

Submission
Australian Parliamentary Inquiry Into Establishing a Modern Slavery Act
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
by Lisa Heinze

To the Committee Secretary:

Introduction

I am an ethical fashion advocate and a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, and I am pleased to make a submission to the Senate inquiry into modern slavery. I am currently completing research on Australia's fashion industry and the challenges facing companies and consumers in the endeavour to create a more sustainable/ethical fashion industry, including the particular significance of transparent supply chains. I welcome this inquiry and support the idea of creating a Modern Slavery Act in Australia.

Nature and extent of modern slavery

Significant research is required to determine the nature and extent of modern slavery in Australia and globally. Statistics on this issue are difficult to come by and definitions are often vague. According to the Global Slavery Index, 36 million people live in modern slavery, and many of them work throughout the supply chain of brands bought in Australia. In terms of the textile and apparel industry, a number of organisations are working to determine the extent of the issue and taking action when possible. These organisations include Baptist World Aid Australia, Clean Clothes Campaign, Fair Wear Foundation, Labour Behind the Label, Oxfam, Stop the Traffic, and Fashion Revolution.

Supply chains

I will specifically speak to the textile and apparel industries in this section. The majority of companies have very little information on the specifics of their supply chain, particularly when it comes to their Tier 2 and Tier 3 suppliers. Most notably, child and forced labour has been reported widely throughout cotton agricultural production. Until recent years (as a result of increased activist pressure following the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh), most companies had little information on their Tier 1 suppliers, either. When companies are not required to know the full story of their supply chain, decisions often come down to the financial bottom line and aesthetic preferences. At this time, Australian consumers have little opportunity to "choose ethical" products, or feel confident they are not supporting unethical practices such as modern slavery, because the companies offering goods do not know and/or share the details of the supply chain. As a result, Australia is complicit in any multitude of modern slavery activities through the suppliers of companies in operation in Australia.

Identifying international best practice

Pursuant to the above sections, Australia should identify best practice employed by governments and organisations to prevent modern slavery throughout supply chains. In addition to learning from the UK's Modern Slavery Act, there are a number of apparel companies leading the way in transparency throughout their supply chain including Patagonia, Honest By, People Tree, ALAS, Kowtow, Levi's, H&M and Zara, to name a few. Organisations Fashion Revolution and Baptist World Aid Australia (via their Ethical Fashion Report) have developed some guidelines for measuring transparency throughout apparel supply chains. However, some of these only examine Tier 1 suppliers, and there is room for improvement to establish full examinations of Tier 2 and Tier 3 suppliers.

Conclusion

Australia has a moral imperative to work to end modern slavery, and Australian citizens have a right to buy goods from companies working in Australia without wondering if their purchase supported modern slavery here or abroad. In light of these facts I fully support the creation of a Modern Slavery Act in Australia.