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The Government's Influence on Sweatshops in Developing Countries

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Abstract

This paper will concentrate on the local influence governments have had on sweatshop factories in developing countries. Based on the literature reviewed and analyzed, it was important to discuss several topics surrounding government influence. Topics covered in this paper include: the ethics behind sweatshops, workers' wages and their choices, government responsibility, and then ending with introducing the Framing Theory. This particular theory was useful in part because of the method implemented in this research paper. The Framing Theory is closely associated with media content because it attempts to compare what the media says on a particular topic verse what the audience or other outlets relay. However, it can be used for other types of topics and thus has been used to analyze the perception of government influence on sweatshops. To acquire the necessary data, in-depth interviews were employed and emailed to the participants. Email was the best option due to participants' access to internet in their country. The findings revealed that governments have a large influence on the sweatshops and its workers. If sweatshops were removed, it would lead to unemployment for many or force governments to engage in legit industries that would generate more income. Moreover, findings highlighted that it is very important to educate the workers on their own rights. Further research needs to investigate how sweatshops affect GDP and learn why the income is not included in the country's GDP.

Introduction

For developing countries to support their economies, it is almost impossible do so without participating in foreign direct investment (FDI) and being aware of globalization. Many Americans are aware that sweatshops exist, but it has become the norm to turn a blind eye. Why do sweatshops exist? Why do American brands and companies choose to do business on foreign soil? The answer to these questions is simple, cheap labor. China has been known as the “world’s factory,” along with the label “Made in China” being associated with sweatshops (Guo, Hsu, Holton, & Jeong, 2012; Yu, 2015). According to Yun-Wing (2007), China surpassed the United States in 2002 when it became the sole leader of FDI. Sweatshops are not a new phenomenon and have been in the media for decades, but are relevant during a government flare up. The most well-known flare up concerning sweatshops appeared in the 90s, with Nike, Inc. Roberts, Engardio, Bernstein, Holmes, and Ji, (2006) wrote an article about the secrets and lies of sweatshops. It revealed companies, like Nike, will go to any length to make their merchandise cheaper for Americans. China is not the only country that has experienced how American companies can manipulate and demand. Countries such as Indonesia, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, India, Guatemala and Bangladesh have all been so called “victimized” by Western businesses (Senser, 1997; Bartley & Child, 2014; Mezzadri, 2014).

Globalization and FDI have had a tremendous impact on sweatshops, but an even bigger effect on the governments of these countries. This paper seeks to touch on the ethical implications of sweatshops, review briefly the wages they receive, highlight the types of choices that are made, as well as delve into the influence of foreign governments on sweatshops. Furthermore, the Framing Theory will be used to better understand the government’s influence as well as understand the perspective of outsiders who observe the situation. The method utilized in this paper will be two in-depth interviews of individuals who are in developing countries where

sweatshops are prevalent. The purpose of this paper is to understand the influence governments of developing countries have on the sweatshops they control and monitor.

Literature Review

Sweatshops have been deeply rooted in the term “exploitation,” which can be explained as taking unfair advantage of someone based on their education level, socioeconomic status, or where they come from (Meyers, 2007; Snyder, 2008). Too broaden the spectrum, sweatshops do not only pertain to the garment and textile industries, but are also associated with toys, furniture, electronics, and footwear (Bartley & Child, 2014; Yu, 2015). Needless to say, to narrow the research, this paper will only be concerned with the garment, textile, and footwear industries. The mid-90s was when sweatshop issue became apparent around the world and when information was exposed by the Western media. The horrifying conditions the workers endured in conjunction with the treatment they received, was now known to many consumers (Guo, Hsu, Holton, & Jeong, 2012). For example, workers either male or female experienced low wages, dangerous working conditions, long hours, and degrading treatment (Powell & Zwolinski, 2012). However, women workers back then and today are more in demand than men. The reasons being are due to their nimble fingers, attention to detail, and obedience level (Chan & Siu, 2010). In addition, female workers are also more prone to be sexually assaulted and demeaned (Zwolinski, 2007).

