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lobalization and Human Rights: The Apparel Industry in the Developing World

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Globalization of the apparel industry has transplanted thousands of factories and millions of jobs to developing countries. This is contributing to rapid economic growth, yet it is also creating “sweatshops” that repress workers’ rights. Throughout the 1990s, media campaigns repeatedly exposed sweatshops. Negative publicity prompted clothing corporations to adopt specific labor codes of conduct, which have sometimes been effective, but have also often been simply a façade. In spite of the bad working conditions in many sweatshops, the overall lesson from the apparel industry is that globalization generally furthers the economic human rights of the world’s poor.

Major demonstrations over the past few years in Seattle, Prague, Washington, D.C., and other cities have vividly displayed the hostility that many feel toward globalization. Those who perceive it as impinging upon the economic human rights of impoverished workers are especially hostile. For many critics, globalization represents an exacerbation of the extremes of free market capitalism by widening inequality and pushing developing nations into yet further poverty.

In contrast, advocates of globalization contend that increased integration is beneficial because it transfers valuable skills, technology, and income to developing countries. The economic growth that this produces admittedly leads to sweatshops being established throughout the world. These sweatshops are part of the “growing pains” of development, and ultimately contribute to a general improvement in eco-

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conomic human rights.

This article cuts through the complexity of the issue and the sentiment attached to the debate by focusing on two specific areas in which both pro- and anti-globalists contend that globalization has affected economic human rights: sweatshops, and corresponding media campaigns against them. To achieve this aim, this investigation defines globalization and human rights, explores the globalization of apparel production, and considers the role of sweatshops in Bangladesh—a country that has swiftly integrated into worldwide clothing manufacturing networks. Finally, this article explores the impact that international media exposure has had upon the human rights of sweatshop workers.

This thorough examination reveals that globalization of the apparel industry has transplanted thousands of factories and millions of jobs to developing countries, where it is causing rapid economic growth. These plants are often referred to as “sweatshops,” in part because they have been known to repress workers rights. However, by creating growth, these plants also increase the choices and economic rights open to their workers. Media and Internet campaigns against sweatshops have prompted clothing corporations to adopt specific labor codes of conduct, which have sometimes been effective in improving the rights of workers, but have often been little more than a façade. Despite this somewhat mixed picture, and the undeniable hardships prevalent in sweatshops, the example of the apparel industry demonstrates that globalization can positively affect the economic human rights of the world’s poor.

Globalization and Human Rights

From the 1990s onwards, there has been a marked increase in global integration. As it is characterized particularly by a growth in trade and the global spread of networks of production, globalization has impacted upon economic human rights in the developing world. Contemporary globalization represents the “widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life.”¹ The substantial removal of political barriers with the end of the Cold War, trade liberalization by the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the explosion of communications technologies such as the Internet are all recent characteristics of globalization. Globalization also has a variety of different consequences for different areas. For instance, some observers of globalization suggest some of the negative results of increased worldwide interconnectedness include ethnic conflict, transnational pollution, and the breakdown of national identity.² Others also claim that increased global integration has a direct bearing upon human rights.

Human rights were first legally protected by international law through the United Nations’ (UN) 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). According to the UDHR, paramount to human rights is the universal entitlement of all people to life, liberty, and the security of person, as well as freedom from slavery, torture, arbitrary arrest, and detention.³

The UDHR also brought to the forefront economic rights such as the right to work, equal pay for equal work, the right to join a trade union, freedom from employment discrimination, and just and favorable remuneration.⁴ These economic human rights have since evolved with further UN initiatives. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) reiterated the right of all people to earn a living doing work they have freely chosen. The International Labor Organization (ILO) Minimum Age Convention (1973) attempted to tackle child labor by stating that children should remain in full-time education until the age of 15.

This article will evaluate how economic human rights such as the right to work and earn a living from freely chosen employment have been affected in developing countries by heightened contemporary globalization.

Globalization of Apparel Production.

Both critics and advocates of global integration agree that the recent acceleration in interconnectedness of apparel production affects economic human rights. In recent decades, global production networks have been formed as a result of a transformation in the structure of corporations and the manner in which products are manufactured, leading to the emergence of global production networks. In part, this transformation has been caused by the rise of multinational corporations (MNCs)—companies that have extended their operations across the planet in a perpetual quest for the least expensive production inputs possible.

