Sweatshop Labour in News Media: The Economics of a Social Issue

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Abstract
This paper will examine the contents of newspaper media in order to ascertain public impressions of the issue of sweatshops in the global market. When analyzed in conjunction with academic findings regarding the same issue, it will be argued that by highlighting sweatshops in dominantly economic terms, mainstream news media provides limited Western based solutions to a broad and complex cultural, political and gendered issue of the developing world. Subsequently change is framed as an economic necessity, and the continued issues of starvation wages, over work, abuse and the feminization of poverty continue to be unchallenged within the new media. In order to develop realistic solutions to the issue of sweatshop labour NGO's must look to solutions proposed by both academic and news inquiries to alleviate Western corporate violations of labour rights as well as to work with workers to enable agency, gender equality, living wages and safe work environments.

The issue of gendered poverty and exploitation within sociological studies of sweatshop labour is highly recognized among scholars, as it is a subject of many and ongoing studies within the field. However, the question should be asked, to what extent does mainstream media share this interest, and what perspectives are taken into account in the public media? Beyond the academic focus, media representations provide a very limited perspective on gender and human rights issues with regard to sweatshop labour. This paper will examine the contents of newspaper media in order to ascertain public impressions of the issue of sweatshops in the global market. When analyzed in conjunction with academic findings regarding the same issue, it will be argued that by highlighting sweatshops in dominantly economic and labour terms, mainstream newspaper media provides limited-based solutions to a broad and complex cultural, political, and gendered issue in the developing world. This paper will first highlight sociological findings with regard to the gendered nature of sweatshop work, and the social and cultural factors that contribute to the attraction of this type of work to working class women in the developing world. Second, the issue of the gendered nature of poverty will be noted. The link between the feminization of poverty and the attraction to sweatshop opportunities will also be addressed. Within this context of academic sociological findings, the analysis of newspaper media will provide a contrasting public perspective on the issue of sweatshops and potential solutions. In this analysis, the media theme of approaching sweatshops as predominantly economic issue, focusing on producers, will be noted as a problematic and limited approach to this complex social issue. Therefore, this study will
conclude with an inquiry into the ways in which such a limited focus on this issue fundamentally ignores the larger interconnected issues of human rights, gender, and women’s agency, as well as cultural and political contexts that must be considered.

The Gendered Nature of Sweatshop Labour:

Throughout the sociological tradition, the focus on works regarding the developing world have a core focus on gender inequality, social and economic conditions, and the abuse that female workers in particular suffer under the sweatshop system. Notably, ethnographic studies conducted by sociologists and NGOs provide context for the broad issues that develop out of globalization and big business within the developing world. One particularly notable project, titled “The Hidden Face of Globalization” by the National Labour Committee (NLC), allows the viewer to see the social reality of sweatshop work. The documentary provides a focus on several key aspects of this system. First, it highlights the fact that the sweatshop is overwhelmingly a gendered environment. According to findings of the NLC, 80% of sweatshop workers in Bangladesh are women between the ages of 16 to 25 years old; however, the majority of supervisors are men, which not only relates to a gendered hierarchy in the system, but the issue of physical and verbal abuse to female workers also becomes apparent. Women who were interviewed stated that they were subjected to verbal and physical abuse if they slowed production or made a mistake, and such abuse could lead to their imprisonment if they were caught consulting with a union or if they protested in any way. The documentary also noted that due to the lower level work done by women, they were the most likely to suffer from the lowest pay, from 8 to 17 cents per hour, with income of between three to five dollars per week. Such income levels are defined as “starvation wages” by the NLC, despite the claims of big businesses that this is a living wage. As well, female workers were also the most likely to be forced to work overtime, working an average of 107 hours per week, for which they are largely unpaid. Such studies provide evidence of the fact that sweatshop labour is much more than an issue of economic interest, and requires more social and culturally based solutions rather than simply calling for big businesses, such as Walmart or Disney, to close production in developing countries.

