

The Struggle to Save Sweatshop Workers

Name: Mafaza Assan
Grade: Grade 12

The Impact of Globalization on Human Rights

As global citizens, we must be aware of the wider world and have a sense of our own role in society. We must respect and value diversity, participate in and contribute to the community at a range of levels, take responsibility for our own actions, and have an understanding of how the world works economically, politically, socially, culturally, technologically, and environmentally. In addition, we must be willing to act to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place.

It is the year 2005, and as our global economy inclines, it is important to recognize one of the greatest challenges that hinder the development of our society. As global citizens, human rights play a vital role in our everyday lives, therefore it is imperative that we accept responsibility to protect people's rights at all times. It is not to be forgotten that human rights are universal and inalienable and if violated, we, as global citizens, must act to rectify the abuse.

One of the main breaches of human rights occurs in developing countries, mainly in sweatshops. A sweatshop is a factory, where people work for a very small wage, producing a variety of products. Workers are kept in a harsh environment with inadequate ventilation, and workers may sometimes be abused physically, mentally, or sexually, subjected to long hours, harsh or unsafe conditions, and the like.¹

Human rights violations in sweatshops are a result of globalization which is the dramatic change in society and the world economy. Globalization is seen as the promotion of a corporatist agenda, which is intended on constricting the freedoms of individuals in the name of profit. This means that the human rights of many are infringed upon in despicable ways. Moreover, globalization is the

result of dramatically increased trade and cultural exchange.² The main reason trade affects globalization is because differences exist in the cost of production of some tradable commodity in different locations. Although most economists accept the non-obvious theory that trade benefits both parties, it is argued that all exchange must exploit one party.³ As a result, increased trade leads to globalization which can be harmful to developing nations as well as the working class.

Transnational corporations are mainly responsible for globalization and can be seen as a power in global politics. They exert political control over developing countries because economic power gives them great influence. Therefore, the activities produced by many transnational corporations in today's society would be deemed as infringing upon human rights. Corporations and businesses should definitely take responsibility for human rights. Most conglomerates exert downward pressure on wages and increase job insecurity, hence, making it easier for corporations to move their operations anywhere in the world. The mere threat of withdrawing investment is enough to convince politicians of developing countries to meet their demands. Also, it will be harder to insist on high standards for workplace safety and protection for workers in developing nations.

Globalization affects working men and women and change needs to be made to incorporate the human rights of workers into global rules and practices at the national, regional, and international levels through governmental, private business, labour union, and other non-governmental channels. Otherwise, workers across the globe will continue to endure labour rights violations such as unlawful employment of children, physical and verbal abuse of workers, violations of health and safety provisions, age discrimination, breaching workers' rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining, failure to

provide maternity leave and benefits, firing workers engaged in union activities, and refusing to reinstate workers who participate in work stoppages.

By world standards, Canada is a country that supports the ethical treatment of human beings as well as respecting and protecting its citizens' human rights. They also have the Canadian Human Rights Act which is made to ensure equality of opportunity and freedom from discrimination. Unfortunately, they continue to trade with, and provide aid to countries that are notorious for mistreating human rights. Although the Human Rights Act applies to Canada, it also shows where the nation's morals and values lie. As Canada's economic ties begin to strengthen with developing countries; the problem is that they are placing their trading interests ahead of their commitment to human rights. It is sad to see that developing nations whose workers are bravely fighting for human rights are finding that their rights are being sacrificed by Western governments who are in a race to get a foothold in the competitive trade industry.

For this reason, globalization can affect anyone and everyone in terms of human rights violations. First of all, sweatshop workers whose rights are violated are greatly affected because their humanity and dignity is crushed by major conglomerates looking to make a profit. It is not to be forgotten that they are workers in developing nations that have poor human rights and they are children, men, women, and seniors. As a result, the families of these workers are equally affected because sweatshops often fail to pay a living wage. They are not working for their own sheer pleasure but they are working for a living and if they are disregarded, it is the end not only for them, but for their families as well.

