

Workplace Health and Safety in the Global Garment Industry

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Abstract

This analysis of (the lack of) occupational health and safety in the textile and garment industry revisits key academic publications on the global historical developments in the sectors since around 1800 and outlines future research options on four spatio-temporal features for securing capital accumulation and worker exploitation in the sector.

A historical-realist analysis of past and present developments in occupational health and safety in the global textile and garment sector uncovers that this industrial sector has a long history of deliberately opting for the “sick role” as corporations and regulators persistently ignore threats to workers’ occupational health and safety, while seeking to evade critical scrutiny of working conditions. In shifting the analysis of health and safety from the scale of individual workers and factories to the scale of the industrial sector and employing a historical-realist perspective, the chapter reveals four spatio-temporal features undergirding the accumulation of capital in global textile and garment manufacturing; lack of investment in technological innovation, undervalued and unsafe labor, intransparent subcontracting networks, and racialized exploitation.

Capacious and critical academic writing about workplace health and safety in the global textile and garment (TG) industry builds on an historical-realist perspective (Smith 2014). First, an historical evaluation on this industry is important as a means to identify continuities and changes in workplace health and safety, particularly as production sites have moved around the globe since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Accordingly, researchers can link historical and contemporary developments in TG manufacturing – from fin de siècle New York to the bonded warehouses and export processing zones of twenty-first century Bangladesh – via the red threads of sweatshop manufacturing, races to the bottom in labor standards and rights, government support for webs of subcontracting located in the shadow economy, and deadly industrial disasters (Bair *et al.* 2017). Second, a realist perspective (Porter 1993) directs critical attention to actually-existing workplace conditions. It transcends pro-capitalist developmentalist narratives portraying particular stages of capitalist exploitation in the industry as ‘transitional’ and, thus, soon to be replaced with decent work and wages. Such fictions have been amplified by many commentaries within the social sciences, as they locate the crucibles of health and safety at the scale of the individual worker and/or the individual factory (see: Barab 2006). In this, they either echo corporate management claims about workers making poor lifestyle choices that affect their workplace performance and safety. In a similar

vein, they reaffirm claims from TG sector umbrella organizations that workplace health and safety problems have arisen from the actions of a few ‘bad (corporate) apples’, running counter to an otherwise diligently managed industry with ample scrutiny of its supply chains.

This chapter builds on such historical and realist insights to remind readers that abuse and extreme exploitation of workers have underpinned global TG production since British machine-made products flooded Asian markets in the 1800s, thereby destroying Indian, Chinese, and Japanese garment industries (Wolf 1997 [1982]: 251). One thrust of this approach is to invert mainstream structural-functionalist and symbolic-interactionist sociology of health paradigms centered on individuals and their well-being. According to the former, societies positively sanction ill-health individuals as long as they accept a ‘sick role’ that obliges them to follow expert advice for recovery (Parsons 1951; *cf.* Doyal and Pennell 1979). Shifting the analysis of health in general, and workplace health and safety in particular, from the individual scale to that of an industrial sector firmly embedded in the capitalist world-system, the chapter reviews the TG industry’s sickening impact on hundreds of millions of workers over two centuries. Factory owners and corporations in this industry have repeatedly refused to accept recommendations from commissions of public enquiry, labor rights groups, United Nations agencies, academics, and many others how to improve workplace health and safety (War on Want 1985 [1984]; Boris 2003; Prentice and de Neve 2017). As such, the TG industry analyzed in this chapter stands as emblematic of the overall social and planetary destruction of capitalist industrial manufacturing.

The following *longue durée* analysis of (the lack of) occupational health and safety in the TG industry revisits key academic publications on its global historical development since around 1800, before identifying opportunities for future research on the spatio-temporal configurations erected to secure capital accumulation and worker exploitation in the sector. The emphasis throughout the chapter is on linking topical literature on TG sector health and safety (avoidance) strategies with critical political economic analysis of capitalism.

