

Examining the Fast Fashion Industry and the Multifaceted Oppression of Downtown Los Angeles Garment Workers

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ABSTRACT: The fast fashion business model used by well-known fashion brands demands high production rates at low prices to maximize profits. This, however, has detrimental effects on the environment and comes at the expense of the rights of garment workers. Wage theft and abuses of power, among other serious labor law violations, are commonplace. While global issues are well publicized, little attention has been paid to garment work issues in the United States. Downtown Los Angeles's Fashion District comprises 83% of the cut-and-sew manufacturing in the U.S. This current field study was conducted using a semi-structured interview with the Garment Workers Center, a garment workers' rights organization, to highlight current issues with the Los Angeles garment manufacturing industry. Not surprisingly, L.A. garment workers, primarily women, people of color, and immigrants, are paid below minimum wage, face wage theft and intimidation, and work in unsafe conditions. Although legislation ensuring proper wages and safe working conditions has been passed, enforcement has been difficult. Continued efforts are needed to address these persistent injustices.

KEYWORDS: Behavioral and Social Sciences, Sociology and Social Psychology, Workers' Rights, Women's Work, Gentrification, Fast Fashion.

■ Introduction

Most people are aware of fast fashion, a business model infamous for its adverse impact on the environment that maximizes profits by maximizing and cheapening production. Globally, the fashion industry produces 92 million tons of textile waste and accounts for 20% of global wastewater each year.¹ The exploitation of garment workers in terms of low wages and dangerous working conditions is also well documented.² However, an often overlooked reality of fast fashion is the disproportionate impact of climate change and exposure to toxic chemicals on low-income communities.³⁻⁵ Factories that create pollutants are often strategically placed in these communities. Socioeconomic vulnerability exposes inhabitants of these communities to health hazards while also not providing adequate resources to combat them.

One does not have to search far to find these issues. Countless immigrant women work in garment manufacturing jobs in the Downtown Los Angeles Fashion District. Paid cents per piece, workers toil for long hours in small, cramped spaces with little ventilation, access to water, and filled with health hazards, which have earned these factories the appropriate label of "sweatshops."⁶ In addition, widespread gentrification efforts in low-income black and brown neighborhoods have made housing unaffordable for its current inhabitants whose wages are unable to cover rent and other basic essentials for survival.^{7,8} This current field study examined the effect of exploitive practices of the Downtown Los Angeles (L.A.) fashion industry on garment workers. It also explored the compounding and interconnected impact of immigration, race, and labor on L.A. garment workers.

■ Methods

Study Design:

This study consisted of a semi-structured interview over Zoom with Communications Manager, Jonathan Coleman, for the Garment Workers Center, an organization that advocates for Downtown Los Angeles (L.A.) garment workers.⁹ Jonathan Coleman has worked as the Communications Manager for the GWC since 2022. Questions (Table 1) were administered by the author directly to Mr. Coleman, and responses recorded during the interview were subsequently paraphrased in this paper. Data from journal publications and news articles were used to provide additional insight into Mr. Coleman's responses.

The objective of this study was to describe the current working conditions of garment workers in Downtown L.A. and describe the role of the Garment Workers Center in protecting workers' rights. We also explored the compounding and interconnected impact of immigration, race, and gentrification of L.A. garment workers.

■ Results

The Garment Workers Center in Los Angeles:

Founded in 2001, the Garment Worker Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization whose mission is to organize low-wage garment workers in the fight for social and economic justice for tens of thousands of Los Angeles garment workers. The organization is headed by a board of directors and staff of various professions with backgrounds in law, labor organization, communications, small business, fashion design, and public affairs. The GWC provides legal assistance and general counseling for immigrant workers, women of color, and their families who

are impacted by unfair employment practices in the fashion industry. The GWC also develops leaders who demand enforcement of strong labor laws and accountability from manufacturers and fashion brands. Lastly, the GWC has collaborated with politicians to sponsor bills protecting garment workers' rights. Most recently, the GWC collaborated with Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (NY) and House of Representative Carolyn Maloney (NY) to introduce the FABRIC Act/S.4312 to protect American garment workers and revitalize the U.S. garment industry.^{9,10}

Job Conditions of Garment Workers in Los Angeles:

According to Jonathan Coleman, L.A. garment workers face unfair employment practices on an almost daily basis. They work long hours and are either prohibited from taking breaks or pressured into not taking breaks at all; it is not uncommon to hear of a workday where a worker did not drink water, go to the bathroom, or suffer job-related injuries that were not attended to. Although entitled to minimum wage, L.A. factories often dodge giving proper wages by paying garment workers a piece rate for garments sewn; this results in workers being paid 2 to 3 cents per piece. The GWC discovered high frequencies of wage theft in factories producing clothing for well-known companies, including Forever 21, Ross Stores, TJ Maxx, Windsor, Nordstrom, Macy's, Burlington, Dillard's, and Urban Outfitters. Many factory floor managers also use several ways to steal wages from garment workers, including charging a fee for workers to collect their paycheck, using a cashier's check or cash as payment, or just not recording a payroll at all. To complicate matters, retailers would provide only a fraction of the money contractors needed to pay their employees; garments were made at a lower cost, and workers earned subminimum wages. In many of these cases, the big retailers passed the blame down the supply chain and often evaded accountability.