In the late 1990s, approximately 53,000 MNCs of varying sizes accounted for around 20 percent of world output and up to 70 percent of world trade.⁵ In recent years, the structure of many MNCs has switched from hierarchical to forms that encourage greater autonomy and communication, creating complex international chains of production.⁶ Also, many MNCs now contract business to smaller enterprises in order to capitalize on lower costs and greater flexibility. As a result of this transformation, a global manufacturing system has emerged where “production capacity is dispersed to an unprecedented number of developing as well as industrialized countries.”⁷ MNCs are crucial to global production networks, but these networks extend far beyond MNCs alone.

The textile and clothing industry presently has one of the most extensive of all worldwide production networks. International production and distribution networks are central to the functioning of the industry, and apparel production is dispersed worldwide.⁸ Apparel MNCs now typically outsource their operations across continents. Asian countries in particular have grown to become major global suppliers.⁹

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, a garment sold in the United States is the product of a complex chain of actors, including manufacturers, merchandisers, buying agents, and retailers.¹⁰ Manufacturers are often found overseas, where they function as both contractors and sub-contractors. So dispersed are networks of production that famous garment brands have clothing made for them in numerous

factories across the world, the number of which is constantly increasing. For example, Gap, which also produces clothing under the Banana Republic and Old Navy brand names, produces its clothing in more than 1,000 sites across Asia, Latin America and Africa.¹¹ Similarly, the Nike Corporation's products are made in 700 factories in 50 countries. However, Nike does not itself own a single factory.¹² By 1997, 530,000 workers outside the United States were employed in the manufacture of products for the Nike Corporation alone.¹³

The expansion of the apparel industry's global production network has greatly accelerated in recent years. Due to the relocation of labor-intensive tasks to regions with lower costs, the majority of manufacturing has been removed from Western countries and transplanted to the developing world. From 1985 to 1995, U.S. imports of apparel grew by 171 percent, reaching nearly \$34.7 billion. In 1995, the U.S. imported apparel products from 168 countries.¹⁴ By 1995, developing nations had almost doubled their share of world clothing exports since the early 1970s to account for more than 60 percent of all exports.¹⁵

In contrast, during this period the clothing industries of wealthy countries, such as the United States, dramatically declined. The number of employees in the American garment industry fell from 1.45 million in 1973 to 853,000 in 1995. The domestic market share of American garment firms fell from 70 percent in 1980 to less than 50 percent in 1995.¹⁶ The complexity of global production networks makes it impossible to say precisely how many factories are engaged in apparel manufacture, but some estimates suggest that the figure is at least 90,000.¹⁷

These statistics do not account for workers who produce garments in their homes for contractors manufacturing for the international market. Reports suggest this is prevalent in several major clothing-producing countries, such as India and the Philippines, where many private homes are also equipped with looms.¹⁸ According to the ILO, industrialized countries have "promoted the expansion of the clothing industry in the developing countries and participated actively in the growing globalization of the sector."¹⁹

This investigation specifically examines the apparel industry for three reasons. First, the apparel industry has one of the most globalized production networks in the world today. Second, the apparel industry is extremely labor intensive, meaning that it affects the lives of millions of employees and their families. Third, questions frequently arise regarding human rights abuses of workers engaged in apparel production.

The Debate: Opponents of Globalized Apparel Production

Critics oppose increased global integration on the basis that it negatively affects the economic human rights of its employees. These critics see a direct correlation between the outsourcing of apparel manufacturing to poorer countries and the creation of "sweatshops." The U.S. Department of Labor considers a factory a sweat-

shop if it violates two or more basic employment rights, including child labor, minimum wage, overtime, and fire and safety laws.²⁰

This perception of correlation stems from a dramatic increase in the number of sweatshops that occurred during the rapid integration of the international economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s.²¹ Throughout the 1990s, anti-globalization groups consistently exposed sweatshops in developing countries that were manufacturing apparel for Western MNCs. According to anti-globalization groups, these examples of sweatshop conditions show that developing countries often ignore international human rights standards because of the need for foreign investment and jobs created by MNCs. In short, anti-globalists claim that this is the reason why globalization leads to the repression of the economic human rights of workers.

