

**our story**  
**our struggle**  
**lagos tailors**



This booklet emerged out of discussions in a workshop with representatives of the National Union of Tailors, Lagos.

The workshop was facilitated by Ismaill Bello of the National Union of Textile Garment and Tailoring Workers of Nigeria (NUTGTWN) and Bobby Marie of TIE GLOBAL.



**tie** is a global grassroots network of workers active in workplaces and communities.

It includes both union and non-union activists in the formal and informal sectors.

tie aims to encourage, organize, and facilitate international consciousness and cooperation among workers and their organizations in various parts of the World.

# introduction

Tailors in Nigeria make garments which is an important part of the cultural tradition and identity of Nigerian and West African community.

Today this industry of small producers is under serious threat from the lack of capital and resources. Tailor struggle to get the capital they need to buy new machines and improve their quality and quantity of production. They work in small rooms because rental is high and they are plagued by an unreliable supply of electricity..

Tailors in Nigeria believe that the union can play an important role to pressure government to support the development of their industry.

In this booklet members of the Nigerian Union of Tailors in Lagos supported by the NUTWTGWN tell their own story. They talk about their work, the problems they experience and their ideas on how these problems can be solved.

The aim of producing this booklet is to encourage tailors to take the first step in their changing their situation i.e. to understand their situation and clearly tell their story.



We make garments for wear by men women and children. The major part of our product is traditional “native” garments but we also produce “western suits”

Our businesses are very small, mostly owned by a single tailor who has apprentices who are in training while helping in production activities. Most businesses start at home however as soon as a tailor gets going they need to set up their own workshop.

The tailoring sector has both men and women working

There are different areas of work within the production process e.g. designing, cutting and sewing and embroidery.

In general tailors do not keep a stock of cloth. They buy this when they need it. Sometimes customers bring their own cloth.

All tailors depend on machines (sewing machines, embroidery machines etc.) to do their work. There are many types of machines. There is a basic machine which does a limited number of functions and there is the “industrial machine” which is more flexible and faster. This machine cuts production time in half, leads to less fatigue. However electricity or a high powered generator is necessary for use. Recently with the new machines from China and India these machines are becoming cheaper. The original Singer or Brother machine was approximately 80 000 naira. The new Chinese/Indian machines cost between 20 000 to 30 000 naira.

## Numbers

There are a very large number of tailors in Nigeria. We don't know the total number. Every street is likely to have one or more tailors.

## Who becomes a tailor and why?

Often tailors take on this line of work because of influence by a family member or close friend. Tailors say that this is creative work which involves making beautiful things and therefore provides a lot of job satisfaction especially when the tailor sees their creations being worn by others.

## Skills Development

There are many ways in which tailors learn their craft and skills:

- Learning from a family member
- By serving an apprenticeship with an established tailor. This could be as long as three years
- Today more young people are attending a training institute particularly to learn special skills e.g. sewing a jacket

Tailors have to continuously keep up with development in clothing fashions and new techniques. This they do by browsing magazines and sharing ideas among colleagues. The union network is very helpful in this informal way of learning.



## Apprenticeship system

The system of training new tailors follows traditional practises. Young apprentices are taken on by a “master” for a period of time (2 -5 years) and only complete their apprenticeship once they are “freed” by their master. An apprentice cannot leave the master before receiving his/her freedom. If the apprentice breaks this rule then he/she will be looked down by the community and can in some cases be fined by the local tailor’s organisation.

During the apprenticeship the trainee is not paid. Often it is the apprenticeship who pays the master for the training he/she receives.

The trainee does whatever task the master says he/she should perform.

Most apprentices once they complete their service go on to create their own shops. Often they receive support from their masters.

Tailors say that today there is a decline in the number of young people wanting to become apprentices. They say this is because they are able to do other work which brings in immediate income (such as driving okadas, setting up cyber cafes, selling air time etc.)



## **Setting up a Tailoring business**

Tailors usually start up by working at home on a single machine which may have been handed down to them by a family member. They then raise money to buy their first machine. They do this by doing other jobs and joining a cooperative. The support of family and friends is import in the start up phase.

