

## **Fashion industry : Labour behind the labor**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The fashion industry has complex connections to many fields, including manufacturing, advertising, and production of raw materials, transportation and retailing. The tremendous profits that stand to be made in the fashion industry create the temptation to engage in unethical behavior. When producers, manufacturers, models or consumers are being exploited or treated unfairly, fashion executives have an ethical responsibility to change the situation. Many fashionable clothes are manufactured by poorly paid people in developing countries. This practice, known as sweatshop labor, has come under major scrutiny and has been condemned by a wide range of critics. Particularly concerning low wages and long hours, unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, exhaustion, sexual harassment and mental stress are some of these issues. Due to consumer consciousness and disasters which occurred in recent years such as factory building that collapsed in Bangladesh killing more than 1,000 workers, many companies and fashion brands are turning towards sustainable and ethical fashion such as Patagonia, GAP. In this review paper, the condition of labor in relation to sweatshops, working hours, and working conditions, Freedom of association, wages, health and safety has been discussed.

**Key Words :** Fashion industry, Sweatshops, Health and safety, Wages

### **INTRODUCTION**

The \$450 billion global fashion industry is one of the most important sectors of the global economy that creates jobs and clothes for people all over the world. It employs over 25 million workers in over 100 countries. The reality of this industry is that many individual producers in the developing countries make the labor work for long hours under strenuous conditions for pennies on the dollar, far less than a living wage (7). Due to lack of education, lack of awareness about the hazards of their occupations, general backwardness in sanitation, poor nutrition and proneness to epidemics aggravate their health hazards from work environment (2). "The fashion industry has designed a system that allows companies to easily move from country to country, from continent to continent, whenever there is an opportunity to cut costs," says a Democratic staffer with the U.S. House Education and the Workforce Committee, who has worked on legislation addressing issues in supply chains of retailers. "Factories in the supply chain are pressured by this global race to the bottom, and, to remain competitive, far too often compromise basic labor rights by abiding poor health and safety conditions, engaging in

wage theft, and in violent repression of unions (14). Due to more consumer consciousness, different brands are making an effort to source and work with companies in developing countries to build an ethical supply chain which can lead to sustainable fashion. They are moving from sweatshops to ethical fashion considering labor conditions and companies profit as well.

#### *Sweatshops:*

There is no single definition of what a sweatshop is. The US Department of labor defines a sweatshop as a factory that violates two or more labor laws, such as those pertaining to wages and benefits, child labor or working hours. In general, a sweatshop can be described as a workplace where workers are subject to extreme exploitation, including the absence of a living wages or benefits, poor working conditions and arbitrary discipline, such as verbal and physical abuse. Since sweatshop workers are paid less than their daily expenses, they are never able to save any money to improve their lives. They are trapped in an awful cycle of exploitation.(10) Sweatshops are located in many parts of the world. They are most highly concentrated in developing countries, but there are also domestic sweatshops in the countries like U.S (11).

Defenders of sweatshops often bring up the fact that even though sweatshops are bad, they at least give people jobs they wouldn't have had otherwise. However, the types of jobs sweatshop workers receive are so bad that they rarely improve their economic situation. (10)

From a business perspective, sweatshops are overwhelmingly lucrative since they capitalize on low-wage labor in developing countries and significantly reduce production costs. Many major clothing and footwear companies, for example, have been linked to sweatshops. Brands such as Nike, GAP, Converse and Levi's, have all been guilty of numerous violations of requirements for reasonable working conditions in their production facilities. All of their headquarters and customer bases are located in the United States, while the manufacturing component of the production process is carried out in Asia. Such companies have been criticized as being complicit in the exploitation of workers because they fail to correct the manufacturers' malpractices, of which they are aware but often claim are hard to correct. An internal report carried out by Nike, for instance, found that nearly two-thirds of the 168 factories making Converse (one of the company's brands) products failed to meet Nike's own standards for manufacturing.

#### **Facts about sweatshops:**

- a) A "sweatshop" is defined by the US Department of Labor as a factory that violates 2 or more labor laws.
- b) Sweatshops often have poor working conditions, unfair wages, unreasonable hours, child labor, and a lack of benefits for workers.
- c) In developing countries, an estimated 250 million children ages 5 to 14 are forced to work.
- d) America has stronger labor laws than most undeveloped countries, but it is not free of sweatshops.
- e) Products that commonly come from sweatshops are shoes, clothing, rugs, coffee, chocolate, toys, and bananas.
- f) A study showed that doubling the salary of sweatshop workers would only increase the consumer cost of an item by 1.8%, while consumers would be willing to pay 15% more to know a product did not come from a sweatshop.
- g) Sweatshops do not alleviate poverty. The people who are forced to work must spend the majority of their paycheck on food for their families to survive.
- h) According to the National Labor Committee, women sewing NBA jerseys make 24 cents per garment that will eventually sell for \$140
- i) Men and women alike are subjected to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse in factories from

their managers and supervisors. They are sometimes trapped in the factory and forced to work overnight or across multiple shifts.