The following examples give credence to this argument. In plants producing footwear for Nike in Vietnam, a supervisor struck female workers two or three times each with a Nike shoe on the back of the head and neck. A supervisor at a Nike contractor reportedly taped a woman's mouth shut to punish her for talking during working hours and another was accused of sexually molesting female employees.²² According to the Human Rights for Workers Bulletin, a different Nike contractor in Indonesia stood out as being one of the worst sweatshops in the entire country in terms of treatment of workers on overtime wages, working conditions, the non-payment of legal benefits, and health and safety conditions.²³

Anti-sweatshop campaigners also claim that increased integration leads to increased inequality and exploitation of workers, as few plants pay their employees "living wages" sufficient to support a family. For instance, in Saipan factories manufacturing clothing for U.S. brands such as Abercrombie & Fitch and J.C. Penney have been accused by organizations such as the Sweatshop Files of using the indentured labor of Chinese migrant workers.²⁴ In 1999, plants manufacturing for the Ann Taylor Company in Shenzhen, China paid their workers 23 cents per hour, which is much less than the minimum income required for survival in this part of China.²⁵ Such instances are merely a few examples of negative practices in sweatshops that were documented in the 1990s.

There is tremendous inequality between the wages paid to workers manufacturing clothing products in developing countries and their counterparts in wealthy countries. For example, in 1999 a worker at a factory manufacturing for Gap in Cambodia earned 21 cents per hour.²⁶ In the same year, the average wage of an apparel worker in the United States was \$9.73 an hour.²⁷

According to their critics, garment sweatshops are also exploitative because workers are paid a tiny amount in proportion to the price for which the goods they manufacture are finally sold. Workers in Indonesia who earn 31 cents per hour make Nike sneakers for which American consumers may pay as much as \$125 per pair.²⁸ It would take a worker 400 hours, or 10 weeks, to earn the sneakers she produced.

Across the world, the majority of sweatshop workers are women; some NGOs

suggest that as many as 90 percent of sweatshop workers are women, the majority of these young and unmarried. Moreover, the exposés of the 1990s discovered that many sweatshops employed children—in breach of various ILO rulings. According to critics, as most developing societies are patriarchal, the high numbers of young single women in clothing factories demonstrates that employers deliberately select young women because they are seen as more easily exploited than men. Furthermore, women selected for sweatshop labor are poorly educated and often recent migrants from rural areas.²⁹

The Debate: Proponents of Globalized Apparel Production

Proponents of globalization contend that it leads to increased growth, which improves the economic human rights of the world's poor, as evidenced by the China and India's recent progress. Garment production in Asia is, according to this point of view, better than the alternatives available to many of its workers, and should be encouraged by the West through the reduction of tariff barriers.

For pro-globalists, the overarching dynamics of economic integration can improve the economic human rights of most of the world's poor if their countries “globalize” and open their borders to free trade and investment. According to a senior economist of the World Bank, provided that individual countries have complementary institutions and policies, globalization is “on the whole a positive force for development and poverty reduction.”³⁰ In other words, globalization leads to growth, which leads to employment—which expands the economic rights of the world's poor.

The world's two largest developing nations, China and India, demonstrate the benefits of globalization. Both countries have become more open to foreign trade and investment in the past two decades and have seen their average annual economic growth rates increase from 2 percent in the early 1970s to 5 percent in the 1990s.³¹ India's average annual poverty reduction rate accelerated to 7.1 percent in 1993-99, and China's reached 8.4 percent in 1992-98.³²

Supporters of global integration acknowledge the poor human rights records of sweatshops in poor countries. However, in spite of their negative effects on some workers, sweatshops have a positive aggregate effect on the economy and society because they function as agents for the transfer of wealth, skills, and technology to developing countries. Harvard University's Professor Jeffrey Sachs, for example, bluntly states that “there are too few sweatshops,” a point reiterated by Paul Krugman, an economist at Princeton University, for whom “the overwhelming mainstream view among economists is that the growth of this kind of employment is tremendous good news for the world's poor.”³³

According to this point of view, sweatshops are an essential and inevitable stage of a nation's economic development. Pro-globalists support sweatshop development not as an end but as a means for development. The world's first industrial revolution began in Britain with technological innovation in textiles that precipitated major

changes throughout the economy, a phenomenon repeated in North America. More recently, this also occurred in East Asia, where the growth of clothing production for export was integral to the development of modern industry.³⁴ Today's sweatshops can be crucial to a country's economic development. As the country's economic development improves, the workers will likely receive better wages and safer conditions.

