
The Issue Of Sweatshops At The Clothing Factories

A landowner receives a call from their tenants, they are a young family with two children, one in kinder-garden, and the other starting primary school in the next few weeks. The parents raise concerns about the gas heater not working properly. For the landowner, it has been the third call this week. Aware of the problem the landowner promises to get someone to look at it before the end of the week. The next day however, the family suffers carbon monoxide poisoning killing both the parents and children.

If I were to ask you what the outcome should be for the landowner I would guess that you would all agree that they should be tried in court for negligence resulting in death. With this in mind, I can't help but question the unethical practises of the clothing industry. Blinded by the financial profit companies make from using sweatshops, many workers suffer from low wages, incredibly long working hours and appalling working conditions.

With consumerism growing, a large proportion of businesses take advantage of people in a vulnerable state by ignoring their basic human rights and placing them in inevitable danger. Just like the landowner, I believe that companies who consciously allow the mistreatment of their employees should be criminally prosecuted. Large corporations that use sweatshops have an obligation to ensure the safety of all of their workers, even if they do not directly oversee the management of these manufacturing sites in other countries.

In the 2013 Dhaka garment factory collapse 1,134 deaths resulted from hazardous cracks in the walls. A day prior workers were evacuated, but sent back to work the following day. It is because of the parent companies high demand for clothing that sweatshops ignore the safety regulations in order to meet their quota. Elizabeth L. Cline, author of *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, reveals that in Bangladesh factories were "in tall office buildings that were not built for manufacturing".

Manufacturers work hard. They work hard despite their poor working conditions and yet they are not even guaranteed their own safety. Although those responsible for the disaster were charged, nothing stops big parent companies from using other sweatshops. Without consequences for big brand labels, they can continue exploiting countries who rely on their exports.

Furthermore, big clothing labels make a significant profit by employing workers who are uneducated, in extreme poverty and desperate for any money they can get. Companies exploit these people to manufacture their clothing because they know that they are desperate for a job to earn money, even if it is well below minimum wage. Fabricating the reality of a 50% off sale companies are able to gain a substantial profit and appeal to savvy shoppers at the expense of their workers who spend the majority of their time working.

Let me set the scene, Lahore Pakistan, 500 women aged between 14 and 30 work in a factory producing knitwear and jeans for companies in America and England. Razia works from 7am to 11pm. She eats her meals on the floor if she is allowed a break. Razia explains that her "male supervisor harasses young women workers" and if they do not sleep with him, he will not give

them their wages. With no proper ventilation system and dim lighting Razia suffers headaches and eye problems. Earning an equivalent of 35 Australian dollars monthly, Razia is considered to be living in extreme poverty. Ultimately, it comes down to the actions of the big corporations, if they refuse to change the environment sweatshop workers are forced to work in then they should be severely punished.

However, commonly argued by those defending the use of sweatshops state that although working conditions are not ideal, big clothing businesses provide jobs for those who would be otherwise unemployed. Instead of addressing the root of the issue with an ethical solution certain people would rather adopt the glass half full mentality.

But how do you tell someone working in a sweatshop, that they are lucky to have a job when they struggle to feed themselves let alone their children or when they share their one bedroom house with ten other people because they cannot afford their own home. I'm sorry to say but sweatshops are not jobs they are forced labour.

In Bangladesh, children as young as six years old work an estimated 16 hours a day and with 1.3 million children working full time it comes to no surprise that it becomes an unrelenting cycle of poverty. That is 1.3 million children that could have been in school earning a better income in the future, boosting their country's economy.

For those who have been informed of this issue, the tragic reality of economic interest is easy to see. Providing a viable solution however, is much more difficult, but let me offer one. By demanding global standards on production with legal consequences it would be a point in the right direction. It would ensure that both sweatshop owners and parent companies are on the same page. On the same page that no one should have to die for being exposed to poor conditions. And on the same page that if we do not tolerate this kind of treatment in Australia neither should the companies.