The rise of textiles and garments sweatshops after the industrial revolution

Humans have made textiles and clothing for thousands of years. From protection to decoration and, later, fashion, textiles and clothing have always been central to everyday life, rituals, myths, religious beliefs, and social order (Riello and Parthasarathi 2009: 1-2). The Old

Testament begins with a story about human desire and covering body-parts with plant products. Buddhist and Hindu monks made robes from discarded fabric in early practices of TG recycling. As empires rose and fell, spinning, weaving, dyeing and other production techniques spread around the globe. In the 1500s, cotton textiles became ‘the first global commodity’. The Indian subcontinent initially dominated all production steps, from cotton and hemp agriculture to spinning, weaving, finishing, and global export. As Eric Hobsbawm (1999 [1968]) emphasized, Eighteenth Century British imperial expansion targeted global domination in textile spinning and garment manufacturing and, thus, laid the grounds for the Industrial Revolution in England.

Textiles and garments workers in the British Empire

The rapid ascent of the British TG industry during the late-Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries was, in large part, buttressed by the rapid expansion of British imperialism during this period and marked by various forms of political economic violence at home and across the Empire. With the violent destruction of burgeoning global competition, imposition of import restrictions on Indian textiles to Britain, and enforced opening of South Asian and other markets for British produce, the British Empire laid the foundations for capitalist anti-markets as vehicles of economic policy in subsequent centuries. These processes also engendered the systematic super-exploitation of workers along the global supply chains for textiles and garments – from cotton harvesting, cleaning, transport, shipping, spinning, and weaving, to packaging and transport. Along these segments of the supply chains, uprisings were brutally quashed in the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester in 1819 and in the violent response to the Indian Mutiny in 1857, for example. Simultaneously, the British ruling classes developed elaborate ideologies to misrepresent working class populations across the Empire as undeserving, ungrateful, lazy, deceitful and, ultimately, responsible for their own poverty (Wolf 1997 [1982]: 251). Within Britain itself, building on long-standing efforts to tarnish the discontent working classes in Britain as the ‘undeserving poor’, the 1834 *Poor Law Amendment Act* codified Thomas Malthus’ presumption that the poor would reproduce exponentially faster than agricultural and other resources could replenish. With vagrancy now a public offense, the rural and urban poor were forced into workhouses planned and designed in the panopticon-style of Jeremy Bentham, and purposed to supplement the reserve army of labor for capital (Hobsbawm and Rudé 1969).

William Blake's (1808) famous poetic reflections on the 'dark satanic mills' of the Industrial Revolution may have been aimed at the Albion flour mills of the last decade of the eighteenth century. Contemporaneous handloom weavers-turned-luddites, however, developed similar feelings about the steam-powered cotton spinning mills springing up across Britain and soon after in India, the United States of America, and across the globe in later waves of industrialization. In the revolutionary decades of the 1800s and 1900s, workers in the globalizing TG industry spearheaded organized strike actions. Perhaps most prominently, the origins of what has come to be known as 'International (Working) Women's Day' can be traced back to a mass-walkout of women garment workers in New York in March of 1857, as well as the strike of women textile workers in Petrograd during February and March of 1917, which helped precipitate the Russian Revolution. In memory of the latter, Clara Zetkin established 8 March as a Communist holiday in 1922. Although a subsequent United Nations declaration on International Women's Day ignored the impact of socialism, it acknowledged the key role of garment workers during the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Centuries in the fight for women's rights (Kaplan 1985).

Such industrial actions were a response, at least in part, to the poor working conditions prevailing within the TG industry. Reflecting on these circumstances, for instance, an International Labour Office (ILO 1983: 17-24) handbook, *Accident Prevention: A workers' Education Manual*, includes a chapter on 'the origins of accident prevention' that sheds light on the feeble occupational health and safety conditions prevailing within the TG industry as a pioneering sector in industrial capitalism. It details how, as the sector took off in the late 1700s, demand for cheap labor targeted pauper children, who had to work 14 to 15 hours per day in crowded factories filled with dirt, pollution from fibers and constant noise from ever-accelerating machinery. Analogously, Jamie Bronstein's (2008: 14-15) monograph on workplace accidents in Nineteenth Century Britain describes how different work tasks exposed workers to accidents – from sweeping floors and being caught in the 'giant metal jaws of spinning mules', to clothing or hair caught in unguarded belts that transmitted power from steam or water. Indeed, the British Parliament received reports of accident-to-worker ratios of 1:176 for the cotton industry and 1:230 for the wool industry as late as 1870, despite repeated Royal Commissions reporting on lack of occupational health and safety across the sector since 1833.