Pro-globalists also contend that sweatshops are greatly preferable to their alternatives. To begin with, a great deal of sweatshop production occurs in fixed locations that are open to inspection, allowing the conditions of workers to be monitored. In contrast, a great deal of traditional employment of minors and women in the apparel industry in developing countries has taken place in small locations where it cannot be easily monitored and regulated, such as in tailors' shops and homes containing looms.³⁵ For instance, a 1996 ILO investigation of the Filipino clothing industry found that 214,000 workers worked in small family enterprises, and almost half a million "homeworkers" operated looms for local subcontracting systems for national export industries.³⁶ Such production is typically clandestine, thus escaping all monitoring and regulation. MNCs and their affiliates also pay higher wages than those paid by domestic employers. In low-income countries, MNCs pay wages twice as much on average as local rivals.³⁷

For such pro-globalists, the development of a global production network in apparel is part of an overall trend of economic integration that is increasing the income of developing countries and should therefore be encouraged. Furthermore, because clothing factories are integral to the economic growth of developing countries, pro-globalists contend they ought to be encouraged by developed nations through trade agreements. At present, the "Quad" countries (the United States, the European Union, Japan, and Canada) impose high tariffs on textile imports from developing countries. For developing countries to benefit fully from globalization, it is essential that rich countries lift these barriers.³⁸ In addition, although they have far smaller internal markets, developing countries also impose high tariffs against one another that pro-globalists would like to see lifted.

Case Study: Bangladesh

Detailed examination of clothing manufacturing in Bangladesh reveals the reality of the impact of the global apparel production network upon a developing society to be far more nuanced than a dichotomous argument implies. In a sense, the accounts given by pro- and anti-globalists can account for the effect that sweatshops have had upon Bangladesh. Sweatshops infringe on the economic and human rights of their workers, yet they also contribute to vital economic growth and poverty reduction—thus contributing to an improvement in the economic human rights of workers.

The Bangladeshi garment industry provides a robust test case for globalization because Bangladesh is an impoverished country that can greatly benefit from growth in foreign investment or "liberalization of its market." The Bangladeshi per

capita income is presently only \$360, making it one of the world's poorest countries. Almost half of the Bangladeshi population of 130 million lives beneath the poverty line as defined by the World Bank.³⁹

In addition, the garment industry in Bangladesh has been consistently accused of high profile economic human rights abuses by the international media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For example, in 1994, Bangladeshi garment factories were notorious for conspicuously employing child laborers.⁴⁰ Indeed, Bangladesh did not even ratify the ILO's 1973 convention on the elimination of child labor until 2001.

The Bangladeshi garment sector is highly integrated into the worldwide production system. The clothing industry in Bangladesh grew dramatically from the late 1970s onwards, as apparel MNCs began to traverse the globe in search of low input costs. As Asian countries such as Hong Kong and South Korea filled their export quotas to the United States, the European Union, and Japan, clothing manufacturers in these countries began searching for new areas with low wages in which to locate factories. Consequently, many foreign companies opened factories in Bangladesh. In turn, Bangladeshi workers trained by foreign companies swiftly opened their own plants. In 1978, there were just four garment factories in Bangladesh. This number grew to 700 in 1985 and then to 2,400 in 1995. Bangladeshi clothing exports grew by 135 percent per year between 1983 and 1987.⁴¹ By 1995, the garment industry was the single largest export industry in Bangladesh, with more than 50 percent of garment exports going to the United States.⁴² This made Bangladesh the tenth largest source of clothing exports to the United States, accounting for \$1.1 billion worth of trade.⁴³

