Responsible Consumerism:
How to Get Sweatshop Free Options at the Bookstore

Marisa Auger
Annie McDonnell

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Dr. Kathy Cain
The fair trade movement has been a long-withstanding faction for the past 50 years within the United States. There are many people who, although given the longer history of the movement, are unaware of what the goal and practical implementation of “fair trade” really is. The World Fair Trade Organization explains the mission of the fair trade movement succinctly on its website, explaining that “fair trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South.”\(^1\) The goal of fair trade is to ensure that the process and interactions between customers and those who make the products are, simply put, fair. While the term “fair” can be subjective and imply different practices, ultimately this movement is aimed at ensuring that workers are respected and paid appropriate amounts for the labor they put into their work. Often times, workers can be exploited and not given appropriate compensation. Without fair trade practices being honored and followed through with, it is near impossible to ensure that the appropriate people are reaping the fruits of their labor and the benefits of their hard work. Fair trade aims at supporting the worker through transparency and communication, to protect workers’ rights wholeheartedly.

This has prompted others to ask why these steps towards fair trade are necessary for workers, hinting that perhaps not all trade is fair. Fair trade developed as a way to respond to the mistreatment of employees in the workplace, specifically within companies that use sweatshops. Sweatshops are a result of the consumerist society that has been built up so heavily throughout the United States. With the increase in demand for material goods, immediately came the need to fill the orders and supply demands of the consumers. The most efficient and cost effective way to do this was through the exploitation of workers, specifically by targeting workers who desperately need money. Sweatshops do not even pay their workers minimum wage; employees work in filthy conditions within the factories; stripped of the dignity and rights that they have, workers are not allowed access to basic necessities, including things such as being able to use the

bathroom. Recent reports have shown the conditions workers are put through: “A quick tour of the building revealed no fire extinguishers, only one exit - the front door - and little more than a hole in the ground, down a rat-infested hall, for the toilet.”\(^2\) Not only is it evident that working conditions are poor, but the tasks that workers had to complete were described as “…back-breaking, it was finger-numbing. It was particularly rage-inducing.”\(^3\) This represents one of the perspectives important to acknowledge in addressing this issue. Along with the way that the workers themselves respond and how they feel about working in these factories; the business side adds another element to this situation, specifically in how the corporation and consumer play a role in the upkeep of sweatshops.

The ethics involved in this issue are overwhelming. Once individuals look closer at this problem, it becomes evident that there are many factors that play a role. The first thing to consider is the reasons that corporations implement these factories and poor working conditions. In a capitalist society, the reasoning always comes back to money. Sweatshops, although terrible for the individuals that they exploit, are a better financial practice for business. The costs for corporations are lowered because of the amount that they save in using sweatshops. There is no high wage for labor, less work in cleaning up the facility, and the production rates are high because there is little break time allotted for workers. While viewed at this level, the issue of sweatshops seems to be an isolated issue between the corporate leaders and their exploited employees. However, every day consumers are at the heart of this need for lower cost. Lower production costs on behalf of a corporation mean that products can be sold for a much lower price. While the use of sweatshops creates maximum efficiency for business and attractive prices for consumers, at what cost is this unethical treatment of individuals supposed to be tolerated?

A major ideology that arises in response to this problem is the concept of inherent human dignity. There are many principles that support and protect the rights of individuals throughout the world. Two of the largest beliefs systems are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Catholic Social Teaching, both of which outline


\(^3\) Raveena Aulakh, “My Life as a Sweatshop Worker.”
reasons to guide others to protect the rights of individuals and workers around the world. Catholic Social Teaching instructs to respect the rights and dignity of workers. The ideas for CST come from the religious belief of the “imago dei,” in which people believe that humans were made from the image and likeness of God. This aspect of the faith therefore implies that all people have inherent human dignity. This means to treat individuals with human dignity, regardless of any biographical identity, and also includes the ideas that everyone should be approached with the same level respect and treatment. With respect to the dignity of work, there is an important idea that consumers must be aware of: that workers have rights and should be granted an equitable amount of dignity as well. In the book, Consuming Faith, Tom Beaudoin explains this in saying, “That basic standard of decency will be different in different cultures…all humans regardless of any variable are created in the image of God, and thereby deserving of basic decency.” This basic form of decency should translate easily into the work sphere. Dignity of work includes being paid fair wages, being able to work in healthy conditions, and having respect as human beings.