## **Customers**

Tailors develop their customers from family, friends, neighbours and people in their local community. A few tailors have large contracts with factories or boutiques

## **Advertising**

The tailors work gets know largely by word of mouth through the neighbourhood network. "A customer wears your clothes and others see and like it so they are come to you". Some tailors have overseas customers. These are Nigerians who live outside the country and visit home.

## **Changes in the market**

Tailors are not afraid that they would lose their market in "native dress" to modern western dressing. Native dress is something everybody has to wear. Even young people who prefer modern dress, have to attend family and cultural events, weddings, family parties, funerals etc. However younger people are demanding new cuts in the clothing which tailors are adapting to.

## **Loans options**

Capital is important to purchase new machines, generators or rent a shop. For small capital, tailors depend for their capital on loans from friends and family. However they turn to banks and micro-finance for larger loans. An important source of small to medium size loans is the self organised community cooperative.

## our trade union



Many Tailors in Lagos are members of the National Union of Tailors. The National union of Tailors have a close relationship with the NUTGWNU.

The union has a branch, state and zonal level structure. Members pay an entry fee and to get an ID card. Thereafter they pay a regular due which half of which goes to the local and the other half goes to the branch.

There are a very large number of tailors in Nigeria however the numbers who have joined unions are very low. One estimate is that they make up only 4000 in the whole of Nigeria.







### **Tailors join unions because**

- Union meetings and events provide an opportunity where they meet lots of people , exchange experiences , share ideas and techniques, talk about latest fashions
- Union members support each other morally and socially at time of family problems, weddings
- The union helps solve disputes with customers.
- The union give regular members financial assistance.
- The union sends members to seminars
- Union protect the price. Set minimum price and put out a schedule. Members are not allowed to charge lower than the published price

### **How can the Union be strengthened.**

- Talk to government to compel other tailors to join union
- Union sometimes purchase cloth in bulk and members buy from them
- Unions can lobby the government to make cheap loans available for tailors.



## Capital

Our biggest frustration is access to Loans. We need advance money to purchase industrial machines, improve our business and when we are low on cash , to pay workers on time.

The existing loan facilities are not good. Banks require collateral which not many of us have. Micro Finances interest rates are very high.

We have and continue to set up our own cooperatives where members put in money into a central fund and each member draws a loan over a period of time. These cooperative are difficult to run and when all members don't pay up on time they collapse.

## Electricity

A reliable supply of electricity is essential to our work. We need light to work, to operate our machines and irons.

Currently we have regularly stoppages in electricity. This has big impact on our business. Not having continuous affects quality of work, a neat finish. It slows down work which means that we can't meet deadlines and urgent requests

A poor electricity supply pushes up our costs. We are forced to purchase stand-by generators. IN addition we have to buy larger generators because small generators cannot handle industrial machines.

When there is no electricity the workers is forced to use foot pedals for long hours this leads to injuries.

### **Space to work**

Rental space is expensive so tailors are forced to work in small and cramped conditions. This makes working conditions very bad.

### **Inferior material**

The quality of materials and equipment available to tailors such as thread, scissors, machines and materials such as china cottons are inferior.

### **Pressure to keep customers**

All the problems above make places great stress on the tailor. There are a lot of tailors and customers can change tailors if our quality is poor or we do not produce on time. Tailors are therefore under constant pressure to keep customers.

### **Bad debt**

To keep attract customers we must give customers credit. Often we have customers who do not pay when promised or pay small amounts over time. When tailors go through their account they find out there is lot of debt to be collected from customers. It also bring headaches to us because debt kills business in any form it might be.

## Health problems

Tailors suffer from many health problems

- Standing too long to cut cloth or ironing
- Sitting for long hours
- Leg problems due to long hours of using the foot pedal when there is no electricity
- Back and leg pains , cardiac arrest , high blood pressure and strokes

These health problems are neglected because many of them can only be solved with improvements in machines, better working space and slower pace of work.