Writing in 1844 about *The Condition of the English Working Class* based on two years of research in Manchester, Friedrich Engels (2009 [1892]) observed that there were so many cripples amongst the inhabitants of Manchester that it was ‘like living in the midst of an army just returned from a campaign’. The *Factory Act of 1844* codified safeguards for machines and protection of workers, as well as inspections and accident reporting, in British law. The above-mentioned ILO handbook published in 1983 declares this a victory of public policy and political pressure groups campaigning against the refusal of mill owners to take responsibility for health and safety provisions, especially for young workers (International Labour Office 1983: 18). Yet, this depiction ignores the broader role of workers’ uprisings and other revolutionary movements in the Nineteenth Century in pressing the British Parliament and capitalists to grant such concessions (Moos 2021).

Continental European and North American Working Conditions

The ILO handbook (1983: 20-2) dates early recommendations for medical and safety inspections in some German kingdoms to the 1830s, with binding legislation arising in Prussia, Saxony, and Bavaria from around 1872. The same sequence is evident in France for 1841 and 1893, while binding legislation for Denmark and Switzerland dates back to 1873 and 1877, respectively. The Kingdom of Belgium was an outlier, with an 1810 Napoleonic-era Imperial Decree protecting against dangerous and unhealthy undertakings. In the USA, federal states had the power to legislate. Massachusetts, in the northeastern heartlands of the TG industry, led the way with an Act on the prevention of accidents in factories in 1877, and a requirement for reporting accidents in 1886. New York, Rhode Island, and other federal states with significant industrial activity, foremost in textiles and garments, followed prior to the fin de siècle era. Along with health and safety regulations, private-sector insurance companies mushroomed and offered tailored cover for TG employers’ legal liabilities. Soon, insurance companies sent out their own inspectors to workplaces. In the first half of the Twentieth Century, voluntary manufacturers’ associations formed at the national scale in Europe and North America, Asia (Japanese Industrial Welfare Society 1928; Safety First Association of India 1931), and Latin America (Cuban National Safety Council 1936).

In this context, the term ‘sweatshop’ emerged in public policy debates and parliamentary inquiries on occupational health and safety that supported the demand for binding legislation. TG work by women and immigrants was termed ‘sweated’ from the 1830s, when a mass-

market for ready-made garments (RMG) took shape. Investigations by the US House of Representatives and the British House of Lords into the ‘sweating system’ accorded the term ‘sweatshop’ common, transatlantic usage (Bender and Greenwald 2003: 4-6). Despite these transatlantic origins, New York’s Lower Eastside is today framed as the birthplace of what Alessandra Mezzadri (2017) has poignantly identified as a ‘sweatshop regime’, marked by super-exploitative and abusive labor relations that also included modern-slavery (Bair *et al.* 2017). Mid-to-late-Nineteenth Century New York was an ideal location for the most violent ignorance of occupational health and safety, as the low capital-to-labor ratio of its RMG sector could feed on immigrants vulnerable to the rags-to-riches stories pervading depictions of the American Dream (Soyer 1999).

Early US industrialization in the textile sector had been closely linked to UK developments, first via technology transfers and then by immigration of skilled workers – mostly handloom weavers – eager to escape power-loom industrialization once Britain allowed the emigration of skilled workers in 1824 (Van Vugt 1999: 64-6). The cradle of RMG production in Britain was military uniforms. Army bureaucracies standardized sizes and, hence, paved the way for mass production of standardized garments. Early industrialization of textile manufacturing depended on the invention of spinning jennies and steam-powered weaving tables. RMG industrialization hinged on another ground-breaking technology: the rise of Singer sewing machines suitable for industrial production in the 1860s. Importantly, the sector has not subsequently seen more recent major technological innovations after spinning jennies, power looms, and industrial sewing machines consolidated RMG manufacturing. This is one reason why capitalist competition in the TG sector is manifest foremost in the search for ever-cheaper labor – mostly from women workers controlled by a few male workers at higher wage rates – and not by the increased capitalization for technological innovation that is characteristic of some other industrial sectors (Godley 1997). The *absence of investment in technological innovation* is, thus, the first constant spatio-temporal feature determining occupational health and safety in the TG sector.