Gender Inequality and Social Root Causes:

Further academic research into this issue reveals a broad array of reasons why women are the social group most likely to be exploited within sweatshops and why they are so drawn to this system despite the exploitative practices. One of the significant issues relates to women and their unequal level of pay. In studies it has been found that due to their concentration in lower status jobs, women are in fact

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
earning between 50 to 90 percent of what men earn. Significantly, this inequality persists despite the fact that women in developing countries have been found to work between six and 15 more hours a week than men.\(^5\) With regard to education, women are also further forced into lower status and paying work due to the fact that they receive roughly half of the schooling that men do in developing countries. For example, in a study titled “What About Women? Why We Need a Gender Perspective in Development Policy,” the fact that, though the gender gap is closing at the primary levels, women’s enrollment at the secondary level of education is 65 percent that of men’s, and only 33 percent at the tertiary level.\(^6\) And due to such low levels of education women have a much higher levels of illiteracy. For example, women between the ages of 20 to 24 in Africa and Asia have an illiteracy rate of 40 percent, and those above 25 have an illiteracy rate over 70 percent.\(^7\) As such, women’s lower educational qualifications exacerbate their labour market disadvantage and force them into undesirable but necessary work such as sweatshop labour. Organizations such as the World Bank have been forced to recognize that women are often more economically vulnerable due to their high concentration in the low wage sector. However, such vulnerability, as has been proven here, stems from more than economics; it stems from larger social, cultural, and political inequalities.\(^8\)

The larger issue of social exclusion must also be recognized to provide a more in-depth understanding of the issue rather than simplifying it as an issue of income. Such findings relate to the larger issue of gender inequality and the economics of sweatshop labour.

The Economic Focus of the News Media:

In contrast to the sociological focus on the social basis of inequality, public news media, particularly newspapers used in this study, dominantly place emphasis on the economics of sweatshops, thus placing the big businesses who utilize this form of labour at the heart of finding a solution to this issue. Within the media, sweatshops are argued to be an issue of production, as much as they are noted to be an issue of human rights violations. In an article from the *New York Times* titled “The Sole of a Worker”, the overwhelming focus of the piece is on the product appropriation from working class Chinese culture and goods.\(^9\) The article begins by noting the dissonant image of the Chinese sweatshop worker, largely mysterious and unknown in the west, and leads into the focus of the piece, the marketing of the Osop sneaker, which was originally a shoe common among the working class in China. Rather than looking at the larger issue of factory conditions or the cause of

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\(^6\) Ibid, 2.

\(^7\) Ibid, 2.

\(^8\) R. Munck, “Gender and Global Inequality,” in *Globalization and Social Exclusion* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005), 89.

such conditions, the article highlights the issue of Ben Walters, the company owner, and his appropriation of Chinese culture. The fact that the people from whom he took the original product design were the very sweatshop workers who would later be producing the shoes for a market is a barely-noted point.

A more in-depth comparison of this can be made concerning a CNN news article titled, “Report Ties U.S. Retailers to Sweatshop Shrimp.” In this case, a comparison can be made between the way in which CNN chose to report the issue, and the original findings of the report that instigated the investigation. Titled “The Degradation of Work: The True Cost of Shrimp”, was a report conducted by the Solidarity Center, an NGO. In the CNN news piece, some of the human rights violations that were discovered in the report are noted. However, the primary focus for the shorter article is clearly the naming of big business companies found involved, such as Walmart and Costco, and the questioning of these companies. The article concludes with interviews from Walmart officials and government officials from both the United States and Bangladesh regarding legal action that is being taken. In this vein, it is made clear by CNN that such issues are largely created and solved by those economically and politically involved. In comparison, the original Solidarity Center report puts greater focus on the underlying social conditions that relate to shrimp sweatshops. From the beginning of the report Executive Director Ellie Larson of Solidarity Center makes the statement that “Sustainable economic development is only achievable in conjunction with respect for worker rights and all human rights.” As well, the report focuses a large amount of attention on individual interviews with mostly female shrimp workers who reported on issues from unsafe work environments, sexual abuse, public torture, and labour brokering through human trafficking. Such contrasting approaches to the topic of sweatshop labour provide insight into the ways the issue can be shaped based on the perspective taken.