In 1995, the rapidly expanding Bangladeshi garment industry employed 1.2 million people in formal factory locations, 90 percent of whom were women.⁴⁴ The fact that Bangladeshi women were employed outside the home is in itself a revolutionary development. The garment industry is unusual for Bangladesh in employing young, unmarried women in large numbers.⁴⁵

The apparel and textile industry is the most labor-intensive in Bangladesh and accounts for 45 percent of all industrial employment and 5 percent of total national income.⁴⁶ Female garment workers typically migrate from poor rural areas into cities such as Dhaka, the capital.⁴⁷ A survey of 400 garment workers conducted in 1997 found that the vast majority entered employment by the age of 16, and a substantial minority did so as young as 11 or 12. Sixty-nine percent of respondents were unmarried when they entered the garment industry.⁴⁸

Interviews with Bangladeshi garment workers reveal an industry in which low wages and abuses of labor rights are common. The fact that the industry's workforce is composed primarily of women reveals that it is mostly women who are willing to work under the exploitative conditions offered to entry-level employees.⁴⁹ Moreover, women are typically already suited to the garment industry, having learned to sew in their family homes as young girls. In many clothing factories, entry-level

salaries for workers newly arrived from rural areas barely even cover subsistence costs. For instance, when one young girl first began garment manufacturing, her monthly wage was less than \$9 a month, 80 percent of which went to cover her food and rent.⁵⁰

In addition, health and safety conditions in many Bangladeshi sweatshops are poor, leading to epidemic levels of stress and sickness for workers. Garment manufacturing is a labor-intensive process that rapidly takes a punishing toll on its workers. In the month before they were surveyed, 73 percent of respondents suffered from head and ear complaints, 69 percent from general fatigue, and 45 percent from eye problems.⁵¹ According to proponents, in spite of these infringements on workers rights, the garment industry significantly contributes to the empowerment of its young female workers. Although entry-level wages are low, there are opportunities for rapid occupational mobility—most women surveyed who had been employed for more than a year had changed factories at least once, and had typically been promoted from helper to operator.⁵²

Workers quickly learn that by working hard and negotiating with their managers, they can rapidly increase their skills and their income. One 17-year-old worker, for example, described how over the course of around five years her monthly wages had increased from \$6 to \$40, which was above the local subsistence level.⁵³ Employment in the formal garment sector also teaches many young women skills of negotiation with superiors that facilitate their social empowerment.⁵⁴ New surveys suggest that some women make a personal decision to enter the garment industry because working in a clothing factory is seen as preferable to domestic work or marrying young.⁵⁵ Young women who earn their own income are now no longer content to simply leave their independence behind in the workplace.

Bangladeshi women are beginning to marry later in life, and some have adopted new attitudes toward contraception because of a strong desire to gain their reproductive freedom.⁵⁶ Reduced birth rates would prove groundbreaking in a country with a population of 130 million, which is projected to double over the next 50 years. There are signs that this transformation is already beginning to occur, as the number of births per woman fell from 3.3 in 1997 to 3.1 in 2000.⁵⁷

Growth in the Bangladeshi garment export sector is also contributing to overall trends of growth for the Bangladeshi economy. The ready-made garment industry is the largest source of foreign currency for Bangladesh. The service sector of which garment production is a vital component has contributed most to the international development of the Bangladeshi economy, having expanded from 39 percent of GDP in 1976-77 to 62 percent in 1997-98.⁵⁸ The Bangladeshi economy has grown at a rate of 5 percent on average over the past decade. Poverty has also been steadily reducing, and the average life expectancy increased from 55 in the late 1980s to 61 in the late 1990s.⁵⁹

A case study of the garment industry in Bangladesh provides conclusions that

support the arguments of both opponents and advocates of global economic integration. Opponents of sweatshops are correct to argue that in many cases such factories pay inadequate wages and repress the rights of their workers.

But in the case of Bangladesh, wages and conditions for apparel workers could be significantly improved without affecting the profitability of the companies from developed countries that contract to them. Economist Richard Rothstein suggests that wages in Bangladesh could “easily be doubled without undermining the profitability of Bangladeshi garment manufacturers.”⁶⁰ This is partly because globalized apparel companies are a victim of their own success and have few countries in the world left to relocate to in search of cheap labor.

