The effects of child labor in sweatshops today

According to the US Department of Labor, a sweatshop can be defined as a factory that produces...items...that is operating in violation of two or more labor laws. Violation of labor laws could include absence of living wages or benefits, dangerous working conditions and verbal or physical abuse. As a society, we are constantly purchasing items without thinking for even a second about how they were made. We are often unaware or choose to ignore the problem of child labor in sweatshops. However, even though most people are not conscious of this, it is a reality that many children are denied their childhood and are forced to work. It has been estimated by the International Labor Organization (2013) that 250 million children between the ages of five and fourteen work in developing countries. More than half of these child laborers are employed in Asia, others work in Africa and Latin America mostly.

Sweatshops are not an ideal place of work for anyone; however, risks are often doubled for children. According to the University of Iowa Labor Center (2011), working conditions that are safe and healthy for adults may not be safe for children. In sweatshops, children most often do not receive proper training and are not adequately supervised. These two factors drastically increase their risks of injuries. Providing for their families, who otherwise would not be able to survive, is one of the most common factors for child employment in sweatshops. According to University of Iowa Labor Center (2011), children living in poverty develop health problems such as malnutrition, fatigue and anemia. These problems make accidents or injuries at work much more likely, and also increase the consequences of the labor and could lead to more permanent damage to the child’s body.

As it was just mentioned, it is evident that working in sweatshops can have many negative impacts on childhood...According to Woman Global and Human Rights, sweatshops are crowded, filthy, and rat-infested. They are located behind barbed wire fences that are monitored by armed guards, visitors are forbidden, and it is also very difficult to escape. A 1998 study done in Southern California’s garment industry showed that 75% of the clothing industry factories violated health and safety guidelines and were considered unsafe. The hazards, such as blocked exits, exposed electrical parts that could start a fire or cause an electrocution, and a lack of safety guards on sewing and cutting equipment to prevent workers from dismemberment, were all found to be serious enough to warrant saying that an accident within these premises deemed substantial probability of death or serious physical harm. The gross violations of safety and health laws left the workers defenseless and vulnerable.

Sweatshops negatively impact children’s health, also compromise their mental health...Child laborers work long hours and often do not have the opportunity to go to school, to make friends and to play like children should. Therefore, they do not learn to interact with other people which could lead to mental health problems in the future. According to the Child Labor Public Education Project, children’s social development can be harmed by long hours of work on a regular basis...
Wanda Embar (2011), who advocates children’s rights and crusades against child labor in sweatshops, does however concede that sweatshops do create jobs that otherwise would not exist. However, compromising the children’s health and education to help their families out of debt or to feed their siblings is too high a price to pay in my opinion. According to Bhakti Varma (2011) …most often older adults lose their employment to younger workers. Remaining in a low paying job or being unemployed makes it difficult to afford to feed and send the children to school. Therefore, the children are forced to become child laborers themselves and continue the cycle.

With all the negative effects sweatshops and child labor can have on young people, an obvious question would be why they still exist. The answer is simple, it’s all about the money. Owners of clothing lines, shoe brands, toy factories, electronic companies and many more see the poor, helpless, uneducated children as a way to cut production costs and increase their profits. Right now, according to COOP America, “sweatshop workers earn as little as ½ to ¼ of what they need to provide for basic nutrition, shelter, energy, clothing, education and transportation”. However, for less than 1% of Nike’s annual advertising budget, the wages of all their employees could be doubled. Unfortunately, the health and well-being of their workers is not what they are interested in. As the Maquila Solidarity Network, a labor and women’s rights organization has said, companies hire children for the simple reason that they are less likely to complain about illegal and unjust conditions. And more importantly, they are less likely to organize unions. They are unaware of their rights and also will naively believe all the lies employers tell them about the money they will be making. Once they are hired, it is virtually impossible for them to escape.

If most countries have at least some form of child labor laws in place, how is this still a problem? The fact is, most industries receive advance notice of inspections, therefore they are able to prepare and give the impression that they are operating according to the law. In fact, Wanda Embar (2011) has said that most inspectors are paid by the factory that they are inspecting. They know ahead of time when the visit will be made and they are able to prepare by making the place look welcoming, keeping the child workers out of sight and coaching the workers on what to say. This particular situation is exactly what went on in a Vietnamese Nike factory in 1997 according to Global Exchange. Following a scandal where a factory was reported to have been exposing toxic fumes 177 times over the legal limit to its employees, the CEO of the company, Mr. Philip Knight, committed to following the OSHA standards. However, the factory receives advance notice of testing therefore they could easily just minimize the amount of chemicals in the air for that day. There is really no way of knowing whether they are operating according to standards or not. It is difficult not to be cynical however it would seem that many of the officials who are in positions of trust have a price.

These school-aged kids, no different from us, deserve better. The way they are being treated is against their fundamentals rights and we are sitting back and supporting this injustice. However, while the situation may seem desperate now, there is hope for a better future. Educating others around you and supporting fair trade companies are all steps that anyone can take to build a better future.