**Dispatches: Fashion's Dirty Secret**

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**Reporter - Tazeen Ahmad**

Reporter Tazeen Ahmad on the filming of the Dispatches into the conditions in UK factories making fashion clothes for major high-street retailers.

Peek inside the average woman's wardrobe and it will be packed full of trendy high street clothes emulating the latest catwalk fashion - all bought at just a fraction of the price. My wardrobe is no different. A pair of £7 skinny jeans, t-shirts that cost no more than a few quid and a favourite dress which I grabbed for just under a tenner. High street fashion is in its heyday because now we can all have the latest designer trends at bargain prices.

But what's the real cost? Dispatches has discovered that fashion has a dirty secret - there's a hidden cost to cheap clothes and it's a human one.

Inside the dirty basement of a textile factory we have filmed in, workers are packed into a windowless room. Their heads are bent low over noisy and unsafe sewing machines; the fire exits are blocked and when they get their much-longed for break they sit on boxes to eat their lunch. The conditions are not just poor, they are appalling. We know little about the workers except they need the money. However the clothes lying in huge piles next to them are very familiar. All are high-profile high street brands: New Look, BHS, Peacocks and Jane Norman. What's most surprising is that this isn't a factory in Bangladesh, it is happening right here in the heart of the UK in Leicester.

Dispatches has been investigating textile factories in Leicester for three months and we've had an undercover reporter secretly filming inside a clothing unit. We've discovered that through a process of sub-contracting some of this country's leading brands, labels that hang in our very wardrobes, are being made in clothing factories that put workers under enormous pressure to deliver to tight deadlines, in unsafe working conditions and paying employees far below the minimum wage. Our reporter earned £2.50 an hour. He was given very little training, often worked long hours, with minimum breaks and an enormous workload.

On one occasion he and his colleagues were asked to make 6000 white cardigans for Peacocks women's range Evie by the end of the week.

During the making of this Dispatches we approached some anti-sweatshop campaigning groups who are trying to change conditions in factories abroad and showed them our footage. One, 'No Sweat' described the conditions in the factory we filmed in as being akin to what they've seen abroad.

Shockingly we have been told that poor conditions are not just found in the unit where we filmed secretly. While in Leicester I met and interviewed Gurjeet Samra, a well-respected Sikh elder who has helped many of the workers in Leicester factories. He said the conditions in some factories were tantamount to being 'like slave labour'. He also told me that many of the people in the factories were here on student visas, working illegally and stuck in a cycle of hopelessness - needing the money but not able to report the conditions in which they were expected to work.

In July this year, a clothing factory, near the Imperial building where we have been filming, was raided by the UK border agency. Nine foreign workers were found to be working illegally and were all from India.

Often though, many of the people working in these factories are British simply accepting this as a way to earn a living. I spoke to one man whose wife has worked in one of these factories for the last 18 months. He showed me employment paperwork that indicated she was earning the minimum wage. In reality she was only being paid £3.50 an hour. I interviewed her husband because she was too upset to talk to me on camera. He described her working conditions as 'slavery'.

So where does the buck for this level of exploitation stop? Campaigning groups say the retailers need to take responsibility and place the factories under closer scrutiny. Others say the government needs to step in and regulate the fashion industry. But what about our responsibilities as consumers? Instead of buying blindly perhaps we should stop to ask more questions about where and how these clothes are made. After all, they're not being stitched thousands of miles away, but right here on our doorstep by people who are being exploited because of our insatiable appetite for dirt cheap fashion.

**TASK:**

1. Give at least **three ways** that the workers in the factories in the article are being exploited (treated unfairly/taken advantage of)?
2. Explain **why** this exploitation is taking place?
3. **Whose responsibility** is it to ensure that textiles factories meet the required employee (labour) standards? Explain your answer

**Extension question**

1. The retailer’s response was one of surprise that their official suppliers were subcontracting to companies such as Sammi Ltd in Leicester. How could fashion retailers such as Mango, New Look, and BHS ensure that they are acting more responsibly and that their operations are more ethical?