Consolidating the sweatshops in praxis and ideology

Early US RMG mass production set the stage for three additional spatio-temporal features that have kept the contemporary TG industry trapped in the sweatshop phase of unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, both globally and in the *longue durée*. New York’s rise to the

world's RMG capital was initially driven by demand for cheap clothing for enslaved workers on plantations in the southern states. In the late-1800s, cotton production helped turn the US into the world's largest exporter of cotton textiles. After the US Civil War, industrial production expanded into mass consumer markets, consolidating the happy-consumer image of US workers content with capitalist exploitation. Until this day, the *undervalued and unsafe labor of millions of exploited workers* constitutes the sector's second spatio-temporal feature. This secures a steady flow of surplus cheap textiles and garments for the world's consumer markets, thereby keeping consumers' costs of living down and, accordingly, allowing for wage cuts across other sectors.

The third spatio-temporal feature is the *division of labor* in that emerged in New York's Lower East Side. Well into the 1920s, mass-production stayed close to the display rooms of so-called jobbers, who subcontracted bulk orders to contractors, and then hired laborers – mostly women immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe – on a piece rate basis. Bair *et al.* (2017: 32) state that 'contracting was the core organizing principle of the apparel industry' by the 1880s, with the majority of cloak-houses and, later, warehouses preferring an 'outside system' where jobbers had contractors competing for orders, all to the detriment of workers' wages and safety. Output more than doubled from US\$32 million in 1883 to US\$68 million in 1885. Average weekly wages fell from US\$15 to US\$6 during the same short period. The three-tier structure with the contractors between jobbers and workers made direct complaints impossible. Workers organized and formed the International Lady Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), a key trade union that would exert global influence for more than 100 years. As the sector expanded, high-rises not built for large-scale industrial manufacturing turned into shop floors. New York's largest garment manufacturer, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company (TSC), ran a factory on the three upper-floors of the ten-story Asch building in Manhattan. TSC-women workers organized in the ILGWU and demanded safer working conditions and better wages in a mass-walkout in 1909, supported by the wealthy members of the Women's Trade Union League. The dispute dragged-on for years. In 1911, a fire broke out in the Asch building, leading to 146 of 500 losing their lives workers – many of whom jumped out of windows when fire ladders could not reach the upper floors. Other victims were buried under collapsing fire escapes unfit for the use of the building as a factory. The disaster consolidated the organizational power of the ILGWU and its support by some wealthy New Yorkers. Yet, it took until 1933 for the *New Deal-era National Industry Recovery Act (NIRA)* to sink the 'outside system' and establish a firm link between (sub)-contracting and unionization via the so-called 'jobbers' agreement',

which successfully reduced wage-driven competition between contractors into the 1980s and across the US (Bair *et al.* 2017: 41).

While workers fought against sweatshop wages and working conditions, *racialized capitalism* arose as the fourth spatio-temporal feature in a globalizing TG industry. The racialization of capitalist exploitation in the sector was facilitated by the entry of social Darwinism into the discipline of economics (see: Halliday 1971: 396-7; Hofstadter 2016 [1944]: 143-56). In the US, this facilitated an ideology that blamed the ‘race’ of workers themselves for the working conditions they endured and, thereby, sought to disguise capitalist exploitation as the guarantor of sweatshops. Such prescriptions claimed that the workforce, primarily comprising Jewish immigrants, were at fault for the ills of the sector. Sweatshops were driving ‘American’ factories out of the business. Conversely, inspectors fashioned themselves as ‘protectors of civilization’ against the Jews’ ‘low racial status’, which was held to confer on them a preference for individualistic, piece-rate work and acceptance of unsafe working conditions that were spreading ‘contagious diseases’ (Bender 2003: 23-5). Immigrant workers, instead, forcefully resisted such racialized, economic explanations for the sweatshop. When they had the opportunity to testify before public enquiries, they pointed to the responsibility of contractors and jobbers for factories without sufficient light and ventilation. Moreover, such enquiries revealed that competition between businesses and associated efforts bolster profits via increased labor exploitation often manifest in employers paying immigrant workers wages so low that, in order to subsist, male workers had to take work home to be completed by other household members (Bender 2003: 27-8).

Sweatshops and the rise of neoliberal globalization

Government legislation for health and safety, the entry of insurance companies and their investigators, and the rise of trade unions all helped improve occupational health and safety for TG workers in the heartlands of the capitalist world system before the Second World War. The rise of socialist and anarchist movements, in conjunction with trade unions, gave workers a voice and means to collectively bargain for higher wages and safer workplaces. Capitalists’ fear of successful working-class uprisings akin to the Russian Revolution, alongside the rapid economic development of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, buttressed these push factors: helping workers win social welfare and social policy concessions as a means to quell potential

industrial unrest. This trend continued after the Second World War, leading many scholars to characterize the immediate post-War period as marked by a tripartite industrial entente. This structure lasted until the 1970s, when large-scale relocations from the industrial heartlands of capitalism to countries in the Global South globalized sweatshops and, thus, created a new international division of labor (Froebel *et al.* 1981; Rosen 2002).

