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Made by Us:

Young Women, Sweatshops, and the Ethics of Globalization

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On the night Li Chunmei died, there wasn't a single toy in sight. No Buzz Lightyear, no Pocahontas, no Minnie Mouse. The grinning stuffed characters that Li brought to life each day in China's Bainan Toy Factory weren't around to see her frail body rocking back and forth on the bathroom floor. Nor did they hear her coughing up blood. They were already on their way to Disney stores in America, waiting to be wrapped in brightly colored paper for the holiday season. It was Li's roommates who discovered her bleeding from the nose and mouth; they immediately called an ambulance, but her heart stopped before it arrived. Like me, Li was nineteen years old.

The district medical examiner in the industrial town of Songgang says he doesn't know the exact cause of Li's death. But there is talk. Friends and co-workers attribute it to *guolaosi*—an increasingly common phrase that means “over-work fatality” and generally applies to young laborers in China's booming sweatshop industry. After nearly four years of making Disney toys for shipment to America, it's as if Li's slender body finally decided to say “No: I cannot carry another heavy box of plastic eyeballs or velvet paws; I refuse to breath another gulp of hot factory air swirling with multi-colored dust; I will not last another 16-hour shift for the sake of \$1.92 in wages.”

And so, Li Chunmei's father traveled three days and nights from the peasant village of Xiaoshan to recover her lifeless body. He tried to follow his own advice to Li—a mantra he'd uttered half a decade ago as his daughter left their mountain hamlet for the sweatshops of Songgang: “It's bad luck to cry.” Since the funeral, he has returned to tending his scattered patches of wheat and rice, all the while hoping that *guolaosi* won't

circle back to claim his other daughter, 22-year-old Li Mei, who also left home for the factories. Li Mei harbors fears of her own, but there is little time to nurse them. No, she has work to do.

Close your eyes, stick out your finger, and spin the globe. Chances are, you'll land on one of the countless nations where goods destined for the U.S. are being produced with the help of young women's sweatshop labor. In an era when most American manufacturers have discovered the profit-boosting miracle of low-wage off-shore production, teenage girls are increasingly bearing the burdens of globalization while reaping relatively few of its tremendous rewards. Tragedies like Li Chunmei's no longer read like horror stories from a parallel universe; instead, they seem part and parcel of the ethical crisis plaguing our international corporate economy. Herein lies one of my generation's greatest dilemmas: as global trade opens up new opportunities for society's economic and social advancement, how can we ensure that its path is charted by ethical as well as financial imperatives?

If the developing world's toy industry is any indication, globalization's moral compass is in desperate need of repair. This December, as U.S. college students like me trek home for the holidays, three million toy workers in China alone—the vast majority of whom are young women like Li Chunmei—will be locked inside some 2,800 factories to produce the season's hot new toys in time for Hanukah, Christmas, and Kwanzaa. They will work 15 hours a day, 7 days a week, 30 days a month, while earning wages as abysmal as 12 cents an hour. Many will be required to handle toxic chemicals with their bare hands; some will be physically or sexually abused in the process.

Although China scrapes the very bottom of the sweatshop barrel, exploitative factory work marks a rite of passage for young women across the developing world. In Bangladesh, girls as young as 13 stitch caps for American universities like Cornell, Columbia, and Georgetown. In Nicaragua, young women sewing garments for Sears and J.C. Penney recently lost their jobs for demanding the right to unionize. In American Samoa, teenage girls producing clothes for Wal-Mart, Target, and other U.S. retailers were held as indentured servants in the Daewoosa factory—cheated of their wages, beaten, starved, and molested until the factory owner was detained for human trafficking. The depressing inventory of abuses goes on like Satan’s wish list to Santa.

Given all this, I am stunned by the mounting gulf between my daily reality and that of the average teenage girl in other corners of the world—places as distant as China and as close as Central America. Has globalization—touted as the great homogenizer—in fact rendered our lives unrecognizable to each other? Perhaps the only way to know is to ask, which is why I quickly embrace the chance to visit with Lydda Gonzalez.

