Shopping for justice: The trouble with good intentions

by Charles M. North
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Julie Clawson needed a new bra. Most of the time Clawson, a Chicago-area pastor, would have just gone to the store, plunked down some cash and headed home with a new bra. But she had been reading about globalization, and her conscience made her wonder where her money was going and what was being done with it. So she decided to try an experiment. She decided to find a "justice bra"—to make a purchase that could do no wrong.

"The bra had to be made from an organically grown material. No synthetics made from petroleum, no pesticides . . . and no unsustainable practices," she wrote on the God's Politics blog. The bra must contain no toxic dyes, and it had to be "fairly made. From the farmers who grew the fibers, to the weavers who spun the fabric, to the tailors who assembled it, each person (adults, not children) along the way had to have been paid a living wage . . . not been coerced to work, and treated humanely."

Did such a bra exist? After searching for a couple weeks, Clawson found one. An online retailer based in Canada had a U.S.-made organic cotton bra that met her "justice bra" standards at a price of about $30—not much more than she would have spent at the mall.

Most of our clothes—and many other products we use each day—are made overseas. It's not just underwear that raises justice issues. In recent years, the living and working conditions of those making American clothes have come under greater scrutiny.

For example, the PBS documentary *China Blue* shows what life is like for Chinese workers who make the blue jeans that Americans wear. "They live crowded together in cement factory dormitories where water has to be carried upstairs in buckets," reports the film's Web site. "Their meals and rent are deducted from their wages, which amount to less than a dollar a day."

On a winter day in 1999, Pietra Rivoli, a finance and international business professor at Georgetown University, watched a student protest. A young woman stepped to the microphone and challenged the crowd: “Who made your T-shirt?” she asked. “Was it a child in Vietnam, chained to a sewing machine, without food or water? Or a young girl from India earning 18 cents per hour and allowed to visit the bathroom only twice per day? Did you know that she lives 12 to a room? That she shares her bed and has only gruel to eat? That she is forced to work 90 hours each week, without overtime pay?”

Rivoli realized that she didn’t know the answers to those questions. So she decided to find out. While on vacation in Florida, she bought a $6 T-shirt with a picture of a parrot on the front of it and over the next five years traced the shirt’s history, a project she describes in her book *The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy*.

She tracked the shirt to Sherry Manufacturing, a Miami silk-screener that printed the design. Sherry connected her with Xu Zhao Min of Shangai Knitwear, which sold the shirt to Sherry. When Xu was next in the States, Rivoli invited him to visit her at Georgetown. During that conversation, Rivoli asked him if she could visit him in China to see where the shirts were sewn, the fabric was knit and the yarn spun. She also asked, “Could I go to the farm and see how the cotton is produced?”

“That might be difficult,” Xu replied. “I think the cotton is grown very far from Shanghai. Probably in Teksa.” Rivoli pulled out a globe and asked where in China “Teksa” was. Xu turned the globe around and pointed—at Texas.

Asking questions about the relationships between the goods, trade, labor and economics of globalization may produce some answers—but often they create even more questions.

Stories abound of unsafe working conditions, bad food in insufficient quantities, unsafe housing, child labor and low pay. Sweatshop Watch defines a sweatshop as:

> a workplace that violates the law and where workers are subject to: extreme exploitation, including the absence of a living wage or long work hours; poor working conditions, such as health and safety hazards; arbitrary discipline, such as verbal or physical abuse; or fear and intimidation when they speak out, organize, or attempt to form a union.

Some sweatshops still use child labor, says Sweatshop Watch. According to the group's Web site, "Many child laborers are in exploitative conditions with low wages, long working hours, no medical or welfare facilities . . . exposed to dangerous working environments with few educational opportunities. Some children are working under bonded and slave-like conditions, harmful to physical, emotional growth and development."

Throughout the history of the mechanized cotton-clothing industry, Rivoli writes, the key input needed was a docile labor force willing to do dull, repetitive tasks over long hours with few breaks. In every country's textile industry, docility comes from "a lack of alternatives, lack of experience, and limited horizons."

Yet to many Chinese textile workers, life in the mills is much better than life back on their farms and in their villages. On assignment for the *New York Times Magazine*, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn headed to China to expose the evils of sweatshops. In their article "Two Cheers for Sweatshops," they describe their 1987 interviews with young women in a purse-making sweatshop in southern China. The women worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, with a week or two off to go back home at the Chinese New Year. To the journalists' surprise, the women "all seemed to regard it as a plus that the factory allowed them to work long hours."

"It's actually pretty annoying how hard they want to work," the factory manager told Kristof and WuDunn. "It means we have to worry about security and have a supervisor around almost constantly."