Pertinently, the concessions won in the inter-war period did not apply to all workers in the Global North, nor were they immune to capital's drive to sustain the sweatshop-driven 'sick role' of the TG sector via unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. Of the labor unrests discussed so far, only the women textile workers of Petrograd engendered a structural expropriation of capitalists. All other successes manifest in Polanyian 'double-movements' (Silver 2003) – incremental and *post facto* reforms designed to protect society against the excesses of the capitalist market – that were, from the 1970s onward, largely unable to withstand the neoliberal '*counter* double-movement' promulgated by capital against such measures (Blyth 2003: 5). In the context of the crisis of post-War capitalism during the 1970s, TG employers in the US sought to circumvent the rising bargaining power of workers and national legislation codifying occupational health and safety. In particular, they relocated their factories to southern states with laxer legislation and lower unionization rates, or employed new immigrants from Puerto Rico and other US colonies to break unionization in the north of the country. Detailed case-studies of northeastern manufacturing cities highlight further that employers used periods of low economic growth in the 1920s and 1950, and again in the 1970s, to push for rollbacks of (women) workers' rights and occupational health and safety (Koistinen 2013). TG manufacturers in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) employed similar counter-movement tactics, with abysmal treatment of the so-called *Gastarbeiter* from southern Europe, hired since the 1950s to top-up the national workforce after millions were killed under Nazi rule (Herbert 1990).

The rise of SEZs as new sweatshop locations

The four spatio-temporal features of exploitation and capitalist accumulation in the TG sector detailed above continued to dominate as the sector globalized from the 1930s onward. From the late-1940s, this dominance increasingly benefitted from the rise of export processing zones (EPZs) and special economic zones (SEZs) as the new locations for competition among countries over foreign investment and export-oriented industrialization in the era of

decolonization and the Cold War (Neveling 2017). Rather than investing in technology to maintain or increase profit margins and secure occupational health and safety, employers in the sector preferred mass layoffs and relocations to low-wage, low-unionization regions and postcolonial countries. The sector's racialized capitalism targeted new immigrant populations in Western nations after 1945, and projected this ideological configuration onto workers in postcolonial nations. Workers in former colonies were represented as inherently less productive, while Orientalist and sexist discourse claimed that women in Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, and elsewhere across the globe were ideal workers for RMG factories because of their 'nimble fingers'. Simultaneously, right-wing national governments declared that these women workers were undeserving of minimum wages because they were only supplementing household income from male breadwinners (Safa 1995; Neveling 2021).

In terms of production technologies, the globalization of the sector relied on Nineteenth Century innovations. Singer and other industrial sewing machines had facilitated mass-production of RMG in countries like Mexico from the 1860s (de la Cruz-Fernández 2015). In the 1930s, the growing number of department stores drove the mass-consumer revolution in leading capitalist countries. These stores were the first large-scale buyers on international markets and transnationalized New York's sub-contracting system. Jobbers now sourced internationally: subcontracting embroidery and sewing work to Western colonies and newly-independent nations which, from the 1960s, became mass suppliers for Western markets with millions of workers in SEZ-factories.

Puerto Rico, a US colony, was one of the early locations for the globalization of the TG sector (Neveling 2015). Ailing from centuries of Spanish rule and an onslaught of US agricultural trusts that rapidly dispossessed small cane planters into a landless urban proletariat, needlework industries producing for mainland department stores became the country's largest employer by the 1930s. The implementation of New Deal legislation and welfare in Puerto Rico (which included the *NIRA*) curbed mass strikes of women workers in urban sweatshops, but did little to ease the pressure on rural households embroidering textiles and garments at home for subcontractors. Local government legislation, backed by the US Treasury and supported by a Boston-based consulting corporation, established the world's first SEZ-style export-oriented development regime from 1947. Several new government agencies and a development bank lured mainland manufacturers and, later, international investors from Europe and Asia to Puerto Rico in the 1950s and 1960s. They advertised tax and customs holidays, low-wage labor

without widespread unionization, government-funded factory buildings, government-backed guarantees on profits, and other investment incentives.