## Our wishes

- We require support for cheap loans for capital to purchase Machines (Industrial sewing machines , embroidery machines and stand by generators
- We need access to better quality of materials and equipment. We need assistance to import good quality material into the country, and there must be strict regulation on the imported good material to be imported into the country. Before the textiles and tailoring industry purchase materials there should be the proper inspection by the custom offices before distribution of the material into the markets



**our personal stories**



My name is Comrade Mulikat Abeje Apena. I was born in Accra, Ghana on Tuesday May 4th 1950. I am from Kuntu Quarter Ilorin in Kwara State. My parents are late Alhaji Abdul Salami and Alhaja Raliat Ashake Salami (Nee Balogun)

I became a tailor because I like the work so much and that is why I asked one of my friend called Wosilat Lawal to help me to enter their institute known as Deo Gratiar Sewing Institute. The Institute is located at 61, Ogunmokon Street Odi-Olowo Muslim Lagos State, under Mrs P.A. Odofoin our head mistress.

I love tailoring work because it is a good work, nobody have the work, even our God himself signed to this work, that is the best out of all. Even I am proud of it, that I am a tailor, I am proud of it at any time, and anywhere in this world, so I really thank God. According to one of our songs in our association:

Kio da aso re bo ra (2x)  
Eni ba binu tailor, yio da aso re bora etc.

I thank God for making me a tailor. That is why I put two of my daughters to this work in order to let everybody know that I love tailoring, If I come back to this world again I will be a tailor.

My frustration with tailoring work are not so much, because before my graduation day, I employed three apprentices girls that help me in my work and my father has already gave me one big shop, before I enter to tailoring work, so my work is going on systematically. Later I married.

We can change our situation by facing what we are doing in time and do it well, that is, our daily work that we know the amount that comes from there because there is nothing we can do, without money. And we must sit down and think for our future and we must be honest and faithful in everything we are doing and start praying to God almighty later, everything will be changed.

COMRADE GANIYU RASHEED OYE-BANJI SHOP ADDRESS: NO. 79, DOSUMU STREET, ITIRE LAGOS, TEL: 08054122741.



I am Mr. Ganiyu Rasheed Oyebanji, I was born in Oyo Town (Oyo Alaafin) also in Oyo State of Nigeria. My date of birth is 10th February, 1956. At about eight years old, I started Local Authority primary school Awumaro, Oyo between 1966 to 1971.

It was that year of 1971 that I got my first certificate in primary education. After this year I helped my parents in their daily work which is weaving Aso Oke (traditional woven cloth). This was before my parents met together to deliberate on what my work should be.

At the end of their discussion they came out to tell me that I would go and learn Tailoring work because to go further in education is not so easy for them since the man that used to sponsor me and my partner died at about six months to our final year in primary school.

I welcomed my parents' decisions and I started learning tailoring work in the year of 1974 and we signed for three years. I have my working freedom in 1977, though my master did not want me to leave him because he loved my service at work including all of his customers.

In fact I don't really know what I did good. But what I believed is that if I said I would do something then I would do it to the best of my ability. And that has been my blood.

I love tailoring work because it made me proud of my profession among the Nigerian Artisan

My frustration with tailoring:

- Working alone at my shop is not encouraging me as well as the time I have two to three apprentice learning work from me. I can see the different between this.
- Tailoring Equipment: if there is no sufficient machineries it can lead to frustration
- Another one is the electricity power in Nigeria that is not encouraging. As we don't have standby power of electricity that services everyone in Nigeria. Our government should find a positive solution for this because tailors have many things to do with electricity at work.

We can change our situation for the better with the following:

- We will need to good machineries such as industrial sewing and embroidery with a stand-by generator
- To get all this we will need loans from savings and loan banks.
- If we get this support our business will grow and we will be able to have two to three workers to let our business move fast without much stress on only one person. This will lead to fall in sick (sickness) from working.

