

9.24: Labor Abuses

Learning Objectives

- Define sweatshop, and explain how it relates to global business

The term **sweatshop** refers to a factory that is guilty of some sort of labor abuse or violation, such as unsafe working conditions, employment of children, mandatory overtime, payment of less than the minimum wage, abusive discipline, sexual harassment, or violation of labor laws and regulations. The U.S. Government Accounting Office has chosen to define a sweatshop as any manufacturing facility that is guilty of two or more of the above types of labor abuses. However, it is important to understand that the term *sweatshop* is not just a legally defined term but a word that is used broadly and has entered the general lexicon.

Rana Plaza

Garment factory collapse, Rana Plaza, Bangladesh.



Figure 9.24.1: Garment factory collapse, Rana Plaza, Bangladesh.

On April 24, 2013, at Rana Plaza on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh, a building containing apparel factories collapsed, trapping and killing more than 1,100 employees. It was not only the worst industrial disaster in the history of the garment industry, it was also the world's most fatal industrial building collapse. News reports soon emerged that the factory owners had ignored ominous warning signs, such as visible cracks in the wall, and had illegally added several stories to the top of the building, creating a weight the building could not bear. Many of the factories operating in the building were producing apparel for well-known Western brands, such as Walmart, Joe Fresh, and Mango.

Rescue workers struggled for more than a week to reach trapped survivors, while hospitals tended to the more than 2,500 workers who had escaped, many with severe injuries. Survivors told heart-rending tales of having lost mothers and sisters who had worked in the same factories. The deaths of so many innocent workers created a firestorm of controversy in Bangladesh and around the world. Accusations and recriminations were leveled at corporations and government officials. A period of intense and profound soul-searching ensued for the global fashion companies that relied on outsourced factory labor in Bangladesh. Within a few months, two major initiatives were announced, one American and one European, to increase safety and accountability in Bangladeshi factories.

How did this situation arise?

Thanks to international efforts to lower import tariffs, such as those instituted by GATT in 1947 and by the WTO in 1995, an outsourcing movement was born, and many companies saw the opportunity to lower their production costs by moving them overseas. Fashion and apparel companies were among the first to take advantage of the benefits of outsourcing—namely, gaining access to cheap foreign labor markets. Throughout the period from 1970 to the present, employment in American apparel factories dropped sharply as companies moved production to countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, China, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.

The outsourcing movement was accompanied by increasing reports of sweatshop abuses. As a result, a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the National Labor Committee, became involved in anti-sweatshop activities. Throughout the 1990s, a number of sweatshop-related abuses came to light in factories used by American brands. Several of these involved the island of Saipan, a small American protectorate in the Pacific. A number of factory owners discovered that since Saipan is technically American territory, clothing produced in Saipan could enter the United States duty-free and carry the label “Made in America.” Since Saipan is much closer to Vietnam and the Philippines than to the United States, a number of these factories recruited Vietnamese and Filipino natives as factory workers. Upon their arrival in Saipan, however, some of these workers were

exposed to flagrant human rights abuses and, in the worst of cases, outright slavery. In one notorious case, workers were literally imprisoned in the factory and forced to work without pay. Eventually, these abuses were revealed and U.S. prosecutors filed charges against factory owners, some of whom were sentenced to substantial prison sentences.

In the early 1990s, one of America's most prominent footwear brands, Nike, also came under attack as reports emerged from Indonesia and Vietnam of worker abuse. In Vietnam, a young female factory employee was working on basketball shoes when her machine exploded and sent a bolt through her heart. At first, Nike refused to accept responsibility, pointing out that Nike had never manufactured its own footwear and apparel. Nike's contracts with its sourcing factories required the factories to obey labor regulations and, in Nike's view, this meant that any abuses were the factories' responsibility. However, by 1998, the continuing negative publicity obliged Nike to reverse its course by instituting a strict code of conduct for its factories.

By 2000, as a result of continued scrutiny from various watchdog organizations like the Worker Rights Consortium, the National Labor Committee, and other international groups such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, most large apparel brands developed and publicized their own internal codes of conduct for suppliers. Such codes of conduct were contractually imposed on all suppliers and required that factories comply with all local labor laws, refrain from employing children, and maintain safety programs. In addition, most brands began to require that factories make themselves available for inspections to make sure that they were complying with the standards set forth in the codes of conduct. A number of inspection companies sprang up to service the needs of the corporations and groups of young inspectors soon scanned the globe, moving from factory to factory, checking them for fire violations, reviewing records to make sure that rules on overtime were respected, and so forth.

Despite all these efforts, reports of violations continued to be heard. The American consumer seemed to have wearied of the sweatshop issue to some extent, and companies like Walmart and Nike, which had often been accused of sweatshop abuses, saw their sales and stock valuations continue to rise. Many companies began to focus more on environmentalism and anti-global-warming issues, and a number of brands began to require that their supply factories obtain some sort of environmental certification, such as the Bluesign certification that was established in Germany under the auspices of SGS S.A., the world's largest inspection company. Then, in 2012 and 2013, a horrific series of accidents reminded the world's consumers that the sweatshop issue was still with us.

In 2012, a fire broke out at an apparel factory in Pakistan, killing some 270 Pakistani workers. Among the Western companies sourcing from that factory were the UK retailer Tesco and the German apparel brand Kix. Kix's offer to compensate the victims' families \$2,000 per fatality was viewed by many Pakistanis as insulting. Then, just a few months later, at the Tazreen Fashions factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, another 112 factory workers perished in a fire. Again, it was discovered that well-known Western brands such as Walmart, Disney, and the Gap had sourced products from the factory. The world's attention was squarely focused on Pakistan and Bangladesh when the building collapse at Rana Plaza in Bangladesh became the worst industrial catastrophe in the history of apparel manufacturing.

? Practice Question

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