In conclusion, the Bangladeshi garment sector is fully integrated into global production networks, and employs a substantial number of workers. Anti-globalists are correct in their assertion that conditions are often poor in the sweatshops that it has created. Moreover, many employers certainly appear to be able to afford to pay their workers higher wages. Yet, poor though their conditions are, sweatshops teach their workers new skills, and opportunities exist for swift advancement and increases in pay. This increases the employment choices available to workers and therefore their economic rights. The vast majority of these workers are women—a revolutionary development, in itself, for a country where only a few years ago it was unheard of for females to work in formal locations outside of the home. Although women are subjected to poor conditions in sweatshops, they are also learning skills of negotiation that they wish to replicate in their private lives such as in matters of reproductive freedom.

Media, Campaigns and Corporate Social Responsibility

Anti-sweatshop media campaigns are further illustration of the positive contribution that globalization makes to the improvement of economic human rights in developing countries. These campaigns began in the 1990s in order to scrutinize the overseas activities of Western apparel manufacturers. The ability of anti-sweatshop campaigners to make their message heard by key consumers was made possible by the communications technology boom of the 1990s.

Because of media attention, MNCs in developing countries cannot avoid the international spotlight when they—or their contractors—are accused of violating workers’ rights. Informational campaigns of this sort have severely damaged the public images and share prices of many apparel MNCs, forcing Western apparel firms to adopt high profile codes of conduct and programs of social responsibility.

Media exposés such as the constant onslaught against Gap led by groups like Behind the Label reveal how remarkably adept many anti-sweatshop NGOs have become in using two important forms of modern media: the Internet and television. Evidence of poor pay and working conditions in sweatshops are publicized by web sites of anti-globalization NGOs based in Western countries. Not only have anti-glo-

balization groups prolifically campaigned against sweatshops, groups such as Nikewatch and Behind the Label were founded with the sole purpose of exposing the manner in which brand-name garments are manufactured.⁶¹

The media has been a willing partner, helping NGOs expose sweatshops. In 2000, a BBC documentary discovered children working in Nike-contracted factories in Cambodia as young as 12.⁶² This prompted calls from pressure groups for Cambodia to fully ratify ILO regulations on the elimination of child labor. In 1993, *NBC Dateline*, an American television news magazine, showed young Bangladeshi children making garments to be sold at Wal-Mart stores in the United States.⁶³ To the embarrassment of clothing MNCs, several other American current affairs programs, including *60 Minutes* and *48 Hours*, have also conducted similar investigations over the past decade.⁶⁴

On several occasions, negative sweatshop publicity spurred protests by stockholder groups. For instance, in 1997 media reports discovered children in China making toys and clothes for the Disney company in factories that were locked from the outside, thus violating health and safety codes. Shareholders of Disney stock at that time included the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church, who formed a coalition that pushed through a resolution calling for respect for workers' human rights. The Disney Company responded by declaring that it would reform its contract supplier system to ensure that no contractor violated labor rights.⁶⁵

The greatest effect of anti-sweatshop campaigns has been to damage the public image of high profile name brands such as Nike and Gap, whose sales are reliant on expensive international advertising campaigns. Although the precise causes of this decline in sales remain unclear, it appears to have been at least partly caused by a boycott of products that teenagers and young adults believed were made with sweatshop labor.

Negative publicity and corresponding sales collapses, such as that suffered by Nike, angered the shareholders and owners of large apparel companies. As one Hong Kong trade lawyer involved in the apparel industry stated, clothing producers "don't want to be exposed on *60 Minutes* or *20/20*."⁶⁶ Many apparel MNCs, such as Gap and Nike, aim their products primarily toward the youth market. There is no greater damage to this market than the revelation that products aimed at youths were made by other youths, impoverished and working in unsafe or repressive conditions.