As we all know. Yoruba proverb says (problem shared is problem solved)







I am Yusuf Odidi, I was born in early 70's at Surulere. I attended primary school at Government demonstration primary school and I later finished it at Surulere primary school at Clegg Ishola Street Surulere. Thereafter, I had my secondary education at Eric Moore high school Lagos where I had my secondary school certificate in my WAEC (West Africa Examination Council) certificate.

I passed six subjects excluding English language. This cost me set back in my education career since I wanted to be an accountant but after several attempt in writing GCE exam to have English, I couldn't.

Then come a day my mother was terribly ill, she then called me and asked me why I can't start tailoring work since I have an idea. She even told me, if it is only sewing wrapper and buba.

When I was growing up my mother was a sewing mistress then I used to see her sew and I did do something's on our machine (sewing machine) like duster to school. From there my mother knows that I have ideas of sewing.

Furthermore, after my mother had told me this I took to her advice I started sewing without going for any formal training, rather I started training myself with my mother's aid. The first trouser I sew, I couldn't fix the back pocket. Then my mother corrected me and since then I started improving.

When I was still in school I used to tell people that I could do tailoring not knowing that it will be my profession. I did not get an formal training. People came to my aid because where I live there are some tailors there that used to call me to assist them in their work.

Remember I told you that I have an idea of this profession from my childhood and I had a fast memory on the job. Anything given to me as a sample I sew it. People in my area started giving me clothes to make dresses for them. So one after the other my customer increased. Before then when I went to any tailor shop, if I saw them doing anything I put it in my brain when I got home I would put it into practice with the aid of my mother. I could even remember when I went to the market to buy a readymade trouser I loosened it into pieces to use as a sample for my own sewing.

There are some challenges which can frustrate some one but with determination I overcome some.

- You know when one is rendering service to different character and attitude it will be very difficult to satisfy everyone equally without any complaint. Some will even go to the extent of shouting at me but later they will come back praising me but at first one would have been demoralized.
- Moreover there are problems of capital to start the business initially. But with the help of people I started and with my mother's machine, because she was not more full time sewing mistress. Later someone offered me shop.
- When I got the shop I joined a

cooperative society which also borrow me some capital to improve my work. I was able to buy new equipment.

- The major problem facing me now is management which myself know that I am lacking. I have been trying but I can't help myself. This weakness even drives away some of my customer because I couldn't manage my time and commitment properly. However I had been trying to solve this problem of mine which I was still unable to do.

- I try to employ some tailors but they couldn't sew to the standard I wanted. I had to train them more but this cost me more. I even thought of take to sewing only men's wear because sewing women's wear is very challenging because it demands a lot of creativity than men's. But my financial obligation couldn't make me to do that and my female customer couldn't allow me because some of them will insist.

I therefore need some more capital to re organize myself.

We all know that having loan from Bank is not easy for those who don't have collateral and my cooperative society has collapsed. Even to take loan from microfinance house is very tasking in servicing the loan because their interest rate is high for us in production field.



I am a tailor because I like fashion to beautify myself and other people, because if you are tailor or designer you will know a good thing for outfits for yourself and many people we like you. Some may even ask you who made your dress for you and buy them then you too will be happy for you being a tailor or designer. But I love to dress simple style. Oh Lucky me for been a tailor as fashion designer.

I become a tailor, what motivated me to go into fashion business: fashion is a passion I picked up from my mummy while I was growing up in the village. She was a well know dressmaker and so also were all my aunties. So that was how I caught the bug too. And I was really involved with the art of dress making and when I come back to Lagos I learnt a lot from my brother who was also into the fashion business then.

I also learnt a lot form Framol Fashion at Akeju St Palmgroove. By 1986 I learnt how to sew throws and jacket by helping my mother in her business. I learnt a lot from her business, I learnt a lot from her so I was born with the talent.

I love tailoring work because I was making clothes for everybody but most of my clients were my friends and other people who wanted something special to wear to parties. What they paid me was next to little or nothing but they were doing it to me because I was so young to them and my shop was to small.