Workers who are treated unethically by transnational corporations have many ways of getting their message out. For example, they can join labour unions to collectively negotiate their terms and conditions of employment with

their employees. Since some companies forbid the practice of trade unionization, most workers have to resort to other sources to protest their treatment. They can protest, strike, riot, hold demonstrations, picket, join activist groups, take-over their factories, and gain the attention of their government and the media to get their opinions heard. They can do this in order to influence public opinion or government policy to enact desired changes.

Although these are brilliant ideas of having their voices heard, the best decision would be to gain media attention regarding their situation. It would be quite difficult to get the government's attention because many believe that governments act for the good of transnational corporations. Therefore, it would be wiser to gain media attention since the media reaches a large audience which sweatshop workers can use to their advantage. One of the most important groups who can be reached through the media is the United Nations. The UN launches initiatives on international questions of peace, economic progress, and human rights and would be of great help to sweatshop workers whose human rights are violated due to globalization.

Also, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can play a key role in demolishing the poor human rights standards in developing nations. The six categories of human rights in the UDHR are civil, economic, political, cultural, social, and equality and they are important in maintaining the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family. Sections 5, 7, and 23, are the specific human rights being violated by major conglomerates in the name of globalization. Section 5 states that, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." Since sweatshop workers endure this type of unethical treatment, this is a direct violation of Section 5. Section 7 mentions that, "All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of the Declaration and against any incitement to

such discrimination.” However, the problem is that in this world, power relationships are not equal and it is important to remember that transnational corporations have more input than individuals who are affected by this issue. As a result, the rights of sweatshop workers are ignored in order to adapt to corporations’ needs, resulting in a violation of Section 7. Section 23 of the UDHR mentions the fact that, “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work, to protection against unemployment, the right to equally pay for equal work, and the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests.” Absolutely all of these rights mentioned in Section 23 are violated resulting in unethical treatment towards sweatshop workers.

If sweatshop workers use the media to their advantage and protest the issue at hand, the reputations of some of today’s most popular transnational corporations would be at risk. Their reputation will be ruined through the actions of activists and the news of their unethical treatment towards their workers. These actions against transnational corporations may be unfair because in their minds, they feel that moving production to low-wage facilities overseas is justified due to the lower standard of living in developing nations. Also, they feel that their operations benefit the community by providing jobs and that the choice is not between high-paid and low-paid work, but between low-paid work and unemployment.⁴

Human rights violations are a daily occurrence throughout the world and we must come to a solution because numerous people are suffering unbearable conditions all in the name of globalization. Given that it is nearly impossible to halt the process of globalization, we need to arrive at a balance that establishes an appropriate framework which guarantees that human rights standards are not

minimized by the expansion of international organizations of investment, trade, and finance.

As a global citizen, an important way to get involved in the movement for global justice would be to understand the issue at hand. Look at your clothes and see the enslavement of the sweatshop workers who sew them. Talk to the people directly affected by these injustices, and to the local activist groups that support them. Learn how they are surviving and how they are resisting. Find out how you can contribute in either tangible or intangible ways. As a global citizen, some solutions of solving this issue would be to help sweatshop workers by protesting and rioting towards their benefits. Also, it would be better to consume ethically or boycott famous labour and environmental offenders. There are many ethical alternatives out on the market such as Fair Trade coffee, organic food, and shoes made in workshops by artisans who get a “fair” wage for their work.⁵ It is also helpful to boycott particular corporate offenders to really illuminate the oppressions that globalization allows and encourages.

On a final note, human rights violations are one of the greatest challenges facing the world today. It is overwhelming to see the enormous amount of power major conglomerates hold in today’s society. It is not to be forgotten that these companies are established to make a profit which is their main goal. For this purpose, they will jump over, under, or through any circumstance in order to reach their goal. This means that they will ignore the fact that humans are all equal and therefore, they should be treated equally.

Endnotes

¹ "Sweatshop", Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 8 April 2005. 25 April 2005. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweatshop>>.

² "Globalization", Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 25 April 2005. 25 April 2005. <[Hhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GlobalisationH](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Globalisation)>.

³ "Trade", Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 21 March 2005, 25 April 2005. <[Hhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TradeH](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trade)>.

⁴ "Sweatshop", Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 8 April 2005. 25 April 2005. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sweatshop>>.

⁵ Schmidt, Andrea. *No Logo*. Jan 2003. 27 April 2005
< <http://nologo.org/>>.