



PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS | **HR**

Bianca Spencer, KitX among brands pledging to employ Afghan refugees



**Ruth Hogan**

September 22, 2021

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A new movement spearheaded by the Australian fashion and textile industry, is aiming to drive better outcomes for refugees in Australia, as the Taliban's campaign of genocide continues in Afghanistan.

Voice for Afghanistan, which is led by Aus Fashion Aid and The Social Outfit with support from the Australian Fashion Council, is calling on the Australian government to resettle more Afghan refugees. An open letter signed by over 40 brands including Bianca Spender, Romance Was Born, Outland Denim, KitX, Ginger & Smart, The Upside, Witchery, Citizen Wolf and Manning Cartell has been sent to the prime minister calling for action.

The Australian and Textile industry is worth \$27.2 billion, according to a recent study by the Australian Fashion Council, and has a powerful role to play in supporting better outcomes for refugees. Many of the brands that signed their support have also pledged to employ former and current refugees from the Australian Afghan community in their workforce, with guidance from The Social Outfit as employment partners.

The Social Outfit, a social enterprise that offers women from refugee backgrounds training and employment in the fashion and retail industry, has provided employment to 47 refugees to date and offered free training to another 313.

“We call it a fashion label with a difference,” chief executive Camilla Schippa told *Inside Retail*.

“Refugee women face the highest barriers to employment in Australia. We focus on improving their English skills, their confidence in understanding

workplace practices and standards in Australia. We help them on a path to employment.

Many of the retail trainees that enter The Social Outfit are young Afghan women, usually between the ages of 19-25, that originate from the Hazaras, a Persian-speaking ethnic group which has been the subject of repeated targeted violence by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

“Seeing these girls on a daily basis and the impact of what is happening made us feel that we need to do something,” Schippa said.

“There is honest fear for their [families’] survival, which is really hard to see. I mean, what can you say to someone who tells you ‘I don’t know if my father is going to be alive tomorrow’.”

Hiring refugees

According to Schippa, in almost all cases, The Social Outfit is the participant’s very first Australian job, with companies seemingly reluctant to take on someone that has fled a foreign country.

“Sadly, today, when sending out resumes, I think the name is still a very big barrier,” she said.

“When they start with us, they are incredibly shy and reserved, almost to the point of feeling a little bit scared. Within a couple of weeks, they just transform.”

Schippa said about 90 per cent of the trainees at The Social Outfit have transitioned to other ongoing employment.

“All they need is that first little bit of support, and then they can go on and have a future and a fulfilling life. They have it all, we just need to give them that first chance.”

Shahida Haydari, a second-year university student originally from Afghanistan, arrived in Australia in 2017 and joined The Social Outfit as a retail trainee in February 2021. She is passionate about women’s empowerment and issues affecting young people such as mental health.

Haydari said she learned so much through The Social Outfit and is deeply grateful for the support through the Voices for Afghanistan campaign.

“As the media attention given to Afghanistan fades away in the news cycles, I trust this campaign will continue to give voice to people like me. The majority of people from Afghanistan in Australia are from the Hazara ethnicity. I am a

proud Hazara woman and this campaign gives voice to us as a targeted minority,” Haydari told *Inside Retail*.

Inclusivity in fashion industry

Schippa believes refugees possess incredible strength, hope and resilience, and would be an asset to any company.

“They are heroes. They face more challenges than anyone and they’re still going to work with a smile on their face every day.”

She said it has been really encouraging to see fashion brands enthusiasm to be part of the campaign.

“We’re talking to an industry that is very familiar with working with migrants. It’s not scary to them. They are used to working with people that come from all over the world, and often don’t speak English. They are very open and understanding and I think that’s a really nice side to the fashion industry that we don’t talk about much.”

The Voices for Afghanistan campaign is also supported by City of Sydney Councillor Jess Miller and prominent fashion PR consultancy AWPR.

If you want to get involved, visit www.ausfashionaid.com

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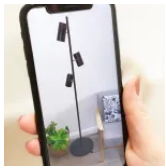
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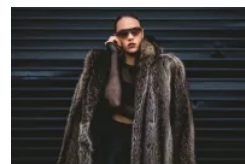
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