It is important to realize that there are individuals who are inspired from their faith to not support sweatshops, there also are secularly based reasons for being an advocate for fair trade, in a system similar to CST. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) also covers the belief in human dignity in a secular, humanist way. To ensure that all people of all nations receive protection for their fundamental human rights, the United Nations established The Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. Created by members of various nations and occupations, the document contains thirty articles that list and explain fundamental human rights for all. The first article in the declaration outlines that all men and women are created equal and born with inherent human dignity. In regards to the workplace particularly, in Article 23, the declaration states that “everyone has the right to work, free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” and “everyone has the right to just and favourable remuneration for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social

4 Tom Beaudoin, Consuming Faith (Maryland, Sheed and Ward, 2006), 57.
conditions.” Furthermore, the article states that workers are free to assemble in the workplace. In other words, the declaration notes the fundamental right of a just and safe work place where the dignity of the worker is upheld. Therefore, according to the document, sweatshops are a direct violation of these rights as workers are not permitted to unionize, workers receive poor wages, and workers are succumbed to harsh and unbearable working conditions.

Although it does not seem very obvious at first glance, as mentioned above consumers actually play a significant role in the cycle of the sweatshops, and restrict the dignity of work for many trapped in factory jobs. Consumers have the opportunity to affect serious change simply with the power of the purse. Every time a consumer opens their wallet, they have the ability to cast a vote and make a statement about what they think is worth their money. By purchasing items from corporations and companies that exploit sweatshops and slave labor, consumers are giving their mark of approval to that practice. In a similar manner, by purchasing items from fair-trade certified groups, consumers are sending the message of what practices are agreeable to them. While making the conscientious decision of where to shop and what to publicly support is one step in this process, it is unclear of how effective of a step that is. There may be additional changes that can be made to bring about a shift to this problem.

The issue with sweatshops seems like a big problem that would be difficult to combat. However, there may be a simple solution that could improve the lives of those working in sweatshops, that complements the tenet in Catholic Social Teaching of dignity of work and worker’s rights, as well as the article within the UDHR. Unions are common practices for workers to pursue as a way to protect their rights. By forming unions, workers would be able to argue for better wages, better working conditions, and better protection of their rights. The creation of a union would be a positive step on the behalf of workers who are exploited by large companies. However, there is a need for support from other entities in order to make sure that those unions are successful in their mission. The role of the government is crucial for the establishment and sustainability of a union.

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In being backed by the government, management level employees would be more apt to respect the actions of the union. The heads of these major corporations would be the ones most frustrated against the possibility of a union, because they would be the ones suffering from having to raise costs for their products. For this reason, support from an outside factor is important. Equally as important is a prevalent self-sustaining support from the members of the union. The employees who are members of the union need to be educated on their own rights and should understand the things they can do to protect their dignity.

Living in a consumerist society, one might think that lower prices and costs would be openly accepted and welcomed, particularly by consumers. However, it is when these practices obtain a face and an identity that begins to evoke a response from consumers. There have been several instances in which shoppers have found notes from workers pleading for help from the terrible conditions within the workplace, that have provocatively raised awareness about sweatshops. In a recent article about this occurrence, “a customer in Belfast, Northern Ireland, claims to have discovered a note from a Chinese prisoner claiming inmates were working 15 hours per day making garments.”6 Not only are the hardships that workers endure exposed, but also there is a light shone on those who are employed this way, which often times are children. By identifying the real actions being put into practice and the real people who are being affecting, the issue of sweatshops starts to become humanized. This connection to humanity is what gets consumers to stop opening their wallets to support sweatshops and become more knowledgeable about where their goods come from.

