News



Models present creations from the Giorgio Armani Spring Summer 2025 collection in New York City Oct. 17, 2024. (OSV News/Caitlin Ochs, Reuters)



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They're stunningly attractive. Almost impossibly glamorous. The latest looks they parade on the runway can swiftly launch international clothing trends.

Yet New York's fashion models — as some of the most visible faces of a $2.5 trillion global business — have long worked without the benefit of basic labor protections.

That's about to change, however.

The Fashion Workers Act, signed into law Dec. 21 by New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, takes effect in June. It will afford models a host of employment safeguards in an industry where many say they have previously felt mute and isolated.

"This act represents a significant step forward in rooting out exploitation in a field where the workers have been subject to rampant abuse over the years," said Joseph McCartin, a labor historian and the executive director of Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor at Jesuit-run Georgetown University in Washington.

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"When most people think of models they probably have in mind prominent super models, who have reached a level of stardom that very few in that field ever come near," explained McCartin. "This bill will help protect the vast majority of workers whose names we are unlikely ever to know who work in that industry."

The law "will finally grant models access to deal memos and contracts with their own clients, increased transparency into expenses with limits on what can be charged to them, safeguards against harassment and abuse, and a formal channel to report violations without fear of retaliation, among other protections," said Sara Ziff, executive director of the Model Alliance, in a Dec. 22 statement.

Founded in 2012, the Model Alliance has been at the forefront of advancing labor rights in the fashion industry for almost a decade.

"For the first time, model management companies in New York will be registered with the state — which will protect aspiring models from fraudulent predators — and have a legal obligation to act in the best interests of the people they represent. Notably, models will also have first-ever protections against the misuse of artificial intelligence," added Ziff.

Formerly unregulated practices will face legal scrutiny once the law goes into effect.

In a particularly disturbing accusation, Ziff in June 2023 told entertainment industry media leader Variety, "Models are now being scouted from refugee camps by agencies in this new era of trying to promote diversity. They're actually preying on girls in refugee camps, and then allowing them to come live in (a) model apartment, rack up debt and then return them to the refugee camp."

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"The Fashion Studies faculty at St. John's University (in New York) applauds the passage of the Model Rights Bill signed recently by our governor," Catherine Ruggieri, creator of St. John's Fashion Institute program and former dean, told OSV News. The Vincentian-run university in the New York borough of Queens offers a four-year degree in fashion studies.

"Models of all ages have been exploited for years, working excessive hours, with little pay and suffering from work practices they could not protest. Only top models were able to overcome these practices," continued Ruggieri. "This law is the beginning of bringing accountability to this industry, since model management will now need to register with New York state and follow the laws protecting employee rights. Our St. John's program is concerned with this issue and other ethical issues involved in the fashion industry and hopes to see even more progress for model employees in the near future."

Leah Darrow agreed. A former model and apologist for Catholic Answers, she now works as a personal development coach and speaker, and she's a mom of seven.

"I believe the Fashion Workers Act is a necessary step to address the lack of protections for workers in the modeling industry," said Darrow. "The world of fashion has long been plagued by issues of exploitation, including the troubling prevalence

of sexual misconduct and child exploitation. Stronger protections and accountability measures are not only essential but overdue to ensure the safety and dignity of everyone involved in this industry."

The right to unionize and seek workplace equity — and to strike if necessary — is fundamental to Catholic social teaching. Pope Leo XIII, St. John XXIII, St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have all expounded on unionized labor topics, in both official and unofficial pronouncements.