

Nicole Power

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Individual essay

Can Fashion be Fair?

The Fashion industry today involves keeping up with the latest trends. Yet, these trends change weekly! With celebrities on social media promoting the newest hottest fashion pieces, it is evident that the consumer will desire these items. For example, theorist, Jean Baudrillard in his *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* says, "Income, purchase of prestige and form a vicious circle of overwork and distraught, the infernal circle of consumption, based on the exaltation of needs called "psychological", which are different needs "physiological" in that they are based apparently on the "discretionary income" and freedom of choice, and become manipulated to thank you." Meaning, in the consumer society today it is inevitable for us to crave consumption in that it becomes a manipulation and therefore a need. In order for this to be achievable for the consumer, these fashion trends must be available right away. Lately, it has become a competition for these large fashion brands as to who can produce the cheapest trendy clothing the fastest. This is called fast fashion. These successful brands like Boohoo and PrettyLittleThing have done just that! They produce and market new arrivals on their online retail store daily! For the consumer, these cheap fashion forward clothing is ideal. Yet, nothing is too good to be true. These large global brands are not telling the consumers how these clothes are being made. How are the clothing so cheap at the retail price? Who is making these pieces at such a rapid pace? Are the conditions these workers ethical in practice? Before even getting these answers, it is quite clear that the fashion industry at every level may not be so successful after all. Is the concept of trends allowing fashion to be fair? Is this idea of fashion being fair even possible?

Large fashion brands won't tell the consumer where their clothes are produced for a reason. This reason is due to the lack of responsible these company have. Although these factory workers are producing for some of the most profitable companies in the world, they are working for poverty wages, under awful conditions, and excessive amounts of overtime. The countries in which are producing these items at a rapid pace are Bangladesh, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Morocco, Mexico, Brazil, Ethiopia and more. In these factories the workers are forced to comply with the neglect

of health and safety, as well as breaks, and sadly abuse. The majority of these neglected workers are women. Factory owners are taking advantage of women's unequal position in society to simply benefit themselves. The first way these women are being exploited by low wages. These wages are way below minimum wage, which means that the workers will always be stuck in the poverty cycle. The need for these women to provide for their family or simply to provide for themselves means they are committed to overtime hours and will be suffering from fatigue. Yet, if they don't produce the target number of blouses per hour, they are subjected to abuse and beatings. Of course the women do not report incidences of abuse or beatings because they fear they'll lose their jobs. This exploitation of women completely takes away their dignity as human beings. Not only are huge fashion companies making a profit off of treating women like slaves, the use of child labor is still prevalent. Although these countries have laws against child labor, it is still happening in garment factories with no one stopping it. Children as young as 5 years old working in these sweatshops are exposed to dangerous equipment, harmful chemicals, and very poor conditions. Also, forced labor in these sweatshops are occurring as women and children are often trafficked and invisible. How is it that these large fashion companies making millions from profit are not doing anything is the relevant power to stop this exploitation of humans. They have the power over underdeveloped countries to dominate this industry however it takes.

Since the 20th century, industrial societies prominently in Britain and America, began to make clothing in mass production. In Elizabeth Wilson, 1936 *Adorned Dreams*, she predicted these poor working conditions women face today as they did in the 1840s. She describes that the factory establishments "employ a mass of young girls-there said to be 15,000 of them un- who sleep and eat on the premises, come usually from the country and are therefore absolutely the slaves of their employers...the only limit to their work is the absolute physical inability to hold the needle another minute." (73) Feminists in London began to campaign and expose to the public the conditions in which these women were working. In 1909, the Trade Board Act was passed to regulate wages as well as conditions in factories. As for 1909 America, strikes continued to occur in the garment industry. And 2 years later the Triangle Shirt-waist fire killing 125 workers, brought exposure to the appalling and dangerous conditions of work. It was then policies were enforced and regulated. If these two dominating countries could put an end to their unfair treatment to their workers, how is it that women and children around the world are still treated unfairly? It is due to the power dominance these major brands have over the underdeveloped country. Journalist H.L. Mencken in his 1920 *More of the Same* says, "Government today is growing too strong to be safe. There are no longer any citizens in the world; there are only subjects. They work day in and day out for their masters. They are bound to die for their masters

at call. Out of this working and dying they tend to get less and less.” These countries majorly rely on their garment industries to provide for their countries' needs completely. These developing countries are competing to produce for multinational brands by offering the lowest costs and the fastest production. This is mainly achieved by making labor cheaper and more flexible, that is, by paying lower salaries, pushing for longer hours, and reducing work and environmental standards. By outsourcing production, these companies play the producers against each other to get the best and most profitable deal. From Elizabeth Wilson, 1936 *Adorned dreams*, in the late 19th century, “one of the worst evils of the system was the middleman who subcontracted work at the lowest possible cost”(76) The deregulated nature of the global economy makes worker's legal protection very thin and their right to organise and bargain collectively is constantly restricted because over the complete dominance these brands have. The large fashion companies making millions from profit are able to step away from their responsibility for these actions due to the secrecy of these corrupt organizations.

Garment workers inability to stand up for their basic human rights is unfair. They need resources and support to confront the powerful forces that they are up against. Currently, there are organisations that are working to fight these issues, including Clean Clothes Campaign, War on Want and TRADE. By supporting them we can make an important contribution for the garment workers' fight. The consumer could also put pressure on the large fashion brands to pay up for the production to ensure complete ethical practice throughout the entire industry production process. In order for any real change to occur we need real commitments and liability from fashion companies and they have to stop counteracting the struggle of garment workers. This means ethics and the environment have to be brought into the centre of the debate and we need to show that, as a consumer society, we do not accept the violations that are taking place in the garment industry. Fashion brands should become accountable for the human rights abuses that are taking place in their supply chains instead of hiding behind the deception of production. Theorist, Jean Baudrillard in his *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* says, “Accounting for the growth [is] the most extraordinary collective bluff of modern societies. An operation of” white magic “on the figures, which hides a black magic spell of action.” We can understand that today's consumer is absorbed in trends and the desire to obtain these items as soon as possible. Yet, need to make it our business to know where their clothes are manufactured and if their favourite brands are engaging in unethical fashion production. It is implicit for us to agree with these poor conditions women and children are faced with in the garment industry as England and America put an end to these practices they could. It is important we provide the same human rights to those in underdeveloped countries. It will take efforts from the consumer society, government regulations, as well as non-profit organizations to

campaign and change these corrupt ways of production. Together we can build strength and push for a fairer and sustainable fashion industry.