j) In 2000, more than 11,000 sweatshops in the US violated the minimum wage and overtime laws, while over 16,000 had broken health and safety laws.

k) Because women make up 85 to 90% of sweatshop workers, employers force them to take birth control and routine pregnancy tests to avoid supporting maternity leave or providing appropriate health benefits.(1)

### **Working conditions and working hours:**

A major concern among garment workers are long working hours and forced overtime. Employees normally have to work between 10 to 12 hours, sometimes 16 to 18 hours a day. When a factory faces order deadlines, working hours get longer. Most people are unaware that many of the things they buy were made by citizens of third world countries who work in horrible working conditions in places called “sweatshops”. Some examples of terrible working conditions include: factory in China that makes Levi jeans, women sew for 12 hours a day for less than 12 cents an hour, with only 2 days off each month. Also, they receive no healthcare and no compensation for injury. In a factory in Vietnam that makes Nike tennis shoes, employees work for 65 hours each week, for less than \$10 a week. Most of these employees suffer from respiratory problems caused by breathing in chemical fumes at work. In a factory in India, boys work 22 hour shifts sewing beads onto scarves, and are beaten if they make even a tiny mistake (9).

### **Over time and wages:**

Excessive overtime is a common problem in many garments –producing countries. Often, people work seven days a week, 14 or 15 hours a day, for months on end. Overtime is caused by external and internal factors. External factors are buying of customers: tight lead time, late sample approval and last minute alterations to product specification, puts increased pressure on factories to deliver orders. On the other hand, the supplier of the factory may further delay the start of production by late delivery of raw material inputs. Internal factors have to do with mismanagement. There is generally poor production planning including a lack of knowledge of critical path, little awareness of standard times needed to produce items and poor communication between merchandisers, factory management and production. Whether they operate in Cambodia, Bangladesh, China, or the Philippines, brands use all kinds of tricks to avoid paying their workers a living wage. They say paying a living wage is impossible because there is no consensus on how to calculate it, Consumers don’t want to pay more for their shirts, Governments, not companies, need to set reasonable minimum wages low-income countries would lose their competitive advantage if wages were higher(12).

### **Health and safety:**

<b>Table 1 : Countries and wages per hour given to workers</b>		
<b>Sr. No.</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Wages / hr</b>
1.	China	\$1.88-1.44/hr
2.	Turkey	\$2.44/hr
3.	Bangladesh	\$0.31/hr
4.	India	\$0.51/hr
5.	Vietnam	\$0.38/hr
6.	Indonesia	\$0.44/hr
7.	Pakistan	\$0.56/hr

Gereffie and Frederick (2010)

Another bad working condition is the handling with the workers health and safety. In November 24, 2012, a fire in Bangladeshi garment factory killed 112 people. The April 24, 2013 building collapse in Bangladesh was one of the worst disasters in the history of the world's garment industry, killing more than 1,100 people. And these were just a few disasters in a string of calamities that have killed and injured thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers (4).

In some garment factories, women who are applying for work, are asked if they are married and planning to have children. The reason for it is that some employers only hire unmarried women with no children and sometimes women must sign an agreement not to get pregnant as long as she works at the factory. Pregnant workers suffer verbal abuse, higher production rates, longer work hours and more difficult tasks such as standing instead sitting or working in a hotter area. Furthermore, women are prevented from taking maternity leave or pay if they return to work after the baby's birth.

Eye strain, exhaustion and debilitating overuse injuries occur because of poor ergonomics (how well a job task fits a worker's body), long hours and constant pressure to meet production workload. The illnesses are often undiagnosed and untreated. If employees take some time to get medical care or to recover from an injury or illness, they may experience cuts in wages or also be fired. In many factories, workers do not receive clean drinking water nor are they allowed to use the toilet when they need to. The reproductive health may be harmed by exposure to chemicals, heat, noise, overwork and