Government agencies and contractors supported investors with marketing campaigns and business planning (Neveling 2015). Workers' rights protests were brutally quashed by local police forces, and workplace health and safety ranked at the bottom of the industrialization agenda. A ten-year anniversary publication claimed that Puerto Rico's export-oriented industrialization program (called 'Operation Bootstrap') factories 'conform to modern codes of health, sanitation, and safety—all carefully enforced by the Department of Labor and Health' (Stead 1958: 92). Yet, that Department was anything but efficient, such that much of the historical reporting on accidents in the many new TG factories focused on monetary damage rather than workers' injuries. Concerns about health and safety in Puerto Rico's pioneering SEZ-style development program focused on healthy and safe profits for capital, rather than occupational health and safety for workers (Neveling 2017: 131-2).

From Puerto Rico, the SEZ model – and, with it, TG industry sweatshops – spread persistently across an increasing number of postcolonial nations. Support for export-oriented and manufacturing-industrialization-driven economic development came from US departments and government institutions, along with new United Nations' (UN) commissions on economic development, UN technical assistance programs, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), and other World Bank branches. US officials organized tours for Puerto Rican officials across Caribbean and Latin American nations. The consulting corporation that designed much of the Puerto Rican scheme won grants to replicate this in Jamaica, Egypt, Honduras, and elsewhere. As the Cold War progressed, financial support for industrial infrastructure and preferential quotas for exports to Western markets became central means for supporting pro-capitalist dictatorships that showed little concern for occupational health and safety. With EPZ policies in place in Taiwan in 1965, in Indonesia and South Korea in 1970, and in Bangladesh and Chile in 1973, among several other nations, TG sweatshops designed by Western and local planning agencies spread across the globe (Neveling 2015).

Crucially, pro-zone policies became central to the agenda of international organizations' as well. Around two dozen countries had SEZ-style development policies up and running, or in preparation, when the non-alignment movement's pressure for changing international terms of trade bore some fruit in the mid-1960s, when the United Nations Conference on Trade and

Development (UNCTAD) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) began work in 1964 and 1966, respectively. With an approach based, to some extent on surveys of existing policies, UNIDO became the powerhouse of SEZ-promotion in the 1970s, despite the fact that the zones continued to give special rights to foreign investors and little oversight for national governments and, thus, were antagonistic to the New International Economic Order policies of many developing nations at the time. The debt crises of the 1980s put both socialist-bloc nations and non-aligned nations at the mercy of World Bank and International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs, most of which came with requirements and regular monitoring to instigate SEZs. The number of zones rose above 1,000 in the 1990s, when governments in post-socialist nations in both Europe and Asia embraced neoliberalism (Neveling 2015).

UNIDO had supported the China with training and workshops since its economic liberalization, marked by the introduction of SEZs in 1979. With an increasing number of bilateral trade agreements, Chinese TG production increased rapidly in the 1990s, and grew exponentially when the country became a full member of the World Trade Organization in 2001. Among other Twenty-First Century WTO entrants, Nepal (2004), Cambodia (2004), and Vietnam (2007) experienced veritable TG booms, again coupled with the rapid expansion of SEZs and also economic corridors that link production sites across mainland Southeast Asia, for example (Arnold 2012; Shakya 2018). Subsequently, SEZs with similarly low wages and lax labor rights provision and policing facilitated the expansion of TG manufacturing for international markets in India (Mezzadri 2017), Bangladesh (Ashraf and Prentice 2019), and Thailand and Myanmar, fueled by huge numbers of regional migrant workers (Campbell 2018). Despite this internationalization trend, some Western countries – notably the US, Italy, Spain, and the Federal Republic of Germany – maintain positions as leading producers and exporters of textiles and garments, primarily because of an emphasis on high-tech products and *haut de gamme* fashion products.

Occupational health and safety in global SEZ sweatshops

The fact that the *ILO Handbook for Workers Education to Prevent Accidents* was published as late 1983 indicates that attention to occupational health and safety remained miniscule as the TG industry went global from the 1960s. In the US, advances from the jobbers agreement of the 1930s were sustained into the 1980s, while the numbers of workers in the sector steadily

declined. In Western Europe, TG manufacturing declined from the 1950s, first through competition from Southern Europe, and then from Southeast Asia. Manufacturers in the Federal Republic of Germany, for example, followed this trend and moved production to Italy, then Poland and Hungary in the 1960s, before moving to Hong Kong, Mauritius, and Taiwan in the 1970s (Froebel *et al.* 1981). Again, such moves were motivated by the lure of longer working hours and limited government protections for workers.

