

The Case Against Sweatshop Labor

By: Alexandra

Introduction

The definition of a sweatshop is a place where people work for long hours, in poor conditions, and in an abusive environment for little to no pay. An image of neglect, poverty, pain, suffering and grief seems to appear in our minds. Would we truly want to subject ourselves, let alone our children, to such cruelty and harsh environment? Unfortunately, some have no choice.

Globally, there are approximately 218 million children involved in child labor. Many of these children are employed in sweatshops because they will work for less wages and are apparently less likely to complain about the unjust working conditions. In developing countries, numerous children ages 5-14 are forced to work in these horrific environments.

An abundance of these children must work to help most of their parents, who are not paid enough to provide for their family. An education is out of the question for these children, for they must work instead of getting the proper education they deserve.

Explain the Issue

Sweatshops are unfortunately a product of the global economy. They can be found all over Central and South America, Asia, and certain regions of Europe. There are even undocumented workers in sweatshops in places such as New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Although the United States has stronger labor laws than most undeveloped countries, it is still not completely free of sweatshops. Many sadly slip under the radar of the U.S. Department of Labor.

Sweatshops are a large problem globally. Many adults, not to mention children have to work in the brutal conditions of sweatshops just to simply pay the rent. For large retailers globally, sweatshops are a good option. They make large quantities of products overseas for very little amounts of money, and these well-known stores make excessive profit. Unfortunately, many stores do not know if they are buying from a sweatshop or not. This is why it is crucial that retailers inspect and monitor their manufacturers, to make sure they are not purchasing goods in mass from factories that have unjust working conditions or harm the workers, some of which may be innocent young children.

Sweatshops affect people both locally and globally. According to the United Nations, India has become the capital for child labor, employing over 55 million children, aged 5 to 14. Although plenty of other countries and places, including the United States, participate in sweatshops and child labor, India stands out by this large number. Locally, even the United States has sweatshops, too. The Department of Labor has found that 90% of the factories in the U.S who employ workers, violate health and safety standards, therefore categorizing these factories as sweatshops.

Children and adults in sweatshops are exploited greatly. Many are tempted by offers of money, food, and a good life. They are then exploited, harmed, and paid little to no money. Common items made in sweatshops are clothing, shoes, candy, rugs, and toys.

Sweatshops are a hidden reality in the globalized world. Few people know that many

popular American brands have been found guilty in the past and today of using child sweatshops, such as *Nike*, *Reebok*, *Victoria's Secret*, *Forever 21*, *Walmart*, *Banana Republic*, *Old Navy*, *Hershey's*, *The Gap* and many more. Furthermore, many people are not aware of the harsh conditions and environment that these children work in, and continue to ignorantly and continuously purchase these items. The few people that are aware of sweatshops believe that they are a major issue. While many sweatshops are neither owned nor operated by these companies, it does not excuse them from ignoring human rights, especially those of children.

In 2009, author Kashmira Sheth published the book *"Boys without Names"*. The novel told the story of eleven-year old Gopal, in India, who accepts a factory job to support his family. He soon discovers that the job is not a factory, but a stuffy sweatshop, where he and some other boys are forced to make beaded frames for no money and little food. The boys are not allowed to leave, and live a miserable life. The novel greatly explains the pain and suffering of children who work in sweatshops, and lets the readers truly understand what these children face everyday. Not only does the book leave a lasting impression on the readers, but even the author as well. "After writing each of my stories I move on to the next one. *Boys Without Names* is an exception." Says author Kashmira Sheth, "I can't forget their innocent faces and their suffering. Whenever I come across an article about child labor, I think about Gopal and the other boys." This book brings readers to the shocking revelation, that goods made by children are sold by brand-name multinational companies throughout the world, including Europe and the United States of America. Hopefully, this book did a part to make both children and adults aware, so that they be inspired to make a difference.

Current Events

Just slightly more than a year and a half ago, a garment factory building in *Dhaka*, Bangladesh collapsed, killing over 1,000 workers. Being the largest catastrophe ever in the history of the global garment industry, the event drew international awareness to the unsafe sweatshop working conditions in Bangladesh's \$20 billion dollar clothing industry. Apparently, before the collapse, workers had complained to the building owner about large cracks across the walls, but had been ignored and sent back to work. This is a perfect example of workers having been denied rights, not to mention having to work in very unsafe conditions.

This shocking disaster caused many retailers to react by taking action. The building collapse has led to widespread discussions about corporate social responsibility across global supply chains. Apparel brands and retailers have signed contracts with global and national trade unions, requiring them to work with their suppliers to remediate violations and ensure safe and decent working conditions. More awareness has been made about the importance of retailers monitoring their factories, to make sure they violate no law that could be classifying them as sweatshops. Although this tragic incident seemed to have been a "wake up call" for most retailers and buyers, unfortunately, it has still not inspired all of the multinational brands to monitor their factories.