The Ethics Behind Sweatshops

Another aspect of sweatshops which should not be overlooked is the ethical implications of them and their moral grounding. Risse and Wollner (2015) explained that exploiting somebody means “to take unfair advantage of her.” However, Zwolinski (2007) combatted this definition by saying those who work in sweatshops choose to do so. Also, Snyder (2008) quoted a simple argument from philosophers, which suggested that workers choose a specific job because it is better than the alternative option. In addition, Preiss (2014) did research to analyze the global

labor justice and economics of sweatshops, with the intent to recant the writings of Powell and Zwolinski (2012). He denotes that sweatshop workers deserve better wages, working conditions, and that the exploitation facet of the industry should be minimized. The work of Kant has been referred back to numerous times to understand if sweatshops are ethical or unethical industries. Meyers (2007) began his article by stating that Kant believes that humans should never use each other as a means but rather an end in itself. However, many who are against sweatshops sometimes have a misconception of the economy in these developing countries (Powell & Zwolinski, 2012). To illustrate this point, Preiss (2014) listed some reasons why economists believe sweatshops deliver a positive impact: sweatshops represent a natural stage in economic development, sweatshop workers freely accept those offers, and sweatshops are the best offers available.

Moreover, an important perspective in ethics is the utilitarianism perspective, which has been applied to the workers' overall treatment in sweatshops. If one considers themselves a utilitarian, then achieving happiness or pleasure for the majority is the ultimate wish (Preiss, 2014). This type of outcome is quite hard to apply to sweatshop workers because of the complexity of the situation they are in (Powell & Zwolinski, 2012). Attempts to make the majority of workers happy will have a tremendous strain on the economy, and then consequently the workers themselves (Preiss, 2014). Anti-sweatshop activists fight for the workers to gain a higher wage but do not always think rationally of the potential outcome (Meyers, 2007). They believe if the government allows for higher wages, the workers will be happier, but increases in wages could potentially force the government to fire many workers due to costs (Meyers, 2007).

Workers' Wages and Their Choices

Being paid an American wage is quite different than receiving a sweatshop worker's wage. Governments of each country create the standard minimum wage for all employees. Chan

and Siu (2010) wrote an article about the exploitation of Chinese workers in export factories. It is quite common in America to get paid hourly to set the basic minimum wage, however, Chan and Siu (2010) found out that most developing countries choose to pay workers monthly. In life, not everything is fair nor equal and for sweatshop workers, many more times than none, they are being treated unfairly. As mentioned before, there are many types of industries and many sweatshops within these industries, where workers do mundane and repetitive tasks. Chan and Siu (2010) discovered that workers in the garment and toy industries were being under-paid and excessively overworked. Specifically, those in the garment industry were getting paid monthly based off their piece rate; compared to their counterparts in the toy industry getting paid based off their time rate. The piece rate system is supposedly implemented to encourage workers to work quickly and efficiently, to make a higher wage (Chan & Siu, 2010). What is heartening about this situation is that these workers must work the minimum forty hours a week just to support themselves. Thus, working overtime is the only way they can work to support their families, but overtime pay can be even lower than within the normal work week (Chan & Siu, 2010). So why do workers choose to accept these types of conditions and treatment?

Zwolinski (2007) did research on “choice” concerning sweatshop workers and discovered two different types of choice: autonomy-exercising choice and preference-evincing choice. Briefly, autonomy-exercising choice defined by Zwolinski (2007) is the ability of an individual to choose or decide freely, regardless of the outcome or interference of others. However, if the decision made out of autonomy will hurt the individual or another, then interfering only makes sense. For example, if an individual openly announces his or her suicidal intentions, it would be expected for an external source to intervene. Sweatshop workers understand the conditions and accept them because of the needs greater than themselves. Zwolinski (2007) pointed out that sweatshop workers choose to work overtime to support their families or give their children an

education, not to spend the extra money on luxury items. The second type of choice noted was preference-evincing, which means exactly what it denotes, based off of certain preferences; one is convinced to choose the best one. In the case of sweatshop workers, they believe they have chosen autonomously the best choice among their preferences of work. Snyder (2008) quoted David Henderson who said, “You don't make someone better off by taking away the best of her bad options” (p. 2). Sweatshops may seem unethical, but for many of the workers, it is the best option economists believe for them to provide for their families.