Currently, the Los Angeles garment manufacturing workforce is approximately 60% women, as estimated by Jonathan Coleman. Given that many L.A. garment workers are undocumented middle-aged to older Guatemalan and Mexican women, Mr. Coleman states that factory floor managers will threaten job loss, violence, and deportation to prevent reporting of abusive workplace practices. Language barriers and overall lack of knowledge of civil rights also make immigrant garment workers easy targets for exploitation.

Jonathan Coleman stated that these exploitative practices prompted the passage of California Senate Bill 62 (SB-62) in 2021.^{11,12} The GWC co-authored Senate Bill 62 with State Senator Maria Elena Durazo. This bill eliminated piece-rate wages in the garment manufacturing industry, required a legal minimum hourly wage for workers, and ensured that brands were held liable for labor law violations. He also added that the enforcement of these regulations has just barely started, three years later, and that workers in California continue to be paid per piece under the table and face wage theft in countless other forms.

Effects of Gentrification of Downtown Los Angeles on Garment Workers:

Currently, the majority of Downtown L.A. garment workers reside in the Downtown neighborhood itself as well as surrounding areas including the Westlake, MacArthur Park, and East L.A. neighborhoods, as stated by Jonathan Coleman. Some of the poorest areas in L.A., these densely populated neighborhoods are inhabited primarily by Latinos. The vast majority of rent and the neighborhoods are made up of primarily multifamily properties and condos. Jonathan Coleman added that some workers, especially those residing in Downtown L.A., have been forced to relocate due to increased rents.

The lack of affordable housing for L.A. garment workers is a continuing focus of the GWC. In 2021, the GWC learned about the DTLA40 Community Plan Update,¹³ launched in 2014 and adopted by the Los Angeles City Council. The plan intends to revitalize the Downtown area and accommodate future growth of business and housing. The Plan creates zoning for 100,000 additional residential units downtown and would have allowed residential development in areas traditionally occupied by the garment industry. This sparked concerns about displacement and job loss. The GWC lobbied for amendments to the Plan that included protections for an estimated 20,000 downtown garment workers, an increase in the amount of manufacturing space required for new housing developments in the Fashion District, and a requirement to include freight elevators and loading docks for manufacturing. The updated plan was approved by the Council's Planning and Land Use Management committee in May 2023.

■ Discussion

History of Garment Work and Women's Role in the Field:

To fully understand how the role of women in garment work has developed to the state today, it is important to first look into the origins of mass-manufactured clothing production.¹⁴ Ready-to-wear garments began as clothing for the poor and oppressed. Dating back to the 1840s, mass-manufactured clothing was most often produced for sailors and enslaved people. Businesses offered a service to plantations where they would ship large quantities of cheaply made one-size clothing. Seamstresses, often women, were forced to produce extremely high quantities of clothing for low wages, introducing the exploitative aspects of the new industry.

A major leap forward for ready-to-wear clothing came with the advent of standard sizing. Mass body measurement sizing data for men were obtained during the Civil War and refined during the Spanish-American War and World War I. Mass industrialization made ready-to-wear clothing more accessible to the public. By the 1880s, women's clothing was being mass-produced in distribution networks organized initially by German-Jewish immigrants. By 1920, women's fashion comprised 76 percent of the ready-to-wear industry and represented a convenient luxury afforded only by wealthy elites.

Women's Garment Work and Devaluation:

It is undeniable that gender has played a significant role in devaluing garment work. Women have long predominated in trades such as teaching, service, domestic work, nursing, and garment making.¹⁵ Western gender norms suggest that women

are naturally and biologically talented in these fields because of the apparent dainty, feminine, or motherly nature of these professions. Women's work has traditionally been viewed as supplemental to that of her husband's "breadwinning" work.¹⁶ Both the idea of women's work being supplemental and the belief that traditionally women-dominated fields are innately femal abilities have contributed to the overall devaluation of women's work. In the case of garment work, since women sewed clothing for their families before the age of mass production, it is believed by the patriarchal society that the ability to cut and sew clothing is a natural behavior in women rather than a learned skill and not deserving of high wages.¹⁶

The Fast Fashion Business Model:

The American advertising industry, born in the 1920s, also played a critical role in the fantasy ready-to-wear industry.¹⁴ Displayed in urban department stores and mailed to people in the countryside, the advertising industry promoted fantasized visions of ready-to-wear clothing to a wider and younger audience. Some of the first consumers of mass-produced fashions were poor shop girls and garment workers.