When hip-hop superstar P. Diddy launched a new clothing line with the slogan “It’s not just a label, it’s a lifestyle,” I somehow doubt he had Lydda Gonzalez in mind. Lydda, a 19-year-old from Honduras, once sewed shirts for P. Diddy’s posh “Sean John” label for the paltry wage of fifteen cents apiece. Like Li Chunmei, she figured that sweatshop labor was her only hope of pulling her family out of poverty.

In 2002, while I was packing my bags for my freshman year of college, Lydda was starting her job with Southeast Textiles—a Honduran factory producing for Sean

John, Old Navy, Polo Sport, and other popular name brands. While I was busy attending history lectures and poetry seminars, she was enduring compulsory pregnancy tests, twelve-hour shifts six days a week, and mandatory unpaid overtime. While I was catching up on sleep over summer vacation, Lydda was staring at a pink slip; she and fourteen co-workers were fired from Southeast Textiles after lobbying for better working conditions.

Now, Lydda Gonzalez and I are fighting the wind on a harsh November evening in New Haven, carrying bags of grated cheese and pinto beans to a dinner lecture at Yale's Latino Cultural Center. Lydda shouldn't be toting groceries tonight, I know; she is one of the guests of honor. But, as she jokes in Spanish, *No es nada nuevo*: hard work, for her, is nothing new. Besides, there's a whole lot of food to transport; a big crowd of students and community members will soon gather to eat tostadas and listen as Lydda imparts her striking but sadly quotidian account of working in a maquiladora factory.

This blustery walk is my first moment alone with Lydda since she arrived at Yale in the afternoon with two other Honduran sweatshop workers and Charles Kernaghan, director of the National Labor Committee, a human rights group. The team of four has been traveling the U.S. in a gray van, visiting high school and college campuses in hopes of rekindling the student anti-sweatshop movement. Last week, Lydda and her cohorts Fabia Gutierrez and Martha Iris Lorenzo spoke at a crowded press conference in front of P. Diddy's soon-to-be boutique on New York City's Fifth Avenue, denouncing the appalling working conditions in Sean John factories. Tomorrow, they will share their testimonies before the U.S. Senate. But right now, in the wind that is blowing us

sideways and making us huddle close with elbows intertwined, Lydda is mine for a brief flash; the others have scurried ahead. There is so much to be asked.

What does she think of America? It is like *la luna, las películas, un sueño*: the moon, the movies, a dream. Is she scared to go home now that right-wing Honduran newspapers have labeled her a terrorist? She refuses to give in to fear; two hundred union members have promised to greet her at the Tegucigalpa airport. What do most girls our age do for fun in Honduras? See movies, go to the *discoteca*, hang out in the street. Does she have a boyfriend? Oh. Do *I* have a boyfriend? We blush.

I already know the more formal details of Lydda's biography. She recited them to a crowd of 70 attentive Yalies earlier this afternoon, and I'd read the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* profiles. I am aware that Lydda began her first job at age 11, working in a bakery. I know that she moved to Honduras's San Miguel Free Trade Zone when she was 17, hoping to find employment inside the maquiladora factories surrounded by tall metal gates and armed guards.

I understand that she was quickly hired by Southeast Textiles. That she sewed 190 Sean John shirts a day. That the only drinking water inside the factory often contained fecal matter. That her supervisor urged her to work faster with shouts of "Donkey," "Bitch," and worse. And the grand finale: that when she finally spoke up and asked to be treated with dignity, she was fired and blacklisted from the Honduran maquiladora industry.