Government Responsibility

Governments within countries have influence as to what goes on internally and externally. Roberts, et al. (2006) wrote a cover story on Chinese sweatshops and revealed the corruption among the American companies. Explicitly, the demands they place on governments of developing countries and the impossible quotas they expect the managers to enforce. A typical work week consists of forty hours, but many Chinese workers exceed sixty hours due to the high demand. Westerns companies want cheaper products for their consumers, but this then inadvertently forces labor laws to be ignored or minimized. In contrast, Risse and Wollner (2015) believe that companies have little authority in these developing countries. Rather, it is the country's governments who are to be accused. In 2013, a garment factory in Bangladesh collapsed and killed 1,129 workers in its wake. Many claim that the government knew of the deteriorating infrastructure but neglected to address the problem. Supposedly, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association prevented workers from voicing their concerns, and the outcome was poor safety concerns and neglect (Risse & Wollner, 2015). Garment exports in Bangladesh have accounted for 80% of the country's exports as reports showed in 2013 (Risse & Wollner, 2015). China is the only country trailing behind and with the collapse of the factory in Bangladesh; the workers' voices have been heard slightly.

Granted, the government could improve labor laws and combat the poor treatment of workers by enforcing codes of conduct (Yu, 2015). However, it is important for both companies and governments to enforce them. According to the International Labour Organization, 66% of codes address discrimination, 45% on child labour, 40% on wages, 25% on forced labour, and 15% on freedom of association and bargaining (Yu, 2015). Even if these codes are enforced, the motive is not to help the workers, but to help the already rich people in the developing countries. Furthermore, if the codes are enforced, there are little consequences if any, for those who carelessly neglect them (Yu, 2015). Barnes (2007) acknowledges that one cannot end sweatshops, but enforcing procurement laws may be the only way to protect the vulnerable workers from being exploited. Such laws that require state and governments to consider the health of the workers, providing vacation days, using nonpolluting vehicles, using recyclable material, and paying a fair wage. Apart from codes, governments are also responsible for monitoring the sweatshops in their countries. Even if it is the factory owners' direct responsibility to physically monitor, it is still up to the governments to be the ultimate overseers.

Roberts et al. (2006) touched on a very important topic concerning monitoring. In their research, they discovered that it was quite common for governmental officials to coach factory mid-management and workers to deceive Western auditors. For example, their research revealed that factory managers would create inaccurate and sometimes completely faulty payroll records and time sheets. Auditors would receive time sheets that showed that each worker had worked the appropriate hours and were paid accordingly. Another way the governments would cover up the conditions the workers endured was by making sure management and workers were given scripted responses. If auditors talked to management or interviewed the workers, they would respond with satisfactory answers the auditors wanted to hear. Auditors also reported finding hidden doors, which revealed another part of the factory that management did not want exposed.

These corrupt acts were found in Chinese factories but it should not be assumed they are not happening in other countries. This information was revealed through the honest bravery of the workers themselves (Roberts et al., 2006).

The Framing Theory

Gregory Bateson was credited for coining the term *frame* around 1955/1972 as it pertained to messages and one's perception of them (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Bateson used the analogy of a picture frame and stated that messages within the picture frame were relevant and those messages outside the frame should be ignored (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). The framing theory has been used mostly in the realm of news and media. Researchers have studied and utilized this theory to observe journalists and how they told their stories (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). For example, authors Guo, et al. (2012) used the framing theory to investigate the Foxconn suicides in China. Due to the heavy media attention Foxconn and Apple were receiving, many news outlets were covering the story. With that being said, these news outlets all captured different perspectives of the incident and so finding exactly what happened could become difficult.

The framing theory allows the researcher to garner different perspectives of the same issue, and see what was highlighted, distorted, or changed. It is not uncommon for local governments to frame a believable story when it comes to sweatshops and workers. No matter what codes, labor laws, or auditors are utilized to create better lives for the workers, it is up to the governments to enact ultimate authority. Many American citizens are aware of sweatshops, but due to the physical separation, the dependence on media is high when trying to understand the issue (Greenberg and Knight, 2004). Working at a sweatshop might be the only chance at a decent job in these countries, but framing their situations to the public as "all right" or "they are being treated fairly," is where the unethical situation occurs. That is why this paper seeks to understand the influence governments truly have and how outsiders or those trying to help the

workers view their injustice. Research has already shown that the U.S. demands have strained the local governments, but through the framing theory, the hope is to uncover how impactful a government's influence really is.

