Labor Rights Child Exploitation and Sustainability in the Fashion Industry

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Fast Fashion, Child Labor, and the Cost of Cheap Clothing

Any trip to the shopping center for clothes threatens to end with the sponsorship of child labor, where a fire may flare up at any moment. Scandals regularly accompany the products of the fast-fashion segment: it will reveal that the sweatshirts sew small children, and it turns out that your jeans cost the lives of dozens of people who are in slavery. Soul shops for the production of clothing – this is another form of modern slavery. Child labor, fires and twelve-hour shifts in the kit. Contractors who oversee manufacturing in factories are at the end of a long chain, so even if the brand takes the initiative and tries to get rid of inappropriate labor conditions, its attempts can end in failure (Wissinger, E. 2012, pp. 125–143).

Fashion is a multi-billion dollar industry; therefore, with the growing demand in the Western world for cheap clothes, money should come from somewhere for materials, labor and for delivery. It would be impossible to achieve such an abundance of clothes that is more than available without going through serious problems. In Cambodia, a person is legally able to work from the age of 15; however, many businesses neglect this law and employ girls from the age of 12. These children drop out of school to get a job because their families live in poverty. By refusing to receive education, girls become part of the system, from which it becomes impossible to break out over time. Regardless of the age of the employee, the average wage is about 50 cents a day (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010, pp. 165–173).

Factory Conditions and the Global Scale of Child Exploitation

In many factories, there is a so-called daycare, which, in fact, is just the angle at which children are waiting for their mothers. There are no teachers, no employees who would look after them. The drive of children to factories also definitely leads to the promotion and development of child labor. After all, without the presence of any other activity, the mother's help will be the only way that will help to discourage the child's boredom (Turker and Altuntas, 2014, pp. 837–849).

Because of the requirements of customers, the factories save on everything; the wages of workers hardly allow them to make ends meet. Often, the order is given to those who work at home, which means they use child labor. At the same time, the authorities believe that the worst thing that can

happen to the country is the withdrawal of Western producers. The export of ready-to-wear in 2013-2014 brought the state $ 24.5 billion, which is 80% of export earnings. While Fashion Week takes place in London, New York and Milan, more than 60 American and European clothing companies are publicly committed not to buying cotton harvested by children (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010, pp. 165–173). These are small children of up to 10 years of age who carry out these tasks two months a year, according to human rights organizations. The authorities ratified two conventions of the International Labor Organization (ILO) on child labor in 2008, but according to the 2011 global report of HRW, there was no significant step to implement them. Independent observers from the ILO were not allowed to enter the country to determine whether the prohibition of child labor in the cotton industry was violated. For a decade, access to all independent human rights experts from the United Nations (UN) who received reports of abuses in this regard was also denied (Moulds, 2016).

The United Nations Global Fund for Children has declared in one of its latest investigations that there are 158 million children in the world who are exploited by labor between the ages of 5 and 14, of which 69 million work in Africa and 44 in Asia. Added to this, Save the Children, in collaboration with the Abrinq Foundation, launched in recent weeks a campaign that denounces child labor in the textile industry; this has been done through photographs that are shown on social networks, mainly on Instagram, which You can observe a cruel reality. In these images, models wearing avant-garde striped garments are observed, among which are hidden children prisoners. The relevance of social networks is clear so that campaigns supported by networks can have a greater impact on society or the public to which they are directed. In this sense, it is a good idea that this initiative should be known mainly on Instagram through photographs that undoubtedly shock (Turker and Altuntas, 2014, pp. 837–849).

Labor Rights, Unionization, and Corporate Responsibility

If a multi-billion dollar fashion industry can bring huge profits to a handful of people, why cannot it create human conditions for simple ants carrying it on their shoulders? Cannot guarantee their safety? Cannot respect basic human rights? In an interview with journalists, managers of large companies confidently and proudly declared that they gave these workers the opportunity to earn a piece of bread for their families because, without their factories, these people could starve. But why, in this case, do top managers forget to mention the 12-hour working day for a penny, which is barely enough for food for the family? Or that child labour in their factories is quite normal because the low earnings of adults are simply not enough for the whole family? Do the inhabitants of poor countries not deserve the same normal working conditions as the inhabitants of developed prosperous countries who wear clothes sewn by half-hungry poor people? By creating the jobs themselves, the owners of the factories justify the difficulties that these very places bear to their owners: the risk of working in emergency buildings, the lack of medical care and proper control over labor safety. However, local residents have no choice but to go to work to feed their families, as there is no time to

reflect on their own destinies and earnings below the subsistence minimum.

For 16 years, there has been an international Fair Trade Organization (OCT) interested in the social growth of ordinary workers from developing countries. More than 60 countries of the world participate in the Fair Trade movement (10-60 organizations in each country). OST is trying to create its own parallel (fair) fashion world – with fashion shows and clothing collections, which would take into account not only the aesthetic characteristics of things but also the working conditions of those who create things from scratch. But, alas, since OST is a social and commercial structure that earns money to raise the standard of living of its employees, and not money for the sake of money, few people know about it outside the professional sphere. Therefore, their activity looks like a drop in the sea of Invisible zero-width space artifactinternational pursuit of profit.

When Western-style workers tried to organize a union and put forward a list of fair requirements to management, the owners first agreed, and then the activists were invited into a closed room (allegedly for discussion) and severely beaten. This desire to voice and protect their rights dried up even among the most advanced workers. Children sew clothes with their own blood, and many will buy a thing and put it on just once. They do not and do not think how difficult it is for children. They do not want people to wear clothes sewn with their blood and, at the cost of their lives, the lives of children. They just want a normal life and normal working conditions. They want conscious factory owners to think about them.

Cobalt Mining and Supply Chain Abuse

Human rights activists are concerned about the irresponsibility of business: cobalt contained in laptops and electric cars is most likely extracted by children. Amnesty International (AI), the international human rights organization, published a report that refers to the use of child labor by large concerns in the extraction of cobalt. The organization investigated the work of 29 enterprises and found that none of them conducted a comprehensive examination of human rights in their supply chains of cobalt.

According to AI, more than half of all cobalt in the world today is mined. It is used for lithium-ion batteries, which are used in the electronics and automotive industries. Their initial investigation revealed that cobalt, extracted by children and adults in monstrous conditions, falls into the supply chains of some of the world’s largest brands. When they asked these companies questions, they discovered that many of them were not even interested in sources of cobalt- explained the head of the AI department for business and human rights. Most of all, human rights activists are dissatisfied with the work of Microsoft, Lenovo and Renault. These companies have not made significant progress in combating suppliers using child labor. The fashion industry, by contrast, has become the industry leader in controlling the origin of cobalt shipments, but only at the expense of the overall low level of company responsibility (Turker and Altuntas, 2014, pp. 837–849).

International Labor Organization Response

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has already responded to the publication of the report. Its head, Guy Ryder, at the international conference on the elimination of child labor in Buenos Aires, called on countries to eradicate child labor. According to him, governments should strengthen the norms of labor law, take care of the quality of education, and provide social protection for children. This problem should be resolved before 2025, the ILO report says. The world employs 151.6 million children aged 5 to 17 years.

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