But there is so much more to be known—things that newspaper articles and public testimonies can't divulge about years of sweat and quietly preserved dreams in a world with horizons half the size of my own. I notice it when we stop by my dorm room

to pick up the bags of groceries and rest for an instant between the afternoon lecture and the evening dinner event. Lydda and I begin chatting about our dream jobs, and she remarks with a sheepish smile, “I would have liked to be a writer.” “Me, too!” I respond, eager for common ground, not realizing until later the vast difference between her “I would have liked to be” and my “I hope to be.” I ask if she keeps a journal. “No, when I come home from work at night, my bed is my diary,” she replies somewhat cryptically. I want to ask more, but I realize we’re late for the dinner. We grab the groceries and run.

Charles Kernaghan, director of the National Labor Committee, has the first indignant words before the crowd at the Latino Cultural Center. His booming voice knows how to command attention; each sentence catapults from his lips like an exclamation point on steroids. He emphatically waves a gray Sean John shirt in the air as he hollers at wide-eyed Yalies: “These women started working when they were eleven years old! . . . Lydda made 15 cents for this \$40 shirt! That’s an enormous mark-up: DO THE MATH!”

Once Kernaghan has purged his fireball homily, Lydda walks slowly to the front of the room. “Mi nombre es Lydda Eli Gonzalez, y soy de Honduras. . . My name is Lydda Eli Gonzalez, and I am from Honduras.” The room falls silent. “I am 19 years old.”

Lydda, too, has learned the art of working a crowd. But her style takes the audience for a spin: if Kernaghan was thunderous, she’s as hushed and concentrated as lightning; if he flung his words like boomerangs, she places each sentence calmly before you in all its naked, unpretentious dreadfulness.

“My job is to attach sleeves to the shirts,” she explains. “There is a lot of dust in the air. . . You breathe it in, and you go into the factory with black hair and come out with hair that is white or red or whatever the color of the shirts we are working on.” She tells of being forbidden to talk to her co-workers, of being sexually harassed by supervisors, and of being searched by random male guards on the rare occasions when she was allowed to use the bathroom. Like any good organizer, Lydda finishes her testimony with an entreaty: “There is too much injustice in the Sean John factory, and that is why I came here. . . We sew your clothing. Please demand that the companies treat us with respect. Thank you.”

Next, Fabia Gutierrez strides to the front of the room—an undeniably sexy 45-year-old union leader wearing tight embroidered jeans and a fake leather jacket. A maquiladora worker for 19 years and now a seasoned labor organizer, she knows how to make the big links. She speaks heatedly of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), a trade agreement being negotiated between the U.S. and all of Latin America (except Cuba). If passed, the mammoth FTAA might unroll a red carpet for big business, encouraging footloose industries to scour the Americas in search of cheap wages and minimal labor regulations. “Right now, the multinational corporations are waging a campaign to wipe out the Central American labor movement to pave the way for the FTAA,” she concludes in animated Spanish. “We need your help to stop them.”

The tale of the toiling sweatshop worker has been told before, perhaps even to the point of cliché. Companies have been condemned; apologies have been delivered; “Codes of Conduct” have been nailed to factory walls. And despite it, the misery has continued. For that reason, the National Labor Committee selected these brave women

from thousands working in Honduran maquiladoras because they were ready to cry out for something bigger, something bolder. Lydda, Martha, and Fabia were ready to talk World War Three.

Most of the unsettled faces in the room tonight seem excited but overwhelmed by the prospect of their conscription. When it comes time for Q & A, hands spring up with inquiries about how students can take up arms. “First of all,” Charles Kernaghan commands, “realize that there are 15.6 million college students in the U.S. today, and that you have \$268 billion dollars a year of purchasing power.” In other words, aim and fire with your pocketbooks. “We’re not pansies,” Kernaghan says, drawing a few laughs. “This is guerrilla warfare.”

But Lydda soon chimes in. Her quiet words remind us that the military analogy is more than a cute rhetorical flourish. When she returns to Honduras next week, she explains, she will likely face intimidation and even death threats. Who knows what the Honduran newspapers will call her next; they’ve already tagged her a “terrorist of the maquila,” a liar, and a traitor to her country. But Lydda won’t be turning back. Next week, she’ll ask to be reinstated at the Sean John factory.