Methods

This research study employs a qualitative design due to the means in which the data was retrieved. One male and one female were chosen to be participants in this research study. They were sought out by a third party who was within the research group the researcher was involved in. Since sweatshops are normally located in developing world countries, it was best to seek out participants who were workers in the factories or worked closely with them. Both participants had good English proficiency and participated in email interviews. The biggest deterrent from not doing face-to-face interviews was access to strong enough internet bandwidth and availability to internet access. The first participant joined the study in early April and the second participant joined in late May. The two participants came from the same country and are involved in the same sweatshop factory. This coincidence was not done on purpose but rather occurred because of the third parties relationships. The interview guide had sixteen questions total, with the first five touching on their background with sweatshops. The remaining questions sought to answer the research questions and provide an overall picture of sweatshops in developing countries (See Appendix A).

Since the questions were emailed to the participants, they both consented through written agreement and assured the researcher they were at least eighteen years of age. There were no apparent time limitations because interviews were not done in person. If clarity was needed, the participant and researcher communicated by email. Access to the internet was never promised and thus receiving the responses back from the participants took some time. One participant was quite involved with the sweatshop issue and the other worked for a company that dealt healthy

related problems but on the side also voluntarily helped sweatshop workers. Since the interviews were not conducted in person, this allowed for more authentic and unpressured responses, which captured the true opinion and perspective of the interviewee. The responses were typed and so there was no need to transcribe them or translate them into English. Before this research could be conducted, it had to go through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. The research was approved by the board in April and research began in late April, to seek out participants.

RQ¹: What types of influence do governments have on locally run sweatshops?

RQ²: What would be some outcomes if sweatshops were completely removed from developing countries?

Findings

To grasp a better understanding of the government influence on sweatshops, the results came from participants personal accounts, which provide an exclusive perspective of the situation. Two participants were interviewed for this paper and both had unique insights to the questions asked. Participant 1 was unaware of any factory collapses in the past five years, while Participant 2 was aware and shared that governments did nothing to fix the damage and left workers unemployed. Participant 1 then added that the issues of sweatshops is known to the country and is used as a lesson in prioritizing factory workers' working environment, wages, and working hours. On the other hand, Participant 2 stated that politicians are only interested in them only during election time due to massive numbers of people found there. Politicians make promises to change things but once elections are over, they are forgotten. The next question asked to the participants was what ways have governments played a part in sweatshops? Participant 1 stated there is a thin line between a living wage, healthy, conducive working environment, and competitive wages as governments' workout investment incentives for investors. Participant 2 commented that the country's government she resides in has made the situation in sweatshops

worse by ignoring the conditions people work in. If they had stopped [the] harsh conditions there, they could have not escalated to where they are now.

Anti-sweatshop activists want to eliminate sweatshops or at least fight for better treatment of the workers. When the participants were asked what would be the outcome of removing sweatshops, Participant 1 retorted that removal of sweatshops would force their operators to engage in legit industries that would generate a lot of income for more workers. Thus, contributing to employment generation, poverty, reduction and economic growth and Participant 1 added that sweatshop operation is not recorded in GDP. Participant 2 added that a lot of people will be left with no jobs, and the economy of the country will be affected as the money made from the exports made in sweatshops will no longer be there. Since it is difficult and dangerous for sweatshop workers to speak out against their own injustice, there are many nonprofit organizations which vouch for them. Both participants work for or are aware of such organizations that strive for better treatment of sweatshop workers. For example, the Ministry Trade and Industry ensures that government adheres to International Labour organization codes in setting employment contracts as Participant 1 noted. Furthermore, Participant 2 added that many of the projects funded to confirm the safety and treatment of these workers are by the American government.

Since the American government has the power and money to help developing countries, it was interesting to note what Participant 1 had to say about how America is trying to help. American has a program called the African Growth and Opportunities Act which has granted developing countries quota free and duty free entry into the American market. As long as these countries adhere to its eligibility requirements such as improving rule of law, human rights, and respect for core labor standards. As the literature suggested, the governments of these developing countries do have control on the matters concerning sweatshops. Participant 1 stated that

governments can use its ministries and agencies to intensify its pre-and post-registration and licensing inspections of buildings of operation for factories. Licensing departments can be located in the ministries and the city councils which issue building, development, and construction permits. Participant 2 continued by saying that the government should also take more responsibility on running these things. For example, get into some sort of a partnership with the owners so they can be on watch at all times.

