



AT HOME IN LOWELL

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FEATURE STORY

HIGH FASHION'S HUMAN COST

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Labouring in heat that can reach 39 degrees Celsius, garment workers assemble a fashion giant's jeans – and fight to keep from fainting



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National

Too hot to breathe in Armani factory

Despite a five-year-old ruling to install roof sprinklers, temperatures inside the Kin Tai Garment factory remain hotter than outside, and workers are resorting to desperate measures to keep from fainting

ALICE CUDDY AND TAING VIDA
Post Weekend

Giorgio Armani has built a world-renowned brand synonymous with high-end fashion, but in Cambodia the human cost of its clothing is evident at the source.

The Taiwanese-owned Kin Tai Garment factory, set back from a busy road in Phnom Penh's Chak Angre commune, employs almost 600 mostly female workers to produce clothes for the Italian fashion house's Armani Jeans line.

The seamstresses have received a first-hand induction into the global economy by helping to sate demand for "luxury" clothing in the United States. In return, they work in boiling temperatures that the factory has, for years, failed to address, for low wages and insecure contracts.

Broken lights and faded national flags adorn the entrance to Kin Tai, where rows of workers sit behind archaic-looking machines, each one responsible for sewing a small component of what will soon become a pair of designer jeans.

The work is monotonous. It takes a seamstress less than a minute to perfectly stitch a pocket. She will sew hundreds every day.

Further down the line, others take seconds to sew a straight seam down the side of pair of men's jeans before rapidly reaching for more material.

Few of the women speak while they work, but the hum of machines and murmur of traditional Cambodian music fills the room with noise.

In a separate, smaller warehouse, workers carefully package the jeans, now fully assembled and embellished with the iconic designer's name.

About 90 per cent of the jeans produced at Kin Tai are shipped to the US, according to its administration manager, Pov Soeun.

Thousands of Armani garments – many from Kin Tai – were also

exported last year to countries including Italy, China and Singapore, leaked export records obtained from a source in the transportation industry show.

When they reach their destination, the jeans come with a hefty price tag, which the monthly wage of those producing them – just \$128 – might not cover.

But while their own wage is meagre, the workers, too, pay a high price for high fashion.

Losing breath

On an early morning this week in a small out-building labelled "infirmary", 28-year-old Veng Sovichenda slouched over a bed, as a co-worker vigorously rubbed the metal lid of a pot of "Siang Pure Balm" up and down her back.

At eight months pregnant, Sovichenda – who works in Kin Tai's packaging department – had felt dizzy, and as though she might collapse.

The traditional healing practice being performed by her co-worker, known as "coining", was an effort to get rid of the symptoms.

Coining, *Gua sha* in Chinese, is a traditional Chinese medical treatment in which the skin is scraped to produce light bruising. Practitioners believe it releases unhealthy elements from injured areas and stimulates blood flow and healing.

"I feel a bit better now," Sovichenda said, smiling nervously as she adjusted her patterned shirt.

The sight of someone being coined is not uncommon at the factory. In fact, it is part of daily life. Workers estimate that between 10 and 30 employees are coined every day.

Earlier in the week, 28-year-old Long Na Ty said she was coined on the factory floor because she was "struggling to breathe in and out".

She said that without the treatment, she feared that she would fall unconscious as she has done in the past.

"When it happened, I felt tired. I

couldn't breathe, I felt too hot – then I collapsed", she recalled.

While faintings are not uncommon in Cambodian factories – in 2014 there were 1,806 reported workplace faintings, according to government data – activists say Kin Tai has a worse record than most.

Joel Preston, a consultant with the Community Legal Education Center (CLEC), which is in regular contact with unionists at the factory, said the group receives "consistent reports" of faintings there.

The issue is made all the more obvious, he said, by the prevalence of coining.

"We're seeing workers resorting to traditional methods, desperately trying to maintain consciousness."

Some staff at the factory claimed that faintings happen almost every day; others said it was less common.

Kin Tai's on-site doctor, Nom Narath, said workers faint up to two to three times a month. But, he acknowledged, between "30 and 50" people come to see him every day to collect medicine, often because of feeling faint.

He said he was unconvinced of the medical benefits of coining. "Maybe it helps a little bit," he concluded after some deliberation.

Both Sovichenda and Na Ty, like most of the people seeking treatment at the factory, said they believed the symptoms were caused by excessive heat.

Soaring temperatures

A report released last year by the Workers Rights Consortium found that temperatures at Kin Tai exceeded 37 degrees Celsius – hotter than the tropical climate outside.

The factory has failed to heed a five-year-old ruling from the Arbitration Council, the Kingdom's statutory labour adjudication body, that it install sprinklers on its metal roof to relieve the heat.

A separate agreement reached in 2014 between the factory



A worker is 'coined' by two co-workers on the factory floor. PHOTO SUPPLIED

and unionists to introduce a new cooling system has also produced no results.

