

**Presentation at the New York Women's Foundation's  
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I am Sau Kwan Yu. I am a Board Member of the Chinese Staff and Workers Association. I am a garment worker. I have worked in factories for more than twenty years. For twenty years, I, like many workers, have worked by piece. Because our wages are so low, in the past, many of us believed that if we work longer hours we would make more money. In reality the more hours we work, the more our hourly wage goes down. In the past we fought to raise our wages. In 1982 workers in Chinatown demanded higher wages. More than 10,000 workers went to the street to demonstrate. After the demonstration the hourly wage in the garment contract did increase. But the union gave up all restrictions on hours. The result was that working hours got longer. The competition between workers in the same shop intensified. Our real wage ended up going down continually. In addition, the contract and labor laws have not been enforced. So we already know that an increase in the legal minimum wage will not help us very much.

In the past twenty years, in the garment factories the working hours have increased drastically. As a result, many of our sisters are getting hurt on the job. I am one who has gotten hurt. Initially, I worked in a union shop. In 1990 I got hurt. I can not work long hours. Therefore, I stopped working and rested. Later, I got better and to earn my livelihood I found a non-union factory near my home. I told the boss clearly, "I can only work an 8-hour day." At that time the boss needed people urgently. He agreed. But later, after he got other workers, the boss used thousands of ways to force me out. I suffered under a lot of pressure. Many workers that I know are getting occupational diseases because of long work hours. They have no way to stop the boss from forcing them to work long hours. My individual way of fighting is very limited.

According to my understanding, Chinese Staff and Workers Association, even back ten years ago, already asked for the strengthening of labor laws and asked for an increase in wage standards. After all this time, we understand that demanding a wage increase and the enforcement of labor laws is not enough.

Four years ago, we summed up some of these lessons. We think that control of working hours is the most important demand because the greatest harm to workers is caused by long hours. Now many garment workers are in fear because the boss can force you to work even twenty hours a day. A human being cannot sustain that. Workers have totally lost control of our time. In many factories people work seven days a week. In the real world, more and more women are demanding shorter working hours. Many experienced garment workers change jobs or trades to work in jobs that have shorter hours, greater stability, and pay the minimum wage. Of course many women must also go home to take care of their kids and family without any compensation. So women suffer the worst from long hours.

The sweatshop system is literally crushing the life out of us and stripping us of our humanity. The effect of disease and injury on women is particularly harsh. On top the constant physical and emotional pain, they must immediately deal with the reality of losing half their meager family income. Their spouses or partners who now see them as a burden abuse or threaten to leave them. Their children are forced forego school and go to work.

More important than just having a say in how much low income women deserve to be paid, we need a say in how many hours we should be forced to work. We need to concentrate our energies into fighting for control of our time with our families and health.

If the bosses increase your wage they will demand that your hours increase without limit and they will deepen the intensity of work. A good example is the case of the DKNY workers. These workers—Chinese and Latina—are not allowed to raise up their heads during the entire working day. The bathroom is locked. You cannot go in. They are constantly verbally insulted and abused and are subject to frisking and body search. Simply asking for increase in wages cannot compensate women for what they are losing.

Now our Women's Committee and all of Chinese Staff has initiated and is participating in the "Ain't I a Woman?!" Campaign. Although we continue to demand enforcement of labor laws, we feel that this campaign puts forth the most urgent demands of working women today:

- First, we have the right to control our life, to control our time. Not just control over our body. We have the right to work a 40-hour workweek at a living wage without suffering retaliation.
- Second, society must recognize and provide compensation for the many hours that women work in the home.

This demand is very just, very proper at this time. In the "Ain't I a Woman?!" Campaign and in our Health and Safety Campaign, and on many different levels we are advancing this demand. This is the most important issue for women today.

I thank the New York Women's Foundation for not just listening to the voices of some of the lowest paid workers in New York, but actively support and encouraging the our fighting spirit. I know that we can all work together on these campaigns, we can look forward to a brighter future where women will enjoy justice for the first time.