

# THE COST OF CLOTHES

• I am 56, 5ft 2' and 68kg and wondering if it would be appropriate to wear an evening style pants suit instead of a long skirt to my son's wedding in August. What do you think?

Mrs. Leske, by email.

*An elegant pant suit is a great option for a wedding. No longer should you feel restricted to wearing dresses and skirts. A well cut jacket and wide-legged evening pant in a beautiful fabric is chic, stylish and flattering on a more mature body shape. Show off a bit of décolletage with a pretty silk satin or lace camisole underneath. Try some beautiful drop earrings to set the outfit off.*

*Some labels you may like to try are Carla Zampatti, Covers, Cue Design, Feathers, George Gross, Harry Who, Jigsaw, David Lawrence, Ojay, or Perri Cutten. Department stores like David Jones and Myer are great also for ideas and inspiration.*

The AWW Fashion Team

Taken from 'Fashion Q & A', the Australian Women's Weekly website

<http://aww.ninemsn.com.au/aww/Beauty/articles/Whatsnew/article933.asp>

For many of us, buying a new outfit is a pre-requisite to attendance at a special occasion like a wedding, or a christening. Not only do our clothes send out messages about who we are, but there are 'rules' about what clothes are appropriate for particular circumstances.

*Wearing the right outfit gives us the personal security of 'fitting in'.*

## ARE WE GETTING 'VALUE' FOR MONEY?

Women often write to magazines for advice about what style of clothing is appropriate for a particular occasion – value for money is not just about the cost and quality of the garment, but whether it meets the social code or conveys the image we wish to portray. This is why women also write to magazines seeking advice about what to wear to a job interview - or out on a date!

But how often do we seek advice on what kind of clothing is appropriate for the well-being of other people who share our world?

How might the fashion team have responded had Mrs Leske asked:

I am 56, 5ft 2' and 68kg and wondering whether my purchase of an evening style pants suit is appropriate for the well-being of women in the garment industry. What do you think?

They might have said that it depends on the conditions under which the garment was made – on whether the woman was paid a fair wage, worked reasonable hours in safe and healthy conditions, and was treated justly by her employer.

They might have also said that, for clothes made in Australia, it often depends on whether the garment has been made by women who are 'outworkers' – working in their own or someone else's home – and, if so, whether the shop it was bought from, and their suppliers, have signed the Homeworkers Code of Practice.

Do you think about where your clothes come from? who has made them? and under what conditions?

**Truth** In Australia, there are around 320,000 outworkers – people who sew garments at home. This is around fourteen times the number of factory-based workers Australia has in this industry. The majority of outworkers are women. Most outworkers are recent migrants, and many do not speak English. Outworkers in the clothing industry are among the most poorly paid people in the Australian workforce – many working 12-hour days, six to seven days a week for as little as \$2 an hour, in conditions that are unsafe and unhealthy. These wages and conditions are illegal in Australia, as our laws define minimum pay and basic benefits that all people are guaranteed.



## BUT WE ALL NEED CLOTHES, RIGHT?

Yes, of course we do!

Clothing is a practical necessity. Many workplaces, sporting activities, or hobbies require special types of protective clothing – think of hard hats, shin-pads, gardening gloves, or even a thimble! Clothes, of course, also protect us from the climate – a jumper or coat will keep you warm, and a hat protects you from the sun.

Australia's climate is harsh and moves from extremes of cold and hot. Adequate clothing is required to protect people from climatic conditions. Clothing is a health issue. One particular Australian example of the importance of clothing for maintaining good health is our need for protection from the sun – ultraviolet radiation on skin causes cancer and Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world.

Clothes are also important for health and safety in many workplaces. Work in industries such as mining, construction, manufacturing and chemical production – to name just a few – demands the use of special clothing to protect and maintain workers health and well-being. Employers have both legal and moral obligations to ensure that the people who work for them are provided with proper protective clothing.

Clothing is a necessity for our physical security but it is also a necessity for our emotional security. Clothes contribute to our sense of self – both our personal identity and our place within community. Without adequate clothing our emotional security can be undermined.

