

Fashion industry blamed for horrors of Italian sweatshops

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The appalling conditions of up to 25,000 migrant clothes workers and their families in central northern Italy can be blamed on the fashion industry, according to a University of Manchester researcher.

Dr Jerónimo Montero says the state authorities are more concerned about Italy's [economic problems](#) than the conditions of the workers - mostly trafficked from China and employed by hundreds of subcontractors.

Locked up for months, working up to 17 hours a day, sleeping where they work and earning as little as £240 a month, the workers produce clothing for well known brands available on the British High Street, and for high end fashion houses, says Dr Montero.

"The conditions are horrendous. But if that isn't enough, one labour inspector told me that with the little money they earned, the workers had to pay-off the costs of being trafficked into Italy," he said.

"It takes up to four years to pay off the debt, and only then are they free to leave these awful places."

Though Dr Montero's research was carried out five years ago, he believes that there is no evidence of change.

His research includes interviews with [business leaders](#), union leaders and other officials in Prato and Tuscany, revealing another side to the

renowned 'made in Italy' label.

He said: "Over recent years, Italy has been repeatedly condemned by the EU and the International Labor Organization for the way it treats [migrant workers](#). But little has changed.

"I urge the state to comply with international protocols that protect victims of trafficking, rather than deport them.

"My research reveals that the exploitation of [workers](#) like those in Prato is how the [fashion industry](#) maintains its profitability.

"But it's not just Italy: the fashion industry across the world has fostered a return to the widespread use of subcontracting because of unstable demand and the general instability of the [global economy](#).

"It's a result of their need for flexibility in production and to cut costs to meet increasing international competition."

According to the researcher based at the University's School of Environment and Development, increasing importance of international financial markets and EU liberalisation have strongly affected manufacturing industries across Southern Europe.

He calls for new laws in Italy which force companies at the top of the production chain to be made legally responsible for the working conditions in their subcontractors' workshops.

He added: "Today, the high fashion houses and retailing chains have the power to control the whole production chain without having to face the risks typical of most companies.

"The 'ethical code' subscribed to by the fashion industry is not enough

and has no legal weight.

"This must change."

Provided by University of Manchester

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