Sweat Shop Fashion show

Sexy, flashy, ugly truth

BY JAY CLEARY

Camera flashes, runway models, sexy music and flashy clothes usually characterize the typical fashion show — but this past week's Sweat Shop Fashion Show in the Green room of the Dalhousie Student Building put it in a disturbing perspective. These were not runway fashions from Paris, London or New York. Rather, they were clothes seen on the streets of Halifax and in the halls of Dalhousie. The glamour and sex appeal were definitely presented, but the glitz of fashion was brutally over-shadowed by an ugly truth; the fashions presented were made using sweat-shop labour.

A sweatshop is a workplace in the apparel industry where workers are subject to extreme exploitation, including poor working conditions, arbitrary discipline, and the absence of a living wage or benefits. This phenomenon is becoming more common in the 'global economy.' Corporations can now trade between countries freely with little or no restrictions and seek to out-source manufacturing to areas where labour costs are lower. They often look to use labour in countries with the lowest wages, poorest employee rights laws, and most lax environmental regluations.

Garments made by Levi's, Tommy Hilfiger, The Gap, Guess, The Hudson Bay Company, Nike, Adidas, Ralph Lauren and even Disney graced the runway, as representatives of the worst of this industry which profits from the unfair treatment of workers and disrespect of the environment.

Oxfam, a sustainable development organization, hosted the fashion event. They are a international non-governmental organization dedicated to fighting poverty and related injustices around the world. The goal of Sweat Shop Fashion Show was inform the public about the intolerable situation of exploited workers and the realities of the global economy. The presenters were graphic in their description of the working conditions in the garment companies, with stories of unbelievable below poverty line wages, worker abuse, child labour, and over-crowded employee dormitories. These companies have been employing slave labour workers in 'developing countries' and surprisingly also maintain sweatshop facilities in North America.

The sweatshop workers here and abroad are primarily females between the ages of 16 to 25. In North America, these sweatshop facilities exploit newly immigrated women who may have few opportunities for employment. The conditions here are remarkably similar to those which workers experience abroad, with employees threatened with firing if they speak out against the injustices. However, the violations go far beyond this overseas. For example, in some Mexican and Central American plants, women are given Depo-Provera shots as a precondition for employment to prevent pregnancy and menstruation. This allows the company to increase productivity by cutting down on, not only maternity leave, but even bathroom break time. In many places, if a woman becomes pregnant or if she refuses to submit to the shot, she is immediately fired — a clear violation of human rights which goes primarily unnoticed.

The most disturbing aspect of the sweat-shop phenomenon is that these companies launch incredible expensive advertising campaigns. Tommy Hilfiger, Gap and Nike spend billions of dollars a year on marketing campaigns targeted to promote class structure and sex-appeal. These companies charge premium prices for their slave labour goods. In fact only 1.3 percent of retail price of a Nike sneaker, reflects the actual cost of the labour. These companies could pay decent wages to these workers instead they spend millions of dollars on campaigns that are directly aimed to play on emotions, to instilling feelings of ina lequacies, trying to make people feel like their product will fill the void.

What can you do? Use your consumer power. Don't support companies that exploit workers and are trying to exploit you. Tell people who are wearing labeled clothes what industry they are supporting: Slave Labour. Realise that consumers must take responsibility for their buying actions to not perpetuate this type of activity. Boycott organizations. Seek alternatives. Buy clothes from local merchants or buy used clothes. A small number of wealthy people created this situation that has allowed sweatshops to thrive, if consumers can work together and spread the message to make ethical consumer choices, we can dismantle it.
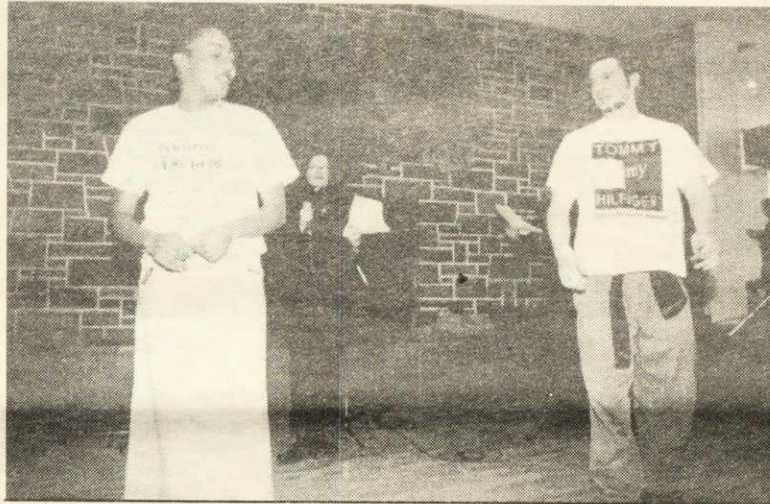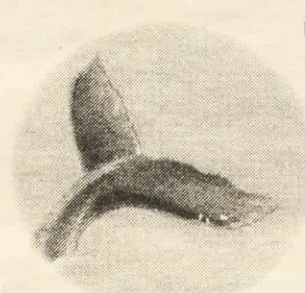

photos by Robin Kuniski

"If you assume that there's no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, there's a chance you may contribute to making a better world. That's your choice."
— Noam Chomsky