In the Bible there are numerous stories that reflect the powerful symbolic force of clothing. In Genesis we read about Jacob who, before leading his people to the promised land of Canaan, calls on them to demonstrate their recommitment to God by changing their clothes – they had been wearing the clothes and adornments of the followers of other religions (Genesis 35:2).

Probably the most famous story about clothes in the Bible is that of Joseph. As a sign of his great affection for his youngest son, Israel (Jacob) made Joseph a long robe with sleeves. When Joseph's brothers saw this and realised that he was their father's favoured son, they turned on him. Clothes have been and are a symbol of favour, and of wealth and power. In the ancient Hebrew tradition, clothes also functioned to symbolise mourning and repentance. In times of grief it was common for people to tear their clothes and put on sackcloth.

Clothing is important for our psychological security because our sense of acceptance in our group, community, and in society more generally, can be enhanced or disrupted by what we wear. A police uniform, a military uniform or the robes of a priest immediately place a person within a social context. Regular clothes, or fashion, also function to give us our sense of place in the social context – they identify us as belonging to particular groups, cultures and sub-cultures in society, enabling us to feel at home.

Like clothing for protection, Mrs Leske's need to fit-in at the wedding was a genuine need – the question is: how can we balance our own need for the physical and psychological security that clothing provides with other people's need for security – in this example, the wages and entitlements for women employed as outworkers in the garment industry?

## WE CAN SEEK REAL VALUE!

In his teachings, Jesus often spoke about how important it is for people to set proper priorities for their lives. In the tradition of the prophets, Jesus taught that what matters most to God is how we live out the values of the Kingdom. We are to strive for 'righteousness' rather than material things.

<sup>27</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>28</sup>And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup>yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>30</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? <sup>31</sup>Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' <sup>32</sup>For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. <sup>33</sup>But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6: 27-32)



It is clear that, as Christians, our need for clothing which satisfies our own practical and social needs for security should never be so great as to eclipse our desire to live faithfully and work for justice. Our sense of security should ultimately rest with God's care for us.

**Christians are called to build life-giving communities – communities where everyone's needs are met, where the vulnerable and the weak are cared for, and where the priorities are about prayer and justice rather than wealth and power.**

Christianity does not have a good track record when it comes to the exploitation of workers. For many generations, and using the Bible to support their claims, Christians engaged in slavery. The Bible contains a great deal of advice about how to treat one's slaves. In the fight to end slavery which reached flash point in the 19th century, Christians stood on both sides. Racism, economics and faith came together in a mighty international struggle for moral right.

**Mercy** Those Christians who fought against slavery were motivated by their understanding that every human being is created in God's image. They were moved by how they understood God's mercy and justice, by their commitment to answer God's call on us to care for the poor and to heed Jesus' warnings against greed and the striving after material possessions. These motivations continue to move many Christians to support the rights of workers in Australia and around the world, both through their public activity and their commitment to make responsible decisions in their everyday lives.

**Justice** This commitment to responsibility for others is core to the Christian faith. In the Bible, the prophets Amos and Isaiah expressed God's displeasure at the worship of those who were responsible for the oppression of workers and the poor: the proper care of workers is expressed as one way that God sees justice being done by the faithful.

<sup>3</sup> "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. <sup>4</sup> Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. (Isaiah 58:3-4)

## DO WE SEEK 'CHRISTIAN VALUE' WHEN WE SHOP?

Christians believe that all people are created by God and as such must be treated with dignity. To live with dignity people need, among other things, food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, employment and clothing. It is important to understand that how we seek to fulfil those needs in our own lives has an impact on other people. What gives us dignity should not demean anyone else. While it is sometimes difficult to believe that we can make an impact on social and economic systems that seem to have a life of their own, our actions do make a difference. Jesus spoke strongly of the responsibility of all people to care for those who are vulnerable and marginalised.

Real value for money comes with the purchase of a garment that both meets the buyer's need and the needs of the person, or people, who made it. The physical and social security that we find in clothing is only genuine security if it reaches all the people who are involved in the clothes – from the consumers to the producers.