This brings up an interesting point as well. It is one thing to not support companies that use sweatshop labor and to make a statement by putting your money elsewhere - namely in a place that respects human dignity. However the decision to just not purchase products from companies that use sweatshops also does not entirely counteract the problem at hand, because those sweatshops still exist. They exist because there still are people, who are struggling financially and need money, who choose to

work in sweatshops. After learning about the terrible conditions that workers endure in sweatshops, it can be surprising to hear that there are some who choose to work there. In reality, the option to have a job in a factory, even if it is in a sweatshop, provides some sort of protection and stability. As outsiders who only see sweatshops as terrible places where injustice is fervent, in other countries or in places of dire need, this is a different case. In a provocative article about the sweatshops in China, Nicholas Kristof wrote to expose the hard reality of supporting sweatshops:

Vath Sam Oeun hopes her 10-year-old boy, scavenging beside her, grows up to get a factory job, partly because she has seen other children run over by garbage trucks. Her boy has never been to a doctor or a dentist, and last bathed when he was 2, so a sweatshop job by comparison would be far more pleasant and less dangerous.

This is a “catch 22” scenario, in which working in a sweatshop is simply the lesser of two evils. There are many people who desperately need money and would rather submit themselves to the poor conditions of a sweatshop than a worse job, like physically demanding work or not working at all. The issue of sweatshops is a complicated problem, with many moving parts and involves parties that further the density of the issue.

While it can be surprising that some people have this relationship to sweatshops, it is important to acknowledge that there is a population that chooses the lesser of two evils. Not only are there workers who would rather work in the conditions of the sweatshop in order to make an income; but also, there are some consumers who are so financially restricted that they need to purchase the cheapest and lowest costing items in order to get by. One can imagine the affect that the low prices from this method of business practice have on those who are restricted financially. Although they might not like that they have to make that decision to support sweatshops and the negative way the workers are treated, it is one of the only options that they have, considering the tightness of their budget, and the lack of luxury that comes along with that.

This issue has primarily been publicized as a fight to bring an end to “sweatshops,” a term in itself that sounds negative. It is oftentimes complemented by the introduction of a practice that is very positive and equitable in its name, a practice explained at the beginning of this paper, which is “fair trade.” The name alone of the
practices involved in this issue serves as a tool to influence the public on what side to support. It is very difficult to argue in favor of a “sweatshop” because of the visuals that come with the term itself. Organizations try to overcome the stain of using a sweatshop by highlighting where the products are made. “Made in America” has a much more positive acceptance from consumers; however this does not mean that sweatshop-like conditions are not present in those factories as well. This shows how the different sides of this topic react and respond to the unfair conditions and treatment of employees.

Fair trade has become more popular as a reaction to the use of sweatshops for production. This issue speaks directly to the ethics that we as a human race need to respond to an ongoing practice that is harming people and stripping away their human dignity, as well as the dignity of their work. While it may be a cultural preference to work in a sweatshop over another employment option, there is an important question that we need to address: where is the line for cultural respect or an individual’s personal decision, when that decision goes against moral tensions? Furthermore, there should be a united front taken to systemically improve the quality of work and living for all workers. If all workers are treated and paid appropriately, there should be no need for cheaper costing goods, which is a factor in the chain of profit, supply, and demand.

As is evident in the explanation this social justice issue, there are many instances in which researchers and experts have presented new perspectives on this topic. There are many sides to the complexity of sweatshops and ample interpretations of the issue. Not only is this seen from first hand accounts, but also is approached from an academic and scholarly approach. Having multiple perspectives is important to gain a more complete understanding of the issue, but also shows the vastness of this issue and how it is relevant for many people. The first is a satirical, but highly knowledgeable account of how corrupt the system is of supply and demand from a corporation standpoint. John Oliver argues this point by repeatedly expressing the problems that arise out of these companies, get publicity, but still results in no change. Frustrated by this system, he refers to it as “a pattern of reckless behavior that has to be addressed.” In speaking out about this in a public and highly viewed way, Oliver implores his viewers to be educated on this issue.

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7 John Oliver, “Fashion.” Last Week Tonight with John Oliver, April 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdLf4fihP78>
and to act upon what they’re learning because “this is going to keep happening for as long as we let it.” Although it seems like this presentation of information is not legitimate, in reality John Oliver is able to shed a light on this by making a mockery of the entire system. But even though this argument takes on a more light-hearted approach, it still speaks to real emotions and relatable feelings on part of viewers, which is the most important part. Oliver reaches a vast audience and shows that the corruption of sweatshops is something so unbelievable that it is laughable.