My frustrations with tailoring work are:

- It about our Government
- We have no big place like big shop to work from
- Poor electricity power & NEPA
- Generators



I am a tailor, my name is Kafilat Olawunmi Agbalaya, I was born on the 15th June 1970, a native of Lagos State Nigeria. I attended Surulere Primary School and also a school certificate holder at new era Girls secondary school Ogunwole close, Surulere. After finishing secondary, I decided to learn tailoring at Dehan-May stitiches at Akerele Road. I spent 3years for learning how to sew & cut cloths and also used 6 month for industrial attachment and collect my certificate.

After training, I went to work at Fee Krezz fashion house for 2 years and later I established my own shop in my premises.

My affection for tailoring was that I love to wear exquisite style, Ankara mix, different fabrics to make dresses for myself. It also bring out the real person in you by making

any style that bring shape out and fit my body very well.

The frustrating thing in tailoring that is affecting us is: electricity, debt, health, finance and also inferior material.

Firstly, finance it very important for us tailors because without money we cannot establish our own company the way we want because of lack of fund to run and buy different machines and to pay workers in the company.

Also electricity is our major problem we tailors are facing in Nigeria and I believe without adequate light our work will not be done be neat the way we want. Electricity is very important to tailors because we need light to cut cloths or ironing finished clothes to give us complete and neat making.

Health is also vital in tailoring because health is wealth and it contributes to the tailoring industry.

The health I am talking about affect us by standing too much in cutting cloths and ironing, also sitting from morning till night i.e feeling back pains and leg pains all over our bodies we use our legs in paddling our machine due to lack of electricity and it affect our health. Example of sickness affecting tailors are cardiac arrest, high blood pressure and also stroke.

Inferior material is also part and parcel of our frustrating problem due to the bad quality of thread, scissors, machines and china material cottons used in making clothes because customers will return the cloths sewn that the material used are inferior and might not patronize the tailor again.

Due to inferior material customer might decide to buy readymade skirt and blouse, pant, trousers, shirt, etc.

Bad debt is also a problem to tailors. Our worst customer will collect their clothes and say they will pay later or give any excuse like he/she is short of fund, that he/she will pay later.

When tailors go through their accounts they will find out there is lot of debt to be collected from customers. It also brings headaches to us because debt kills business in any form it might be.

The way to change the situation facing tailoring is to get loans, lend from friend, relative or contributing



an Esusu between tailors to assist each other to develop his/her business.

Another solution is for government to provide adequate and stable electricity to the country so as to help in improving production of clothe in textiles industry and tailoring industry.

The government should also import good quality material into the country, and there must be strict regulation on the imported good material to be imported into the country, before the textiles and tailoring industry purchase the materials. There should be proper inspection by the custom offices before distribution of the material to the market.

Wit all these changes I believe tailoring and textile industry will move up to exception in the country and the tailoring Association will also improve in Nigeria.



I am Mr. Moses Olusegun Omokusinu, Born 50years ago by Alice Aduni and Gabriel Omokusinu. I learnt Tailoring from my master from 1977-1983 through Mr. Samson Adebayo (Ona-Ara-Cuts) at Oshodi.

I became Tailor on my own in 1983 July after I completed my apprenticeship from my master

I love tailoring work because it is my work from my youth. And it is the first work done by God himself to cover the nakedness of human being and I am proud of it every day of my life.

My frustration with tailors work are:

- Non availability of power(light) in Nigeria
- Unavailable trainees, Apprentice because boys of today are not ready to learn work.
- High rate of shop rental
- Dues paid in various ways\*(taxes and levies to government)

· Funds.  
Things that will change my situation for better as tailors

- Money as capital. By getting this for my establishment my life will change for better. I will purchase new and modern equipments.
- Rent very big apartment. Employ many workers
- Then make different advert on Radios and Television, print many hand bill, distribute it and make many people know my location to come and patronize me.

By this by God's grace I believe my life will change for better in tailoring industry. Generally in the life of living for all this I need assistance.

Moses Olusegun Omokusinu Akiniku St Isolade B/s Oshodi. Oshodi/isolo L.G.A state Executive welfare officer