Western governments, consultants, and international development organizations paid little attention to health and safety standards in what came to be known as ‘newly industrializing countries’ (NICs). As late as the 1970s, reports that carried ‘health’ and/or ‘safety’ in their titles commonly devoted limited attention to reporting on industrial accidents, and showed little interest in monitoring oversight bodies. If anything, that trend towards ignoring workers’ health and safety rights violations was exacerbated with the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s. Fiscal policies, deregulation of protectionist measures, and implementation of investment incentives by indebted governments were meticulously monitored in bi-annual reports over hundreds of pages, while the same huge bureaucratic apparatus had no interest in monitoring workers’ rights provisions (Neveling 2017: 137). In sum, the credo that emerged in late 1930s Puerto Rican TG manufacturing – health and safety for capital and investors, rather than for factory workers – went global in the following decades.

When UNIDO, other international organizations, corporate think-tanks, and industrial sector interest groups produced their first overviews of the global spread and operations of SEZs in the 1970s, occupational health and safety was of little concern. Checklists produced by the government-funded German Institute for Economic Research for TG companies, for instance, emphasized low-wage costs, longer working hours, ‘freedom to hire and fire’, absence of ‘militant or communist influenced trade unions’, and other anti-workers’ rights variables as positive items to observe before determining new manufacturing locations (Froebel *et al.* 1981: 147). Even publications highly critical of global manufacturing – like the excellent working paper series by the UN’s Centre on Transnational Corporations and the ILO’s Multinational Enterprise Programme in the 1980s, or the seminal *No Logo* (Klein 2000) of the late 1990s and 2000s global anti-sweatshop campaign – lack comprehensive reviews of occupational health and safety in the global TG sector. The shortcomings of those decades, thus, must be pieced together from a range of exemplary sources.

An SEZ-style scheme for Mexico, developed since around 1960, went live in 1965 as the Border Industrialization Programme (BIP), and gave rise to the widely-criticized maquila-factories where young women – many of them migrants from rural Mexico and other Latin American nations – toil for long hours under terrible sweatshop conditions while suffering sexist abusive from foremen and factory managers. Health hazards in maquilas in Nogales and elsewhere were representative of global conditions in the sector in the 1980s (Neveling 2017), making it worth reproducing a summary study in detail:

Hazards of the workplace include exposure to toxics as well as mutagenic and carcinogenic chemicals, the operation of dangerous and antiquated machinery that lacks safeguards to prevent injury, lack of protective equipment and clothing, stress or disease caused by long hours and repetitive motion, and a denial of information on chemicals in the workplace. Community-level risks include chemical exposure due to improper disposal of industry chemicals, lack of hygienic water delivery, storage and drainage in squatter communities, housing vulnerability to flood damage, and transportation accidents in an overcrowded city (Cravey 1998: 96).

Further reports from independent researchers and local workers' rights groups in the 1980s (cited in *ibid.*: 97) amplify that industrial pollution goes beyond the workplace to impact entire communities of workers. The continuity of such environmental and workplace pollution into the present is evident in recent reporting (Grassi 2020) on Nogales, Mexico's 'Blue-Jeans capital', where around 300 factories and 25 laundries pollute rivers and drinking water, migrant TG workers live in extreme poverty in unsafe squatter settlements without running water, and factory workers report frequent sexual harassment, workplace abuse, exposure to toxic chemicals and fumes, and long working hours. Without government support, a local worker movement had to fight corporations for many years to win basic fire safety and other life-saving industrial protection (*ibid.*).