Furthermore, this study is not alone in its finding that news media tends to focus more on the economic and political perspective of sweatshops. In a 2004 paper titled “Framing Sweatshops: Nike, Global Production, and the American News Media,” sociologists Greenberg and Knight concluded that news media focused largely on the agency of consumers and producers, which in turn problematized broad issues of social, cultural, and political issues into essentially economic terms.

10 Walker, “The Sole of a Worker,”
12 Ibid.
Through an analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the authors found that the dominant sources of articles regarding sweatshops derived from a debate among corporate representatives and social activists, and, to a lesser extent, government officials. Such a focus on the debate, the authors argued, subsequently rendered the sweatshop workers essentially invisible and entirely non-existent within the media debate. In the course of the research for this paper, similar findings were also reached regarding more current media of 2008. For example in one *New York Times* article, a clear focus is placed on a sweatshop in Guangzhou China, where Christmas ornaments, toys, and cards are produced. While noting issues with working conditions, the author places a primary focus on the issue of the conscience of the consumer, who must come to terms with where their goods come from, thus placing the consumer at the center of the sweatshop debate. Another conclusion drawn from the Greenburg and Knight study is that the articles focused to a much greater extent on the impact that globalization and sweatshop labour had on consumers. As such, the media represented local interests and chose to highlight local solutions rather than take a more in depth look at the broader global causes for sweatshop labour, for example the pressures placed on developing countries by big business to ignore human rights and labour violations.

What Does This Perspective Ignore?

While the economic focus of news media may appear to simply portray key concerns over sweatshop labour, there is a larger issue: this focus clearly ignores a multitude of underlying causes and social contexts that contribute to keeping the sweatshop system in business. The economic core of newspaper articles ignore the social conditions that make sweatshop labour possible, the conditions of inequality that maintain the largely female workforce, who make sweatshop labour desirable and necessary. The articles place the locus of the issue in an environment by taking a primary focus on producers and consumers, ignoring the fact that the real issue of sweatshop labour resides in the working conditions, the low pay, the abuse, and the gendered status that all take place within the context of the developing nation. By simplifying solutions into terms of consumer pressure on corporations, the agency of the female sweatshop workers are ignored. By highlighting only top-down solutions to a global issue, the ability of the developing citizen to impact change or influence their own environment is ignored. Subsequently, change is framed as an economic necessity, and the continued issues of starvation wages, overwork, abuse, and the feminization of poverty continue to be unchallenged within the news media.

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16 Greenberg and Knight, “Framing Sweatshops,” 171.
18 Greenberg and Knight, “Framing Sweatshops,” 172.
19 Ibid, 172.
In conclusion, when academic sociological research is compared to public news media it becomes clear that the two sources approach the issue of sweatshop labour from very different perspectives. Academic sources dominantly focus on the developing context and base research on finding the causes and social forces that create the gendered sweatshop environment. They look at gendered poverty, low status jobs, and poor pay to create an understanding of the environment in which sweatshop labour is perpetuated and made desirable. Public news media, however, portray a very different opinion of this issue. In the articles studied, the environment discussed was largely the consumer and corporate debate over economic solutions to the issue of sweatshops in a global market. Such a focus only provides limited-based solutions to a broad and complex cultural, political, and gendered issue of the developing world. As long as the sweatshop remains within the developing world, external pressure to create change will only partially address the issue. The changes themselves must address the social and gendered issues to be successfully applied within the developing environment. In order to develop realistic solutions to the issue of sweatshop labour the locus of work must look within both of these spheres, to alleviate corporate violations of labour rights as well to work with the workers in enabling agency, gender equality, living wages, and safe work environments.
Works Cited