In a 2004 *New York Times* column, Kristof tells the story of Nhep Chanda, a 17-year-old Cambodian girl who sifts through the city dump to make a living. She averages 75 cents a day for her efforts. For her, the idea of being exploited in a garment factory—working only six days a week, and inside instead of in the broiling sun, for up to $2 a day—is a dream.

American sensibilities regard sweatshops as inhumane places that exploit young women and girls. Kristof and WuDunn acknowledge the problems. Workers do live in firetrap dorms. Children are exposed to dangerous chemicals. Some managers do "deny bathroom breaks, demand sexual favors, force people to work double shifts or dismiss anyone who tries to organize a union." But sweatshops have also been the engine of growth in China and other East Asian countries.

Between 1981 and 2001, the number of people in extreme poverty (living on less than $1 a day) fell in East Asia by more than 500 million people. The percentage of East Asians living in extreme poverty fell from 57.7 percent to 14.9 percent. Also, the portion of East Asians living on less than $2 a day fell from 84.8 percent in 1981 to 47.4 percent in 2001.

Smaller gains have occurred in South Asia, including India, mainly because South Asian countries were slower to embrace international trade as a growth strategy. And in the rest of the developing world, the poverty rate has been about the same or has even increased because governments have rejected growth strategies based on the export trade.

According to economist Jagdish Bhagwati, author of *In Defense of Globalization* (Oxford University Press), jobs in poor-country factories that are run by multinational corporations pay much better than most other jobs in those countries. Generally, workers at such jobs earn up to 10 percent more than they would in comparable jobs in their countries. Some multinationals pay as much as 40 to 100 percent higher. Kristof and WuDunn report that wages in Dongguan, China, have risen from $50 a month in 1987 to $250 a month today, though this pay premium doesn't necessarily carry over to the locally owned subcontractors of multinational firms.

Some Chinese factories are even getting less "sweaty." Andy Mukherjee of Bloomberg.com describes a massive Chinese factory complex—with 200,000 workers—where Apple's iPods are made. Dorms are air-conditioned and have TV rooms, snooker tables and public telephones. The campus has "soccer fields, a swimming pool, supermarkets, Internet cafes, banks, 13 restaurants and a hospital." The factory appears to comply with Chinese labor laws and doesn't use child labor. All the employees have medical coverage. The iPod factory is hardly the norm, but it shows what can happen as China's export goods become more valuable and as Chinese workers become more accustomed to modest but growing wealth.

According to Rivoli, sweatshop jobs can help workers develop a new set of choices. Schooling, independence and release from undesirable arranged marriages become possible. Rivoli notes that as Chinese factory workers have gotten more skilled, they have gained clout. "The factories producing textiles cannot find the workers they need to keep producing," she says. "The power has shifted. Rather than having millions of people begging for a job and being exploited, you have instead thousands of factories begging for workers. I think that is a sign of progress."

For Christians who want to improve substandard working conditions around the globe, Rivoli hints at a solution: don't try to eliminate the jobs through boycotts and similar tactics. Kristof and WuDunn agree: "Asian workers would be aghast at the idea of American consumers boycotting certain toys or clothing in protest." Instead, pressure the employers by shining a light on their practices and making them publicly known. Help the workers learn how to stand up for better working conditions.

Bhagwati agrees that public pressure is better than trade sanctions for cleaning up labor practices in developing countries. He admits that many people think formal sanctions—such as boycotts and bans and tariffs—will work better at improving overseas wages and working conditions than moral persuasion. "Indeed, we must remember that God gave us not just teeth but also a tongue," Bhagwati writes. "And a good tongue-lashing on a moral cause is more likely to work today than a bite. Recall that, with NGOs and CNN, we have the possibility now of using shame and embarrassment to great advantage."

There are limits on how much even well-meaning people will pay for "justice." In her search for a justice bra, Julie Clawson had found one for $100 made in the United Kingdom, but she balked at paying such a high price. "I knew this endeavor would require more funds than the typical sale bin at the mall, but I had my limits. There has to be a balance between saving a buck at the expense of a worker in a third-world nation and throwing one's money away on luxury items."

And it's not at all clear that Clawson really achieved the greatest justice by buying the "justice bra." At best, Clawson could hope for a long-term effect: if enough people think like her, then maybe working conditions around the globe could improve as demand for unjust bras wanes. At worst, buying an American-made bra from a Canadian company made some poor sweatshop worker a little worse off.

Is Clawson's willingness to pay $30 for justly made underwear typical of most Americans? The Wal-Mart store in Lake Zurich, Illinois, has a wide selection of bras ranging from $8 to $15. Undoubtedly, these fail Clawson's justice criteria. But they were probably made by poor-country workers doing jobs they prefer over their other options. And the low price allows low-income Americans to stretch their hard-earned dollars farther. So which bra does more justice?

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