Acting as a complementary example that supports this research, C. D. Meyers published an article that promotes similar ways of thinking as John Oliver. In this article, Meyers writes about the exploitation of sweatshops, and the responsibility that consumers have in turn. Meyers brings more information up that adds to the larger picture of the anti-sweatshop movement. Meyers expresses “though many opponents of sweatshops do not explicitly appeal to contemporary philosophical ethics, these theories are popular in part because, and insofar as, they justify our commonsense moral intuitions.” This is a claim that most can identify with, that ethics and morals define sweatshops as being bad. While our morals may say one thing, Meyers brings light to a different interpretation of the issue, which is seen through how some workers willingly choose to undergo the difficult conditions. There are multiple perspectives for this issue, that are complicated and hard to grasp, especially when it seems to go directly against all that we are taught. This article shows that there are two sides to this issue. So often people just look at the conditions and say that sweatshops are intrinsically evil, but Meyers shows there is another perspective to see it from which makes this issue all the more complicated.

In addition to all this, there are many who have researched the implementation of sweatshop free options at different college campuses, which proves that there are examples of successful projects accomplishing this goal. There are individuals who have personal, first-hand experience of organizing these efforts, such as Jim Keady, who as a collegiate athlete became aware of this practice and motivated to change its role on campus. Keady made a documentary exposing the terrible working conditions and quality

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8 John Oliver, “Fashion.”
of life of workers in a sweatshop in Indonesia, as well as teaching about the corrupt system that operates it. Jim Keady also is the head of an organization called Educating for Justice, in which he visits schools and programs to educate students on the reality of sweatshops and how students play a role in that issue. This shows that the realities of this issue and showing the accessibility and possibility of providing this information to students. Keady ends this documentary by saying “we should care for these people because they are human beings.” Not only does this source express motivations for being involved in a program like this, it also promotes the practicality of making this a reality for students on a college campus. Through his organization Educating for Justice, Keady is able to empower students to bring change to their schools.

The more scholarly support that demonstrates the possibility for anti-sweatshop movements amongst college students is from an article from Purnima Bose on the Student Anti-Sweatshop Movement. This article focuses on specific individuals who were able to bring this movement to their schools and the method in which they did so successfully. For example, Megan Hise is a student whom Bose highlights, who takes the approach of a direct and controversial way of teaching. Hise is quoted saying, “In some ways it is easier to agitate a person new to these issues by initiating the dialogue with the visceral reality of the iconic sweatshop: the heat, the fatigue, the toxic odors, the hunger, the humiliation. Starting from the vantage point where the conditions are so ugly that organizing a union can mean a life or death struggle, labor solidarity suddenly seems more urgent.” This perspective from an involved student who led this project onto another campus is very helpful and insightful to shaping the way in which we want to approach this task at Merrimack.

While it is important to have the basis from other people who have effectively accomplished this task, it is equally necessary to be aware of the audience and the people that will be addressing this issue in our realm of this issue. For a practical example, I reached out to two specific members of the Merrimack Community who reflect the ideologies needed to make this project a success. The first person that I reached out to is Professor Michael DeCesare from the Sociology department; Professor DeCesare teaches a social movements course at Merrimack. The answers that Professor DeCesare gives all centers around the power of the student and the little steps that we can take to make the
change necessary at this school. The most basic way that this can be done is through raising awareness, on any and all levels possible. Professor DeCesare believes that specifically at a smaller sized school, success is definitely possible and even more plausible because of the tight-knit community and closeness of students.\textsuperscript{10} In a school like Merrimack, students are unaware of the strength in numbers that they have. Working in tandem with this information, I also reached out to students who would be involved in helping with this project. Amshula Divadkar is an involved student who has a genuine interest in social issues and how we as individuals affect them. The answers given from Amshula coincide with similar ideas expressed by Professor DeCesare. Amshula expressed not being as informed on the topic as she could be, arguing that consciousness-raising is an important part of this project. While her answers were honest, they express a genuine interest in being involved in this project and working toward fixing this issue; while still acknowledging a struggle with the other concerns involving an anti-sweatshop movement, such as financial constraints.\textsuperscript{11}