Moreover, despite the leaps to improve sweatshops, the industry has a long way to go. One of the last questions asked touched on where the participants see this issue of sweatshops in the next five years, better or worse. Participant 1 replied that it will be better but Participant 2 thinks the complete opposite. Participant 2 said worse and added that the situation in [these] buildings is not changing, and more people are living in poverty, hence are forced to work in those inhumane conditions. Again, since no one seems to be interested in the wellbeing of these people, the situation will just keep on getting worse. Furthermore, [the] factories are owned by outsiders who only came to exploit people through cheap labour; therefore are not really concerned about the wellbeing of the people, just their profits. In conjunction to this last question asked, it is also important to seek advice to figure out how to help these workers. Participant 1 said, shedding the light on consumers of the sweatshop products is an important issue which should be intensified. However, I think it should run concurrently with worker education on their rights. [For it] will put more pressure on governments to act on this issue more aggressively. Participant 2 remarked by saying, the issue of sweatshops has been overlooked for a very long time. Therefore, anyone who can shed light [on] it should not give up but work hard on it as many lives will be changed for better, if people were to take notice of how badly workers are treated there.

The framing theory worked well in this research study due to the participants involved. The questions were not framed by desire a specific response but rather were unobtrusive and allowed each interviewee to answer as they saw fit. It is interesting enough to note that both interviewees agreed that governments play a role but they disagreed on the progression of sweatshops in the next five years. Participant 1 said it will be improved but Participant 2 felt very strongly that the sweatshops she has encountered will not change in the next five years. The reasoning behind this was the fact that the buildings are not changing and more and more people are living in poverty. Framing a positive light on dismal or bleak situations are not out of the ordinary but rather expected. The interview questions allowed the interviewees to frame their own responses, which in turn supported the fact that sweatshops are not well-run and the governments are not doing much to improve conditions.

Discussion

Having a small sample size of two participants makes generalizing any data impossible, especially when they were from the same country and sweatshop factory. As the researcher, this fact was well known but finding participants for this particular study was difficult. However, even with two participants, it was quite interesting to see how different their responses and experiences were. It never really occurred to me that sweatshops are used as a political ploy to garner votes during election season. When Participant 2 wrote this as one of their responses, it reminded me of Kant and how we should not treat each other as a means. These politicians promise better conditions so the workers vote for them, since a high percentage of the population works in factories. But once elected, they do not follow through and the workers lives do not improve. Another finding to highlight is the statement given by Participant 1 and how sweatshops are not included in the gross domestic product (GDP). This was quite interesting because of the amount of revenue these factories generate for the country.

Furthermore, it is evident that the governments have a large influence on the operations within these factories but it is shocking how little they care about the individual workers. Both Participants 1 and 2 suggested that governments need to care more and be more proactive when it comes to making sure conditions and operations align with the given standards. For example, I was unaware that some of these countries have ministries and agencies, which have the ability to assist the factories. Participant 2 said that one way to improve conditions for the workers is if the governments and factory managers work together. This also shows that governments have the means to improve the conditions of the workers but somehow choose not to make it a priority. If governments don't want to make sure the workers are well taking care of, why not just remove the factories? Participant 2 made a good point by stating if factories were removed where she is from, it would make many people jobless and the economy would be very bad. On the other hand, Participant 1 believed it would force the government to find industries that helped the workers and their economy simultaneously.

The framing theory benefited this paper by providing a deep understanding and personal connection to the sweatshop issue apart from what the media has portrayed. Also, many of the literature that has been published does not choose in-depth interviews but depends on other means of collection. The literature used to write this paper was very beneficial, but having real personal accounts framed through their perspectives added to the understanding of sweatshops. The framing theory was useful because both participants came from the same location but provided completely unique responses. Their responses were so unique that many of did not show up in the previous literature. Once again, these findings only come from two perspectives and cannot be generalized to include the majority of governments and sweatshops.