Harmful publicity prompted many clothing companies to react swiftly. Some MNCs commissioned international accountancy firms such as Ernst & Young and Peat Marwick to assess and adjudicate their labor practices in developing countries. Others recruited local NGOs in developing countries to monitor factories on their behalf, a practice employed by companies such as Gap and Liz Claiborne.⁶⁷ Nike now assigns specific "in-house" personnel to the task of monitoring its factories in developing countries. These personnel visit factories once every two or three days and then report back to headquarters with their findings.⁶⁸ Nike has committed itself to trans-

parency with a website, tours of its facilities, and publications of findings in overseas factories.⁶⁹

Additionally, in the mid-1990s most clothing MNCs issued “codes of conduct” for their overseas plants—sets of rules strictly outlining labor practices. In 1995, the U.S. Department of Labor surveyed 15 of the leading U.S. clothing corporations, including Levi-Strauss, Fruit of the Loom, and Nike. The majority of these companies had implemented their own codes. These codes of conduct specified workers’ rights in contractors’ plants, and in some cases even regulated the countries from which they could make purchases. Levi-Strauss, for example, does not do business with Myanmar, a country against whose present government the U.S. government has imposed sanctions for its repressive human rights practices.

In response to negative publicity, and in an attempt to improve their public images, some clothing companies also adopted corporate social responsibility programs. The purpose of these programs is to assure critics such as hostile anti-sweatshop campaigners that a company is fair in the treatment of its own and its affiliates’ employees, and that the programs also perform an important role in the international community.

Nike’s Web site, for example, has a “Global Citizenship” section that describes the corporation as being an “innovative and inspirational global citizen in a world where our company participates. Every day we drive responsible business practices that contribute to profitable and sustainable growth.”⁷⁰ Recent Nike corporate social responsibility initiatives have included sponsoring athletes to work with diabetic Native Americans, giving grants to charities near the company’s Oregon headquarters, and sending its employees to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity.⁷¹

Gap has taken similar measures and now defines its social responsibilities as “getting involved in organizations that express the needs of youth and neighborhoods. It means we want garment workers to be treated with dignity and respect. And it means minimizing our effect on the environment.”⁷² As part of its social responsibility program, Gap supports organizations that work in five key global problem areas, including HIV/AIDS and environmental degradation.⁷³

The growth of corporate social responsibility programs and codes of conduct also occurred in other industries in the 1990s. Many companies acknowledged that this was chiefly a response to media criticism. An executive of Starbucks, for example, admitted that protesters had “prodded” his company into adopting a code.⁷⁴ The consequences of the adoption of codes of conduct and social responsibility programs by clothing corporations have been somewhat mixed. Positively, such codes and programs have increased transparency in the apparel industry, contributed to the improvement of conditions within clothing factories, and transformed the “bottom line” considerations of many companies. The Global Alliance, a coalition of NGOs that works with MNCs such as Gap and Nike, recently released a report based on interviews with over 4,000 workers in nine factories in the Indonesian garment industry.

The survey asked questions about issues such as sexual harassment and the responsiveness of supervisors to health complaints. On its Web site, Nike has published this survey, its reactions to it, and plans for improvements.

By the mid-1990s, the implementation of codes of conduct in the Indian subcontinent by apparel producers was adjudged by the U.S. Department of Labor to have contributed to the improvement of conditions in sweatshops, demonstrated especially by a decline in child labor. For example, by 1996 there were conspicuously fewer children employed in garment production in the region than in the previous two years.⁷⁵

Corporate social responsibility programs and codes of conduct have also altered the “bottom line” considerations of many clothing manufacturers. Fear of the risk to profits, public relations, and shareholder relations resulting from poor publicity has caused many clothing MNCs to incorporate workers human rights in their bottom line considerations.

Consequently, increasing numbers of clothing companies see fair treatment of labor as necessary and unavoidable. This transformation is in many respects revolutionary. According to *Forbes Magazine*, 30 years ago the majority of Western MNCs openly rejected the suggestion that they had any social obligation to the countries in which their products were manufactured.⁷⁶ The benefits of incorporating ethical considerations into the bottom line were summarized by the CEO of Levi-Strauss, who stated that a “company cannot sustain success unless it develops ways to anticipate and address ethical issues as they arise. Doing the right thing from Day One helps avoid future setbacks and regrets.”⁷⁷ Acting ethically limits potential risk because it preempts accusations of workers rights violations.