The products of sweatshops have infiltrated many different arenas and have proven to be present in many aspects of our consumer lives. Many consumers are unaware of the role that they play in this issue in their daily choices and actions. Specifically as college students this statement and description is applicable. College students are a major concentration of those individuals who unknowingly contribute to the continuation of sweatshops because of their consumerist habits. Due to the reality of this, it is important that students are getting this information and being inspired to help alleviate the norm that it has become. The overall goal for this project is to see the Merrimack College Bookstore offer sweatshop-free products to be sold on campus, which aligns and supports ideas held within its Catholic identity. While time is a constraint in this project, the goal still remains the same; however has been expanded over a greater amount of time. The product for this specific project will be a manual, that we hope can be created to aid future generations of students who will take on this project of bringing ethically made, fair trade certified items to be sold in the bookstore. Within this large-scale project, there also are practical goals that have been identified in order to ensure this

\textsuperscript{10} Dr. Michael DeCesare (Professor of Sociology) in email interview, March 2016.
\textsuperscript{11} Amshula Divadkar, in email interview, March 2016.
to be a success. At the forefront of these goals is education: in order to make sure that students and other members of this community realize why this is such an important project. With education, comes the understanding that people are intentional about their actions and realize that this is an issue that should be addressed. In addition to education, another goal is for the student body to be able to be heard on campus regarding an issue that they are passionate about and that directly aligns with the mission and teachings of the school.

In being able to accomplish the goals within this project, the audience is very important. Due to the structure of this project, this will address multiple audiences: the student body on a general scale, and the administration more directly. This project hopes to address the large community of college students at Merrimack College who make uninformed decisions with their money and purchases. Our audience for this project is Merrimack College students and faculty, who hopefully will be empowered and encouraged to accept this information and realize how close to home this hits to this community. Due to these facts, this project aims to move students to address the issue of sweatshops and how it relates to them as students. This is the intended audience because students are the future of the world and our society. The contributions of college students are extremely important because they are the individuals who will ultimately be taking over and making the necessary changes. Similarly, the audience is altered to be administrators, who have specific resources that can help improve Merrimack’s ethical and responsible decisions as a participating member of the global community.

On one hand, it is important to base this issue from a Catholic perspective when presenting this to the Merrimack administration due to the school’s history. Merrimack College is an Augustinian, Catholic institution that prides itself on its mission, which is based heavily in the Augustinian tradition. Being able to compare and cite a religious set of ideas, would aid this case that Merrimack needs to be more active in living out the characteristics of their faith. A specific way that Merrimack can represent the ideas of Catholic Social Teaching of dignity would be through promoting fair trade across campus. In addition to citing the CST principles and appealing to the Catholic identity of the school, it is also important to use the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a humanist approach to that same issue. Even if students are not moved by a religious
explanation for this campaign, as humans, we all can empathize with the reasoning for being involved in this issue as people.

Ultimately, the major claim to be addressed through the completion of this project is that of responsible consumerism and an association to being a global citizen. In identifying as such, it is the hope that students involved in this will come to believe that sweatshops should not be supported. Furthermore, students will consider that through our power as consumers, we should work for the dignity of the worker and worker’s rights. In addition to this, this project should support the idea that consumers, even college aged ones, have the ability to make an impact for the better with this issue.

As for the details of what this final project will look like, this is a description of the manual. The vision for this final project is a little bit different than most, and will be made up of different parts. Ultimately, this project will take shape in the form of a binder, which will serve as a manual of “How to get Sweatshop Free Items Offered in the Bookstore.” While the ultimate goal is for the Merrimack College bookstore to sell sweatshop free products, this manual will have multiple parts to it, designed so that another student (or group of students) can use it as a base to make this into a reality. This binder will include a step-by-step process for what students should do for this overarching project. The first step is to organize a small group of dedicated students and supportive faculty to help organize this project. The second step is to educate the greater community and raising awareness across campus; by presenting the research and information to student organizations and classes by a formal presentation, or even passively educating others through photo campaigns across campus or creating an informational video. Then the final step is a formal and professional proposal to be passed on to the bookstore and higher administration, presenting the information on sweatshop and recommending that the school make changes in their responsible consumerism practices.
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