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Deadly Fashion

My \$9.99 t-shirt is no longer wearable after two washes: the shape of the shirt is so distorted that it does not fit me well anymore. One might say I got what I paid for, because the poorly constructed t-shirt is from a “fast fashion” stores. Fast fashion is a term for the companies like H&M, Zara, and Uniqlo that sell clothes that copy the trendy appeal of high-end brands but at an affordable price, usually because they are made in countries with low labor costs like India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and China. Fast fashion prices are so low, explains anthropologist and marketing professor Annamma Joy, that consumers feel encouraged to dispose of a garment after a few wearings and buy a new piece (274). This leads to an increase in sales for new clothing. In fact, According to journalist Rachel Monroe, “Worldwide, clothing production doubled from 2000 to 2015, while prices dropped: We were spending the same amount on clothes, but getting nearly twice as many items for it.” This increase in value for customers has a steep price, even if we can't see it in the store. Before tossing my t-shirt in a donation bag, I wonder about the person who sewed it. Who is this person? How good or bad are their working conditions? What about the cost of pollution? Although some defend the fast fashion industry’s aesthetic and economic contributions, it has devastating impacts on labor rights and the environment, and needs serious regulations by all nations to stop the damage.

One glaring consequence of the demand for cheap clothing is that factory workers get paid too little, while their requests for living wages are ignored. Cheap labor is a reason that many apparel

corporations move their production overseas. As Adam Matthews reports, by 2016, only 3% of clothes sold in the U.S. were made in this country. This shift to foreign production is the direct result of lower labor costs. According to Deborah Drew, an associate at the World Resource Institute's Center for Sustainable Business, women garment workers in Bangladesh are paid about \$96 per month; however, the government estimates \$336 dollars as a minimum level for workers to afford their basic needs. Based on these statistics, women are paid less than a third of a necessary living wage. Garment workers in other developing countries suffer similarly: they work long hours but remain in poverty. Business owners and their powerful organizations dismiss the demands of factory laborers for raises because they claim paying more will lead to factory closures. In fact, in recent negotiations, some are trying to impose even worse pay. Ken Loo, secretary-general of the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia, defended the employers' proposal to reduce wages by 4.5 percent. He "pointed to the economic effects of COVID-19 and said garment industry employers can't afford to spend more on labor" (Sovuthy). His statement reflects the belief that the workers' lives and well-being are not important compared to the continuing profits of the owners and investors. Most reasonable people would not agree with that idea, but most of us still shop for cheap clothing. We can't depend on the individual fairness of factory owners, or on individual consumers to solve this problem; that's why regulations are critical.

Besides low wages, workers in the clothing factories also suffer terrible working conditions. Singular tragic events such as the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 that killed over a thousand workers make worldwide news (Rahman and Rahman 1331), but the daily experiences of the people making cheap clothing are also unacceptable. According to Sadika Akhter, an anthropologist and doctor of Environmental Public Health and her colleagues,

garment workers in Bangladesh typically work ten to twelve hours per day, inhaling fabric dust, enduring extreme heat, and getting repetitive motion injuries from using the machines. They are constantly in pain and exhausted. In their qualitative study of women garment workers' experiences, Akhter et al. quote a machine operator who says, "We sew shirts with our tears and injure our fingers due to needle punctures. If you work at the garment factory it will give you some money but it will take your health. . . . No one can work in a factory more than ten years because you will lose your physical strength, energy and health . . . due to the nature of hard work in this industry." This statement emphasizes how exploited these workers are; their bodies are being damaged every day. The people, not just the clothing, are treated as if they are disposable.

It is true that the industry has made some progress in improving labor rights. Sociology professor Shahidur Rahman of BRAC University, and professor of Development Studies Kazi Mahmudur of University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh describe some attempts at reform following the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 in their article in *Development and Change*. According to Rahman and Rahman, two major agreements, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Workers' Safety brought together business owners and governments to improve the safety of factory buildings (1332). The Bangladeshi government also made changes to labor laws to allow workers to organize, and other international unions and non-governmental organizations have campaigned for worker rights in the industry (Rahman and Rahman 1333). These developments are positive - at least workers are less likely to die in a fire or building collapse. However, the inhumane daily conditions and low pay remain, even eight years after these agreements were made.

Beyond the conditions inside the factories, the production of cheap clothing causes

significant pollution. The problems begin with the raw materials: synthetic fibers are made from petroleum, and although plant fibers are considered more natural, growing plants to use for fabric has its own problems. Research scientist Luz Claudio writes that cotton is "one of the most water and pesticide dependent crops (A450). Despite the fact that more consumers are choosing organic produce over conventional because of the concern about pesticide residue on fruits and vegetables, this trend is not extending to crops grown for fabrics. In fact, pesticide use on cotton fields is actually growing, along with its negative impact on farmworkers, according to an international team of scientists from Pakistan and Greece (Khan and Damala 9). This problem is not limited to the countries where clothing is sewn; the U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that the usage of pesticides to produce cotton is a quarter of the entire pesticide used in this country (qtd. in Claudio, A450). Furthermore, when fabric is processed and dyed in factories overseas it can lead to significant water pollution. According to investigative reporter Adam Matthews, water that runs off from the factories contaminates rivers that are the lifeline for farmers, killing crops and sickening local residents and animals. Yixiu Wu of Greenpeace points out that "the average pair of jeans requires 1,850 gallons of water to process; a t-shirt requires 715 gallons. And after going through the manufacturing process, all that water often ends up horribly polluted" (qtd. in Matthews). In addition to water pollution, the fashion industry produces at least a tenth of the world's carbon emissions, says journalist Dana Thomas (qtd. in Shatzman). Still, most retail corporations do little to address these harms, because their profits are higher when they spend less money ensuring that crops are grown without poisons and that the waste products are properly disposed of.

Despite the clear injustices and environmental harms of garment production, some argue that the fashion industry provides work to people with few better choices in developing

countries. According to reporter Stephanie Vatz, companies began outsourcing clothing manufacturing jobs in the 1970s, and by 2013, only two percent of clothing was made in the U.S. The same lack of labor protections that allow terrible working conditions in developing countries also guarantees low labor costs that motivate U.S. companies to relocate their factory sources (Vetz). Some claim that this is actually a benefit to those workers. For example, Benjamin Powell, the director of the Free Market Institute, justifies sweatshop labor, insists that this model is "part of the process that raises living standards and leads to better working conditions and development over time (qtd. in Ozdamar-Ertekin 3). This argument is compelling from a distance, but even if it may be true to some degree when we look at the history of economic development, it disregards the humanity of current garment workers. These people continue to work long hours in brutal conditions, generating huge profits for the factory and retail owners. Making the excuse that their lives could be even worse without this exploitation is just a cynical justification for greed.

Fast fashion brands focus almost entirely on financial gain and ignore social responsibility and workers' human rights. They turn a blind eye to polluting rivers, the farmland and to poor labor conditions. As a consumer of fast fashion brands, this is troubling. As a person considering fashion as a part of history, a form of art and self-expression, this is beyond sad. A bad sewing job is an inconvenience for me, but unethical practices are the real issue. If there is something we can change, that is our behavior as consumers: we need to buy second-hand clothes, look for companies making apparel here in the U.S., and be willing to pay more for higher-quality clothing that lasts. However, ultimately this is not just a question of our own purchasing decisions. Major changes are needed in the system, and for that we need stronger government regulations to ensure real change.

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