The mass manufacturing model has morphed over time into what is now known as the fast fashion business model fueled by social media. TikTok, a widely popular short-form video app, is a major culprit of the casual bombardment of advertising that has contributed to a hyper-consumerist culture. TikTok uses an adaptive and responsive algorithm to bring the viewer extremely tailored content. Companies take advantage of the highly addictive nature of TikTok to advertise brand deals with influencers and sell directly to users through the e-commerce marketplace.^{17,18} This form of advertisement has given rise to microtrends – a short-lived trend that focuses on achieving a certain aesthetic and usually does not last longer than a few months.¹⁹ Trends and styles are given appealing names and prey on users' insecurities regarding their appearance. The constant exposure and psychological pressure to follow the latest trend, in turn, drives excessive consumerism. As trend cycles shorten, clothing is worn very few times before being discarded. This pattern goes hand in hand with the deterioration of clothing quality. The number of times clothing is worn before being discarded has decreased by around 35% since 2008.¹ To produce large quantities of low-priced clothing to satisfy ever-increasing demand, manufacturers produce lower quality products, utilize more synthetic materials, and underpay and overwork employees.²⁰

Today's Garment Work Industry in Los Angeles:

For years, the "Made in USA" movement rested on the belief in better quality compared to foreign competitors. There was also an assumption that garments were produced more ethically than their lower-priced foreign competitors. These assumptions about the U.S. garment industry are unfortunately false.

Tucked away in Downtown Los Angeles's Fashion District is 83% of the cut-and-sew manufacturing and 58% of registered garment industry contractors in the United States.²¹ These factories, located in the cramped warehouses, basements, and upper floors of buildings, are owned and used by the biggest names in fast fashion: Ross, TJ Maxx, Windsor, Nordstrom,

Macy's, Burlington, Fashion Nova, Urban Outfitters, Neiman Marcus, and Forever 21.²²⁻²⁴ Workers in this industry are inseparably tied to undocumented immigrants making it fertile ground for wage theft, worker intimidation, and unsafe working conditions. In what has been described as modern-day slavery, workers in these garment factories toil in unsafe conditions and are paid extremely low wages.²³⁻²⁵ CBS News reported that a 2016 U.S. Department of Labor investigation found pay violations in 85% of the L.A. garment shops investigated.⁶ Garment workers described working conditions that included a lack of air conditioning, cockroach infestations, and unattended job-related injuries. Workers were paid on a piece rate system and earned approximately 5 to 6 cents for each garment sewn. To earn the minimum wage rate of \$15 per hour, a worker would have to sew 300 pieces in an hour.

Many hailed the passage of the Garment Workers Protection Act, SB-62, which made California the first state to prohibit a piece-rate wage system, made all parties involved in garment facturing liable for ensuring proper wages, and provided a system for workers to recover stolen wages. Despite the passage of SB-62 in 2021, unlawful wage practices persist in California. In a survey of more than 50 Southern California garment-sewing contractors and manufacturers conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, 80% had violated the Fair Labor Standards Act.²⁶ More than 50 percent of the time, employers were also found to have illegally paid workers part or all their wages off the books, with payroll records either deliberately forged or not provided. The survey also found 32% of contractors paying garment workers piece-rate wages, a practice prohibited by the State of California on Jan 1, 2022. Contractors and manufacturers included in the survey produce garments for sale by national retailers, including Dillard's, Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, and Stitch Fix, among others. California's first arrest for garment industry wage theft occurred on October 12, 2022.²⁷ The California Labor Commissioner and the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office announced felony criminal charges against Lawrence Lee, a co-owner of a garment manufacturing business, and Soon Ae Park, a garment contractor with a history of stealing wages. Their alleged misdeeds included compensating workers with as little as \$6 per hour, many earning an average of \$350 for a 50-hour workweek. Mr. Lee also failed to provide worker's compensation insurance coverage and information about paid sick leave.

■ Conclusion

At its most basic level, fast fashion involves producing mass quantities of trendy, low-quality, inexpensive clothing. The surge in clothing production and consumption, fueled by social media, has had deleterious effects on the environment and garment workers. While unfair wage practices and dangerous working conditions in the garment industry in countries such as China and Bangladesh have been highlighted in mainstream media, the "hidden" cut-and-sew industry located in Downtown Los Angeles has been ignored until recently. Workers in the L.A. garment manufacturing industry face wage violations, intimidation, and unsafe working conditions similar to workers in other countries. These ongoing issues are shouldered by

women, people of color, and immigrant workers. Organizations such as the Garment Workers Center directly support L.A. garment workers by building a culture of solidarity within the industry, recovering unpaid wages, enforcement of labor standards, and partnering with politicians to put forth workers protection legislation. Despite successful passage of legislation such as California Senate Bill 62, enforcement has been delayed and difficult. Continued efforts are needed to address these persistent injustices both in the U.S. and globally.

■ Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to my mentor, Dr. Laura Kenner, Ph.D., whose support and guidance throughout the entire process made the completion of this paper possible. Her patience and feedback inspired me to push myself and continue improving.

I also want to thank Jonathan Coleman of the Garment Workers Center for his insight. His willingness to discuss the work of the Garment Workers Center and his experiences with the organization helped me immensely in writing this paper.

Furthermore, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Carla Macal for taking the time to discuss her work with me. Her insight and suggestions helped me throughout the research and writing process.

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