Industrial hazards are well-known in Nogales and all other TG factory production sites – not only to workers, but also to factory managers, owners, and most brands that subcontract production to SEZs, bonded warehouses, and other 'special' zone locations. Production techniques such as the sandblasting of denim jeans, for instance, are widely known to cause silicosis among workers, a long-term and often deadly lung disease (Hobson 2013). Yet, much like the garment stores of New York's Lower East Side around the time of the Triangle

Shirtwaist Factory Fire, Twenty-First Century high-street retailers and fashion brands seek to outsource responsibility for occupational health and safety while simultaneously subcontracting production. The rapidly expanding TG sector in Bangladesh had seen numerous accidents, and many of them deadly, before the Rana Plaza building collapse killed more than 1,000 mostly women garment workers on 24 April, 2013. As in 1911 New York, the building was not constructed for industrial manufacturing. In the days before the disaster, workers from businesses on other floors of the building had been warned to stay home because cracks had appeared in the walls and ceilings of the building. After the disaster, pictures of garments among the rubble bearing the logos of brands and retailers made international news headlines. As global pressure on high-street retailers mounted, international workers' rights groups and Bangladeshi trade unions finally won the *Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety*, ratified in 2013 (Siddiqi 2015). This was after concerns over lacks of occupational health and safety had been raised for decades, even by otherwise-supportive authors of the country's EPZ regime (for example, Dowla 1997).

Critical scholars highlight the dangers of normalizing effects that, as Sumon et al. have pointed out, arose from compensation payments that allegedly indemnified grieving families after the deadly Tazreen Fashions factory fire in Dhaka in 2012, and also the Rana Plaza factory collapse (Sumon *et al.* 2017). 2017 saw another garment factory fire in Bangladesh. For the period from 1 January, 2021, to 13 June, 2022, alone, the international workers' rights activist group, *Clean Clothes Campaign*, has listed 56 incidents internationally, with 131 workers dead and 279 injured in TG factories in Pakistan, India, Egypt, Morocco, China and Cambodia. Adding to the list of obvious industrial hazards from lack of adequate occupational health and safety measures are factory fires in Argentina, Chile, Turkey, and Peru that, fortunately, did not cost any lives.¹

During the peak lockdowns of the global COVID-19 pandemic, many workers in TG factories had to show up for work, as production was hastily switched to incorporate protective equipment against the virus. Rural migrant workers in Bangladesh, India, and elsewhere received no compensations for temporary layoffs and were sent back-and-forth between their workplaces and hometowns like expendable pawns on a chessboard (Carswell *et al.* 2020;

¹ For more information, see: <<https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/protect-progress/deaths-and-injuries-in-the-global-garment-industry>> (accessed 2 August, 2022).

Siddiqi 2021). Millions of new forced migrants from regions marked by escalating wars are now vulnerable to super-exploitative factory regimes with hardly any oversight, as neoliberal development economists like former Oxford Professor, Paul Collier, and ex-World Bank consultant, Lotta Moberg, promote construction of SEZs next to refugee camps so that capital may draw from an expanded reserve army of laborers in dire straits (see Neveling 2015b for a discussion of Collier and other academics arguing in this vein). The death of Syrian migrants in a recent garment factory incident in Istanbul (see reference to database in footnote 1) may, thus, be a first sign of an even more dangerous future for garment workers.

Stitching it up

This short overview of past and present developments in occupational health and safety in the global TG sector has uncovered the long history of an industrial sector deliberately opting for the ‘sick role’. The spatio-temporal features of the sector that have undergirded its accumulation of capital and exploitation of labor – lack of investment in technological innovation, undervalued and unsafe labor, opaque subcontracting networks, and racialized exploitation – have been surprisingly stable for more than a century. Innovation has been focused on globalizing the TG commodity chain so that capital investment in technology could remain low, while racist stereotyping of ‘undeserving workers’ has supported the poor provision of occupational health and safety across the historical evolution of production hotspots. Dynamic webs of subcontracting have been maintained since the sector was at the center of Britain’s pioneering industrialization drive at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. Retailers, contractors, and subcontractors have shown an impressive versatility in labor exploitation via global labor arbitrage – allowing them to tap into the lowest-paid pools of capitalism’s industrial reserve army via, alternatively, incorporating incoming impoverished migrants in existing production sites, or relocating to regions with lower wages, lax government oversight and minimal occupational health and safety regulations. The latter strategy has supported capital’s ability to avoid collective bargaining and unionization, which is particularly important for this chapter’s topic, as successful struggles for workers’ rights and support from progressive consumer publics have proven to be the only means to successfully improve occupational health and safety in the sector over more than 200 years. In the same period, capital has enjoyed healthy and safe profits from TG manufacturing, while showing little interest in improving occupational health and safety on the global scale of the sector’s activities.

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