It’s clear that we, too, are needed on our home turf: to write letters to Sean John and other companies, to raise consciousness, and—perhaps most significantly—to throw a wrench in the upcoming Miami negotiations of the FTAA and other trade deals negotiated without young women like Lydda or Li Chunmei in mind.

With that rally cry, their talk is suddenly done. People rise in a standing ovation. Some jot down notes on their hands or loose scraps of paper. The room echoes with that

strained sense of the in-between: should we cry or should we cheer? Maybe both? As I begin folding chairs, I find myself wondering how long Lydda's words will fill our heads and hearts.

Soon, we've reached departure time. Lydda grabs my hand. "Continue your struggle," she says, stealing the words from my mouth. I'm not quite ready for her to go. I had promised to play her P. Diddy's latest album; she'd mentioned that, until she came to the U.S., she had no idea whom she was sewing shirts for (that is, until Mr. Kernaghan described P. Diddy as "the ex-boyfriend of J-Lo"). I had meant to ask her about her family and her friends, and maybe to tell her about mine.

Instead, we hug. She descends the steps of the Latino Cultural Center into the unfamiliar cold, turning back to wave.

When I return to my dorm that evening, the women's stories weave in and out of my mind. I sit on the couch with my roommate, and we talk about the otherworldliness of having Lydda, Martha, and Fabia in our room just five hours ago, drinking milk and chatting. We feel like fish in dirty water as we use a National Labor Committee report to take an inventory of our suite:

1 Nike T-shirt: Made by company that employed Martha for five cents a shirt.

1 Adidas soccer ball: Made by company notorious for anti-unionism, low wages, and abuse of young women workers.

1 Barbie doll, legs missing: Made in China by Mattel, in factory much like Li Chunmei's.

Average worker age = 14.

2 pairs New Balance sneakers: Chinese workers there are paid 18 cents an hour and forced to live in crammed 12-person dorm rooms.

At some point the list-making gets old. The message is clear. Somehow we've become submerged in a system that genuinely repulses our ethical sensibilities. The 1990's may have been the decade of the depressing sweatshop exposé, but I finally see why the past few years have rendered talk of sweatshops blasé. If we can't untangle ourselves from the corporate icons we depend upon, then the only way to maintain our sanity, too often, is to close our eyes.

My roommate reminds me that Lydda didn't come here to stir up guilt. She came with a mission and finished her talk with a plea: "We need people in the streets." I get online and book an \$89 Jetblue flight.

It's settled. I am going to protest the free trade negotiations in Miami.

Three police helicopters hover above our heads like giant, genetically modified mosquitoes. Bright spotlights slice through the dark as throngs of activists hustle in and out of the abandoned warehouse that's been reclaimed as the "Convergence Center"—a headquarters in downtown Miami where people from around the country can gather to plan direct actions against tomorrow's Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting.

This is a motley crew. Some are here because they believe the FTAA will wreak havoc on the environment—ushering the destruction of rainforests, the patenting of biodiversity, and the production of genetically engineered crops. Others are here because they fear the FTAA will enshrine investor's rights at the expense of American workers, causing massive job losses as more manufacturing plants are shipped south of the border. Still others have come out of anger that the treaty is being negotiated in secrecy, by undemocratic institutions that all but ignore the voices of civil society.

I am here because the moral battle over sweatshops is here. In its current incarnation, the FTAA is structured to drastically accelerate corporate globalization across the Americas—largely at the expense of young women my age. An epic free trade treaty that threatens to repeat the bloopers of past trade agreements on a larger scale, the FTAA will invite U.S. industries to set up factories in Latin America that have virtually no accountability to labor and human rights standards.

Many neoliberal economists rationalize this system of exploitation, arguing that “Sweatshops are better than no shops, right?” They might even point out that Lydda Gonzalez’s earnings at Southeastern Textiles surpassed Honduras’s prevailing minimum wage of 55 cents an hour by more than ten cents.