Unusual access inside the factory granted to *Post Weekend* this week showed that high temperatures remain a major problem. The warehouses lack adequate ventilation, and ceiling fans do little to penetrate the heat.

Every worker interviewed for this article complained of excessive heat at the factory. Some estimated that temperatures this year have reached

as high as 39 degrees Celsius.

Soeun, Kin Tai's administration manager, blamed global warming for the problem. "Because of climate change, the hot weather increased," he said, explaining that this had in turn made the factory hotter.

Soeun said the factory reacted to the climate shift by spending about \$10,000 on ventilators, but, "unluckily it was a failure and didn't help".

The ventilators can still be seen on the outer wall, now boarded over.



Workers making Armani Jeans spend their shifts repeating minute tasks several hundred times. KIMBERLEY MCCOSKER



Giorgio Armani (pictured) runs a company described by labour rights advocates as one of the least cooperative in the Kingdom. **AFP**



Veng Sovichenda (left) sits in the infirmary, having just been coined by her co-worker Roun Malai. Up to 50 workers visit the infirmary every day. **KIMBERLEY MCCOSKER**



Ceiling fans do little to cool the factory floor. **KIMBERLEY MCCOSKER**



Despite the heat, women wear gloves to stop their skin burning. **KIMBERLEY MCCOSKER**



Long Na Ty was coined last week after 'struggling to breathe'. **KIMBERLEY MCCOSKER**

Following the 2010 Arbitration Council ruling, Soeun said the factory had "recently" decided to consider buying sprinklers. "We hired specialists to measure the location and where to put it."

But activists are unconvinced that the problem will be resolved.

"From what we've seen, there's absolutely no will from the factory to implement what they've agreed to for years," said Preston of the CLEC.

Failing to address the problem

would be in no one's interest, he added. "From a productivity standpoint, you want your workforce to be fit and healthy."

In the meantime, workers at the factory continue to struggle with the heat, with some adopting unusual – and potentially dangerous – methods to keep cool.

"We wear lots of clothes because the sweat cools us down," Na Ty said.

Another worker, 39-year-old Kong Savorn, insisted that there was no other choice.

"If we don't wear many clothes, the heat burns our skin, and pieces of fabric get caught in our throats if we don't cover our faces with [protective] masks."

On the factory floor, workers were seen in woollen hats and gloves.

Ho Sophea, a 38-year-old seamstress, laid down her materials for a moment while she showed off a hat that she puts on after lunch to protect her scalp from burning in the heat.

"In the morning, like now, it's OK, but in the afternoon, it gets hotter," she explained.

In the past, workers were not allowed to open doors on the factory floor to let the air in, Sophea said. "Now they allow us to do that more," she said, before quickly returning to her work.

Chheang Thida, the in-factory union's president, said that requests to open windows and doors have often been ignored because management "believe it will detract our focus from work".

Maintaining focus

The workers have little choice but to remain on-task.

Out of more than a dozen Kin Tai employees interviewed by *Post Weekend*, just one was on a long-

term contract, the result, she claimed, of taking her complaint to the Arbitration Council.

The rest, despite saying they had worked at the factory for up to five years, were on three- to six-month fixed-duration contracts (FDCs).

Phil Robertson, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's (HRW) Asia division, said FDCs are "a huge problem" because they enable factory owners to "easily discriminate against and fire factory workers".

"Any worker that is seen as a trouble-maker or a financial burden requiring benefits is easily gotten rid of because of FDCs," he said.

Workers estimated that as few as 20 of the factory's 590 staff were on long-term contracts.

The almost blanket use of FDCs appears to violate Armani's code of conduct.

The code states: "The use of contract, temporary or other non-full-time employment schemes shall not be used to systematically avoid the payment of worker benefits."

But Soeun, the administration manager, dismissed this. "For those who have worked for more than two years, recently we provided them with long-term contracts," he said.

He added that even those without long-term contracts are ensured the same rights.

Many workers in the factory said they weren't receiving seniority bonuses, while others, including a pregnant woman, were unsure of their rights to paid leave.

Evading responsibility

Armani did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

It is not the first time that the fashion house has failed to address criticisms of its practices in Cambodia.

A number of labour rights groups have highlighted Armani as one of the least cooperative brands operating in the Kingdom.

Robertson of HRW said the label's "failure to be transparent and responsive shows that Armani apparently doesn't care to take responsibility for what happens in its supply chain, including abuses against workers."

CLEC's Preston agreed, explaining that a brand's willingness to enter into dialogue is "usually a pretty good indicator of its commitment to social responsibility."

"There's something really wrong about it ... That so much profit can be made from their products when there is such little investment into workers' health and safety," he added.

The workers, though, are well-schooled in the global industry's inequity.

"We make hundreds of pairs of jeans every day, and we know each one is sold for hundreds of dollars. But look at us – we have such little wages to survive on. This is unfair both for workers and for buyers," Na Ty said.

Union leader Thida said customers fooled by the label into thinking they were buying something both luxurious and ethical needed to know the truth.

"They should understand how we have been working." ■