having previous experience in these areas, being aware of job opportunities in these fields, and feeling that their lack of skills restricted them to these areas of work. The garment workers in this study described a number of barriers that affect their ability to find employment outside of the garment industry. Those working in garment factories find themselves in a context where English is often not required and their garment construction skills are not transferable to other fields of work, making it very difficult for these workers to find employment elsewhere. As well, being an older worker was seen as limiting work opportunities, as was finding the time and money to pursue training in other areas.

Many garment workers were aware of the elimination of quotas, and while sharing different views about the situation, their frustration and concern for their future and that of other workers was evident. Some were able to justify the movement of work overseas. Others conveyed their views on the inequality of the World Trade Organization agreement. In these cases, garment workers felt that this decision built on the power differential between workers and employers, the result being that company owners are profiting while local workers lose their jobs. Frustration was also expressed about the loss of jobs to overseas workers, and Winnipeg garment workers shared their concern about working conditions in factories overseas and the quality of clothing they produced. The women in this study face many difficulties adjusting to the phase-out of quotas, which they viewed as directly related to the recent loss of jobs and plant closures in the Winnipeg garment industry. While some hope for improvements in the industry, many feel they have no choice in the matter and are unable to change the situation.

Conclusion: Policy Implications

The research findings of this study suggest the need for a number of policy initiatives regarding Winnipeg garment workers. Given the instability of the local garment industry and the high rate of worker layoffs, initiatives should be developed to draw current and former garment workers into training programs for more stable areas of work. Currently, there are no specific programs for laid-off garment workers, and accessible training that

considers women's work responsibilities inside and outside the home would greatly benefit these workers.

Few research participants were aware of training programs outside of ESL. More social workers able to speak the languages of immigrant workers could be useful in helping garment workers find employment and training in other areas. As well, ESL classes should be offered at the workplaces of industries with high numbers of non-English speaking immigrants as a useful resource for these workers, considering the work and social barriers they face in not speaking an official language.

As it has in the past, the provincial government continues to recruit immigrant women to work in the Winnipeg garment industry through the Provincial Nominee Program. Considering the uncertain future of the local garment industry, the continued recruitment of immigrants to work in this field is questionable and should be reconsidered. In addition, it would seem that the government bears some responsibility to ensure that these recruited workers have access to stable, safe employment that offers a living wage. One important step in this direction would be to recognize the work and education credentials immigrants have obtained in their countries of origin, allowing them to work in fields where they have previous training and experience.

Finally, the Canadian government should consider following the examples set by the U.S. and E.U. in implementing safeguards against Chinese imports, which have increased dramatically since the removal of quotas on clothing and textiles. While unlikely to stop the flow of jobs to sites overseas, these safeguards could slow down the loss of jobs in this area and provide a useful opportunity to transition garment workers into other areas of work.

I would like to thank you and your organization for assisting me with this research. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me by phone at (204) 474-2099, or by e-mail at kmossman@yahoo.com.

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