However, critics contend that conduct codes and social responsibility programs are at best cosmetic, and at worst a myopic distraction. Social responsibility programs have been dismissed as public relations exercises by opponents of globally integrated clothing production networks. For example, the Nike Corporation now sends athletes to combat Native American diabetes. This improves the company’s public image relatively inexpensively, but does it really do anything to improve pay and conditions for workers in developing countries?

Another criticism is that the actions taken to encourage contracting factories to comply with codes of conduct do not actually preserve worker rights. For example, media revelations about child labor in the 1990s caused children to be dismissed from many clothing factories producing in the Indian subcontinent. Phillips-Van Heusen gave factories 30-90 days to discharge underage workers. Sears and Roebuck reacted to a BBC documentary showing child labor in its factories by demanding that its garments no longer be made there.⁷⁸

While it was fortunate that children were no longer exposed to long hours and repressive conditions, their removal from factories did not necessarily cause them to return to school. Findings by ILO monitoring teams suggest that that less than a quar-

ter of dismissed children ended up in school. Significant numbers of other children appeared to end up as street beggars, domestic servants, or even prostitutes. Others merely relocated to secret underground subcontractors, working in sweatshops with far worse, unmonitored conditions.⁷⁹

In summary, recent advances in communications technology have enabled campaigning groups to highlight sweatshop production conditions in the apparel industry. Investigative television programs have also highlighted abuses in sweatshops. This negative publicity has contributed to the adoption by clothing manufacturers of codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility programs—with mixed results. However, on balance, media attention to the issue of sweatshops has largely been positive for the economic rights of workers in developing countries.

Conclusion

This article has examined two aspects of the relationship between accelerated worldwide interconnectedness and the economic human rights of workers: clothing sweatshops in developing countries, and media campaigns against these sweatshops. Examining sweatshops reveals that the reality of the impact of globalization upon economic human rights is far more complex than any polarized debate between pro- and anti- globalists allows. Since the late 1970s, worldwide production networks in the apparel industry have created thousands of factories and millions of jobs in developing countries. However, many of these plants have correctly been labeled “sweatshops” because of their oppression of workers rights.

Bangladeshi clothing factories reveal that the arguments of advocates and opponents of globalization both partly account for the impact of sweatshops. Manufacturing clothing in sweatshops pays poorly and is often associated with sexual harassment and excessive physical discipline. Furthermore, it seems likely that manufacturers could easily pay apparel workers more without affecting their profitability. However, the garment sector is also a vital component of Bangladesh’s integration into the global economy, which is steadily growing, and gradually helping to reduce poverty. Moreover, sweatshops are having the somewhat surprising consequence of giving young unmarried women independence in the workplace for the first time. This increases the employment choices available to them, thereby improving their economic rights.

The 1990s witnessed major campaigns by anti-sweatshop NGOs and countless exposés of poor working conditions by investigative television programs. As a result, large apparel producers suffered public relations disasters and decreases in sales. They responded by initiating codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility programs and becoming more transparent and responsive to the needs of workers. Some of these initiatives appear to have been merely palliatives designed to assuage a media hungry for tales of sweatshops. Others, when combined with sufficient information for workers and effective monitoring, appear to have been transformative in

that they have altered the bottom line considerations of large corporations. Many CEOs freely admit that this would not have occurred without the scrutiny of the global media and NGOs.

Examination of the relationship between globalization and human rights reveals that increased economic integration on the whole benefits the economic human rights of workers in developing countries, although its full potential has yet to be realized. The garment sector will aid the economic growth of developing nations further if it is allowed to expand while conditions for its employees simultaneously continue to improve. A tariff reduction on textile imports to wealthy developed markets such as the European Union, the United States, and Japan will help developing countries' economic growth. It is also necessary that Internet and television scrutiny of sweatshops continue in order to continue pressure on apparel corporations to monitor and improve the pay and conditions of their workers.

Therefore, the globalized apparel industry reveals that improvement of the economic human rights of workers in developing countries requires further access to international markets and continuing scrutiny from international campaigning groups adept at the manipulation of communications technology.

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