Limitations

An important limitation to highlight in this study was only having two participants, but being able to capture the perspectives of a male and female, was a good outcome. Factory managers prefer females over males due to their obedience, docile fingers, and attention to details. Another big limitation to the study was not being able to conduct the interviews in person but having to depend on email responses. Since both participants were not working in the United States, one had to take into account the time differences of each. A factor that developed as the study continued was the priority and efficiency of the respondents. The study only had sixteen questions with the last eleven questions being focused on the sweatshop issue entirely. The participants were chosen at two different points during the study because it was hard to find them. One participant answered all questions at once while the other participant took several weeks to answer the questions. This could affect the study because one participant had all questions answered without the researcher having to remind them. While the other participant had to be continually reminded, which may mean the participant answered due to the persistence of the researcher. Also, the interviews were conducted via email, which means it was very difficult to ask follow-up questions to their responses because of the time difference and method.

Future Research

If this research was conducted differently, it would be interesting to choose another method or choose two methods. Choosing a method such as an ethnography would allow for proper immersion into the culture and situation of the workers. This method is very useful because it encourages the researcher to truly understand, feel, and observe the population in their natural setting. Doing research on sweatshops is very difficult if this method is picked because of the regulations the country and factories may have, but the data would be authentic and rich. If the researcher was familiar with the language or had a translator accompany them, using a short

survey conducted in person would also provide some useful data. The workers are not all well-educated so the questions would have to be simple enough for them to understand as well. For this current research, email interviews were best because of the situation and timing of the study but doing in-person interviews should be the most preferred. Triangulation is another great method to practice because it allows for more than one method to be used. By doing this, it provides the researcher with enough data to compare methods and findings, which will hopefully support the research questions. In addition, using two methods at once can reveal certain findings that may not have appeared if just one method was picked.

Moreover, using different methods can provide unique findings but delving into diverse topics can also accomplish the same. Based off this current research, new research could look into how sweatshops affect a developing country's gross domestic product (GDP). This could entail doing content analysis on the country of the researcher's choice and looking into its finances and economics. Another topic that could get attention for further research, are the types of American government-run organizations which are located in the developing countries that assist workers. One piece of advice the participants offered was to somehow educate the workers on their rights. This research could include personal interviews with the ministries and agencies and see how they assist the workers in educating them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, wanting to eradicate sweatshops from these developing countries may initially and potentially do more harm than good. Rather, one should take into account all facets of the developing country's situation and unique problems. Governments have immense power inside their own countries but as we have learned, they need to be more proactive with their external resources. Each worker has a choice to work within the factories or elsewhere but that does not mean their only best worst option has to treat them so poorly. The advice given by the

participants should be taken into account, especially the point where the workers themselves need to be educated on their own rights. Adjusting their wages may become difficult but as the literature revealed, possibly asking for more days off could become a better incentive and more plausible for the government to do. Participant 1 highlighted that many people know that sweatshops exist and as Participant 2 added, the conditions of the workers need to be known by all. This study focused on the government influence on sweatshops in developing countries and how the framing theory could be applied. However, there are multiple angles which can be applied to this research topic on sweatshops and this paper is just a stepping stone.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Government Influence on Sweatshops

Interview Guide:

Background-

1. How long have you been studying the sweatshop issue?
2. What key roles have you played?
3. What organizations have you been involved in?
4. Have you visited a sweatshop before?
5. What are some major projects you have worked on concerning sweatshops?

Issue-

6. In your opinion, what percentage of the countries income is received from sweatshops?
7. Since the horrible events of factories collapsing, what changes have you seen been implemented by the governments in these countries or ours?
8. How have sweatshops impacted the way the governments are run?
9. In what ways do you think the governments have played a part in sweatshops in developing countries?
10. If sweatshops were removed from these developing countries, what would be some outcomes you could foresee?
11. What ways have you or the organizations you have worked for reached out to these governments?
12. In what ways (if any) have you seen the American government reach out to the governments in the developing countries?
13. What procedures do you think the government can do to make a safer environment for the people working in these buildings?
14. How can Americans help shed light on the mistreatment of sweatshops workers in developing countries?
15. Where do you see the issues surrounding sweatshops in the next five years? Better or Worse?
16. If you could give a piece of advice to people who want to shed light on the injustice of sweatshops in developing countries, what would it be?