In Australia, unions, churches, community groups, and Commonwealth and State governments have taken on the responsibility of ensuring that companies which sell or manufacture clothes do so in ways that do not exploit vulnerable people. The wages, conditions, and other entitlements of outworkers are protected in legislation and awards – just as these are protected for other workers in Australia. However, many companies break our laws, and monitoring compliance is difficult in an industry where people work outside the company's buildings and where there is a chain of contracts from the retailer, to the supplier/s, to the manufacturer/s, and then to individual workers.

**Community** The Homeworkers Code of Practice is a voluntary agreement that retailers and manufacturers can sign in order to demonstrate that they are committed to ending the exploitation of outworkers. For retailers, signing the code demonstrates that the retailer is requiring, through their purchase contracts, that suppliers comply with laws and regulations, including payment of the sewing garment rate relevant to homeworkers. It indicates the retailer's co-operation in providing the commercial records necessary for compliance with legislation and awards to be monitored. Retailer signatories to the Code now account for approximately 70% - 75% (by value) of the Australian retail market.



For manufacturers (including suppliers, wholesalers, warehouses and fashion houses), becoming a signatory to the code involves undertaking a process of accreditation to demonstrate that they (and their contractors) are abiding by the code and meeting their obligations under legislation and awards. Once a manufacturer is accredited they earn the right to use the 'No Sweatshop' label. This label is a signal to consumers that the clothes they are buying were made by companies who have complied with the laws and regulations and who are committed to the fair and just treatment of outworkers. This is a wonderful initiative but you should not be surprised if you have never, or only rarely, seen a 'No Sweatshop' label. While many retailers have signed the Code, very few of their suppliers have become accredited...



## FINDING OUT MORE

- Read about globalisation and theology – *In Justice: Women and Global Economics* by Ann-Cathrin Jarl, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003
- Get involved with Fair Wear in Australia – visit one of the Fair Wear websites: <http://www.fairwear.org.au> (Victoria) or <http://www.awatw.org.au/fairwear> (NSW)
- Find out about clothes (and other things) that are made overseas – visit Oxfam's 'Make Trade Fair' campaign at the website <http://www.maketradefair.com>

The cost of our clothes is also felt by those who we exclude – people who lack the money to 'fit in'. Lack of adequate clothing, and poor and inadequate clothing, has a detrimental effect on people who suffer the effects of poverty. It increases and perpetuates their marginalisation preventing them from full participation in Australian society. The poor and the marginalised are often not accepted in social environments simply because their clothing does not meet social norms. Those who are not clothed adequately are often unable to obtain work, yet without work they will continue to lack the money to obtain the clothing they need to be accepted.

The early Christians understood only too well the power of clothes to signal social status, wealth and power and they were keen to ensure that they were faithful to Jesus' teachings about what was important to God and what was not. The Letter of James reminds people of God's concern for the poor and calls on them not to judge people by their clothes and not to be drawn into treating wealthy people with more respect than poor people:

<sup>1</sup> My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? <sup>2</sup>For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, <sup>3</sup>and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet,"? <sup>4</sup>have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

<sup>5</sup>Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (James 1:1-5)

In our society, however, people do make judgements on the basis of what a person is wearing. We make judgements about whether they might be 'people like us.' A person's clothes help us determine whether a person is fun-loving and carefree, driven by their work, young and rebellious, or a follower of a religious faith. Clothes also tell us about a person's financial status. A person whose clothes reflect the latest fashion trends or brand names obviously has a regular source of income and is generally treated with dignity and respect accordingly. In Australian society clothes really do make the man, the woman, the teenager and even the child.

Christians give clothing to alleviate the physical suffering and need of those who don't have adequate clothes, but the Christian responsibility to clothe those who are in need also entails reflecting upon the practice of providing the marginalised and poor with second hand clothing, in light of the norms of our society.

Any gift should not only be practical, but should also contribute positively to people's feelings of self-worth. We should think carefully about the quality of clothes that we give away. If we give a person discarded and worn clothing what message does it give to them about how we value them as people? The clothing we give should aid a person's inclusion into Australian society and improve their feelings of value and security.