Call for Action

Fortunately, many organizations are addressing this topic. Two of these organizations are "Workers Rights Consortium" and "Sweatfree Communities."

“Workers Rights Consortium” is an independent labor rights monitoring organization, conducting investigations of working conditions in factories around the globe. Their purpose is to combat sweatshops and protect the rights of workers who make apparel and other products. The “WRC” conducts investigations of factories, to make sure that they are not sweatshops and makes the public aware of popular retailers who use sweatshops. The WRC conducts independent, in-depth investigations, issues public reports on factories producing for major global brands, and aids workers at these factories in their efforts to end labor abuses and defend their workplace rights.

“Sweatfree Communities” is a global organization and a campaign of the International Labor Rights Forum, who assists sweatshop workers globally in their struggles to improve working conditions and form strong, independent unions. Additionally, “Sweatfree Communities” also helps to raise awareness about sweatshops to the the public.

Finally, an organization called “United Students Against Sweatshops”, or the “USAS” is the nation’s largest youth-led, student labor campaign organization, with affiliated locals on over 150 campuses.

Are *you* interested in taking action against sweatshops? Here are some specific organizations and projects you may participate in. If none of these interest you, please consider starting your own project to help remediate the issue. Another great way to take action is just by informing friends and family about the retailers that use sweatshops and encouraging them to boycott them. The more aware the public about where their goods come from, the more we can take a stand and make change.

Organization/Projects:	Efforts and How you Can Help:	Contact Information:
Worker Rights Consortium	The purpose of this organization is to combat sweatshops and protect the rights of workers who make apparel and other products. Colleges may affiliate with the organization, and this is a great way to be part of the mission and team. Also, donating a sum of money to the WRC is always a good way to show support.	5 Thomas Circle NW, Fifth Floor Washington, DC 20005 United States of America Phone: (202) 387-4884 Fax: (202) 387-3292 @http://www.workersrights.org
Sweatfree Communities	The purpose of this organization is to create a “sweatfree world”. This involves helping workers to create strong unions and informing citizens on what products have been made “sweatfree”. Many school districts, cities, counties, and states have adopted sweatfree purchasing policies. These policies aim	Contact: Joy Perkett 800 Troy Schenectady Road Latham, NY 12110-2455 518-213-6000 x6348 jperkett@abor-religion.org Organizing for Sweatfree Procurement in New York. @http://www.sweatfree.org/

	to direct purchasing power away from sweatshops to places where workers are treated with kindness and equality. Children may encourage their school to develop a "sweatfree policy" and is a great way to make a change.	
United Students Against Sweatshops	This organization is the largest youth-led, student labor campaign organization, with affiliated locals on over 150 campuses. The mission of USAS is to hold accountable multinational companies that exploit the people who work on university campuses, in our communities, and in the overseas factories where collegiate apparel is produced. Because this organization is run entirely by students, and it a great way to make a change and do something to truly help these people. Joining is a good way to help...	National Organizers – staff@usas.org KB Brower – kb@usas.org , (610) 308-7161 Garrett Shishido Strain - garrett@usas.org (817) 964-9836 Jan Van Tol – jan@usas.org , (585) 764-4202 Marcelle Grair - marcelle@usas.org , (330) 671-8773 @http://usas.org/
Team Sweat	Team Sweat is an international coalition of consumers, investors and workers committed to ending injustices in <i>Nike's</i> sweatshops around the world.	@http://www.teamsweat.org/ [Chat through the Website]
Fair Labor Association	This organization combines the efforts of business, civil society organizations, and colleges and universities to promote and protect workers' rights and to improve working conditions globally through adherence to international standards.	1111 19th St. NW, Suite 401 Washington, DC 20036 Phone: +1-202-898-1000 Fax: +1-202-898-9050 @http://www.fairlabor.org/

Conclusion

In the future, I plan to do the best that I can to help remediate this issue and inspire others to do so as well. I will inform friends, family, peers and leaders and encourage them to boycott all the companies and retailers listed before such as *Nike*, *Reebok*, *Victoria's Secret*, *Forever 21*, *Walmart*, *Banana Republic*, *Old Navy*, *Hershey's* and *The Gap*. Again, I strongly encourage you to do the same and inform everyone possible.

Just please remember, the next time you go into a store and see those pair of *Nike* sneakers you want, or that *Hershey* milk chocolate bar, just think of those poor adults, not to mention children. Them working 24 hours a day, with little to no pay and in a small, stuffy room with cracked walls and peeling paint. Just picture those children, aged five, six, seven, eight, nine, pricking a little finger on the needle of the sewing machine, or falling asleep standing up from exhaustion, just to bring home less than a dollar for their family to survive on. Just please remember that this is the depressing, living reality. People who work in these conditions live a miserable lifestyle and it is up to us to make a change. Sweatshops are a large issue and deserve to be taken seriously and put a stop to. Please, join us in taking a stand and making change. Together, we can raise awareness and eliminate sweatshops for good.

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