Yet relativism doesn’t erase the fact that 65 cents an hour is still not a salary of survival. It doesn’t mitigate the degradation Lydda and many other young women confront daily: needing special permission to use the bathroom; being sexually harassed by supervisors, and facing anti-union intimidation from managers. Nor does it exonerate U.S. consumers from our duty to demand more of the multinational corporations whose products fill our closets and deck our bodies, as well as from the trade negotiators who purport to represent our will.

I have good company in which to raise my voice against the FTAA. Hundreds of activists are already funneling into the Convergence Center to meet fellow protesters and to brainstorm creative acts of civil disobedience. Thousands more are expected to fill the streets tomorrow.

As the evening goes on, the whine of the helicopters reminds us that whatever we are planning for tomorrow, the police are busy preparing for it. Clearly, the stakes are

high in this fight over the future of globalization. Tomorrow, the goal of more than 2,500 riot cops will be to create the illusion, contrived as it may be, of business as usual. The goal of the direct action protesters, on the other hand, will be to create crisis—a loud, media-savvy, in-your-face state of emergency. As well-known labor activist Lisa Fithian puts it, “I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible.”

After hearing Li Chunmei’s chilling story and listening to Lydda Gonzalez’s testimony less than one week ago, I have a slightly different take on things. My goal is not to *create* crisis—it already exists in abundance, as Lydda can attest. My hope is that the thousands of us marching together will be able to *unveil* it, to *make it visible* as a first step toward rendering global sweatshops untenable. The moment globalization enabled so many of the wealthy and powerful to detach from the realities of exploitation—shipping the abuses thousands of miles away—was also the moment that sweatshops became, to them, morally tolerable. My belief is that the reverse will also prove true: the moment that the sad fact of sweatshops explodes in the streets—half carnival, half apocalypse—could be the moment that young women like Li and Lydda are finally recognized as fully human.

The next day starts pure circus. I can understand why the media might overlook the serious motivations driving many of the protestors; it’s easy to get lost in the whirl of drums, chants, songs, and even a conga line. I begin to explore, weaving in and out of speeches, heated political conversations, and guerrilla theater performances under the hot sun.

Suddenly, the spirit of carnival disappears and everyone is frantically running, though we're not quite sure why or where. We come face-to-face with a line of riot cops in front of the massive wire fence separating protesters from trade ministers. I'm brought back to Earth, back to the enormous moral issues that are on the line today. I begin to feel claustrophobic. It looks as if a few people are getting arrested thirty feet in front of me. *What am I doing here?* I find myself asking.

An answer comes zipping back almost reflexively as I hear someone shout, "Corporate greed kills!" Several years ago, such a cry might have struck me as an overzealous cliché, but today it does not. I think of how Lydda's supervisor once screamed, "Hurry up! Do you know how many girls are lined up in China who would die for this work?" I remember Li Chunmei, who proved him right.

And, for a moment, I grasp the bigger picture. Lydda now has returned to the Southeast Textiles factory in Honduras to sew and fold as I chant and march. She has plans to start a union and believes that the other workers will join her. But she also knows that the battle for young women's rights in the sweatshops cannot be won in a single locale—especially in an age of transnational capital. She has challenged people like me who sit within the belly of the corporate beast, and I am here to answer.

This is not a movement that will be stamped "Made in the USA." The tag won't read "Made in Honduras" or "Made in China." Instead, the profound battle over the ethical future of globalization will be assembled by young women everywhere—those fighting the sexual harassment of their supervisors, those refusing to handle toxic chemicals with their bare hands, those leading the struggle for unionization, and those rallying against unfair trade deals. It's a movement that will feature girls bent over

sewing machines *and* university computer screens. It will harness our sweat and sorrow for the sake of human rights and social progress.

And, if we do it right, our struggle will raise the ghost of Li Chunmei and the dreams of Lydda Gonzalez into the same blue sky our daughters will inherit.

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