Child labour out of the wardrobe

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Next time you open your wardrobe, consider this: more than 90 per cent of clothing brands, including Rivers, Katies and Lacoste, are likely to profit from some form of child labour.

A damning report on the Australian fashion industry shows 93 per cent of brands do not know where their cotton is sourced from, making it likely child labour and exploitation has been involved as the bulk of the world’s cotton is sourced from countries that force children to pick the harvest.

In Uzbekistan, the world’s fourth-largest cotton producer, children as young as 10 are taken out of school and coerced by the Karimov government to work 70-hour weeks in cotton fields.

The Australian Fashion Report investigated 40 companies that own 128 clothing brands sold in Australia, ranking them on the transparency and monitoring of their supply chains and ethical codes.

Brands Supre, Abercrombie & Fitch, Rivers, Lacoste and the Specialty Group, which owns Millers and Katies, were labelled as the worst in the report, failing to boycott Uzbekistan cotton.

Of the companies surveyed, only 20 had boycotted the use of Uzbekistan cotton. About 35 per cent of the cotton used in Bangladesh comes from Uzbekistan, the report showed. Imports of Bangladeshi clothes into Australia has grown exponentially in five years, from $16 million in 2007 to $287 million in 2012.

Companies including Rivers, Woolworths and Coles do not boycott the use of Uzbekistan cotton. Supre and the Specialty Group did not respond to Fairfax Media’s questions in time for publication.

A spokesman for Rivers said the company rejected the claims. “Rivers has published ethical standards for all product sourcing worldwide. It follows these standards.”

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