Health problems and disease patterns in garment industry
<p><b>Health problems</b></p> <p><i>Musculoskeletal disorders</i> : Garment production involves the performance of monotonous, highly repetitive and high-speed tasks, often requiring non-neutral and awkward joint postures. These exposures place garment workers at risk of developing WRMDs of the neck, upper extremities, back and lower extremities.</p> <p>Sewing machine operators and hand sewers (sample-makers and finishers) perform work which requires repetitive hand and wrist movements, typically performed with non-neutral postures of the fingers, wrist, elbows, shoulders and neck. Therefore, they are at risk for developing carpal tunnel syndrome, ganglion cysts, forearm tendinitis, epicondylitis, shoulder disorders including bicipital and rotator cuff tendinitis, rotator cuff tears and neck disorders.</p> <p>Cutters, whose work requires lifting and carrying of fabric rolls as well as operation of hand-held or computer-operated cutting machines, are also at risk for development of musculoskeletal disorders of the neck, shoulder, elbow, forearm/wrist and low back. Pressers are at risk for developing tendinitis and related disorders of the shoulder, elbow and forearm, and may also be at risk for developing related nerve entrapment disorders.</p> <p><b>Chemical hazards.</b> Resin-treated fabrics used in permanent press clothing may release formaldehyde. Exposures are greatest during cutting, because off-gassing is greatest when fabric bolts are first unrolled; during pressing, as heating promotes the liberation of formaldehyde from residual amounts of resins; in production areas in which large quantities of fabric are being used; and in warehouse and retail areas. Many garment shops are poorly ventilated and afford poor control of ambient temperatures. With increased temperature, off-gassing is greater; with poor ventilation, increasing ambient concentrations of formaldehyde can accumulate. Formaldehyde is a well-recognized acute irritant of the eyes, nose, throat and upper and lower airways. Formaldehyde may be a cause of occupational asthma due to either irritative effects or allergic sensitization.</p> <p><b>Other occupational illnesses and hazards.:</b> Worldwide, the high proportion of women and children employed in the garment industry, combined with the predominance of sub-contracting and industrial home work, has created an ideal field for exploitation. Sexual harassment, including non-consensual sexual activity with its attendant health problems, is a serious problem in the clothing industry worldwide. Child workers are particularly vulnerable to the health effects of toxic exposures and to the effects of poor workplace ergonomics due to their developing bodies. Working children are also highly vulnerable to workplace accidents.</p>

Herbert, Robin, Plattus, Becky 2011.

exhaustion. (7)

### **Freedom of association:**

Factories workers often do not receive regular employment contracts. So they have no means of compensation if their employers fail to respect labour laws like minimum wages, working hours, overtime payment, health benefits and other ones. Especially immigrants do not get contracts and so they are not accepted as normal in the industry. The worst-treated are the temporary workers, because they are hired with a temporary contract which is then renewed continuously to avoid legal responsibilities like health insurance. This is particularly common in Indonesia.

In many of the factories the management makes it clear that union organizing is not acceptable and workers who are joining will be fired. This behavior is even supported by the government although trade unions are a constitutional right in many countries. (3)

### **Steps towards being ethical:**

#### *Increase transparency about clothing origins:*

Transparency is increasingly becoming a hot topic in the fashion business. The growing disclosure of social issues has raised consumer interest of knowing where their garments come from and who made them. Some large retailers have already taken first steps into greater supply chain transparency. H&M is disclosing a list of its suppliers and audit information online. NIKE is going one step further with an interactive manufacturing map which additionally gives information on worker quality, gender ratio, percentage of migrants and average age of workers. Companies who are taking the transparent route highlight that disclosing more information can lead to increased innovation, consumer trust and collaboration along the supply chain (13). Everlane, an online boutique, recently added paragraphs to its Web site describing the factories where its products are made.(8)

#### *Taking personal responsibility:*

Even though the industries are the ones responsible for the sweatshops and labor, consumer, too, play a role. Consumers ignorantly and continuously purchase these items, and by doing so, end up supporting the practices (6). As a consumer one can buy from popular brands and retailers who are doing more to improve worker's rights such as Patagonia. Being responsible consumers, they can buy things from second hand stores. Thing is not a long term solution but buying less first hand clothing may slow down production, reduce pressure in workplace, and help improve workers and working conditions. Also it is important to mention the big problem of waste created by the second hand clothing business, when not sold, second hand clothes in emerging markets of developing countries and their local fashion industry is damaged.(12) Some steps have been taken by few brands towards ethical fashion industry which includes retailers Gap Inc., Patagonia, Costco, Marks & Spencer and Target Corp.; cosmetics companies L'Oréal and Shiseido Co.; textile firm Milliken & Co.; apparel brand Timberland, and eBay Inc. The firms were chosen for promoting ethical business standards and practices by exceeding legal minimums for compliance, introducing innovative ideas that benefit the public and forcing their competitors to follow suit.(14).

### **Conclusion:**

All in all, the working conditions in the global fashion industry are really tough and the employees do not have the normal working rights set by the law. It is very important to support these people so that they can be member of trade unions and at least receive a living wage. For this reason, customers should consider if buying cheap clothes is worth that many factory employees work under strenuous conditions and facing poverty. Through the purchases you make, and those you choose to avoid, you have the power to create an economy where child labor and sweatshops cease to exist.

Textile and apparel manufacturer as well as big brands, know that a strong ethics program is a key component to a successful business model, and they continue to scrutinize their ethical standards to keep up with an ever-changing regulatory environment. Also corporate ethics has become much more important globally and that is reflected in the truly global nature of this year's honorees." Adding your voice, together with the voices of others, can help encourage companies here and abroad to ensure that all workers are paid fairly and treated with respect. Ask companies you do business with to ensure that no sweatshop or forced child labor is used in the manufacturing of the products they sell. The next time you go shopping for clothes, shoes, or household items, take a minute to fill out a customer comment card and ask the company to work with their suppliers to make sure that workers are paid a living wage and treated fairly, thus leading sustainable and ethical fashion industry.

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