

Rana Plaza – Spotlight on Bangladesh

'How do you think that happened? On price pressure. Because of relentless demand for cheap-as-possible prices someone cuts corners. We as consumers are largely insulated from that. We move on. But these are other people's lives, other people's livelihoods and we in the relatively rich society need to understand that.' Sir Stuart Rose, CEO, Marks and Spencer, 2004 – 2010

Cheap as Chips!

The arrival of Primark on virtually every British high street brought fashion within the reach of the many. No shop does fashion faster or cheaper than Primark. Prices are unbelievably low – with t-shirts regularly selling for £1.50. Since the turn of the 21st century fashion prices have gone down, not up, with significant reductions prompted by competition and resulting in the birth of 'disposable clothes'. Imagine - guilt-free shopping for a top costing £5, worn once or twice and thrown away. It sounds futuristic, but is happening all over the country in many homes every week. That adds up to a lot of bargains and happy, on-trend fashionistas.

However, our obsession for everything to be cheap, cheap, cheap may heap unbearable, and at times, tragic costs on others. How often do we think beyond liking a particular garment and wanting to buy it, to considering who made it and the conditions they work under? What are the key global issues resulting from the clothes industry; what are the implications for world development and what can be done?

The global 'rag trade'

Bangladesh is being transformed by the clothing industry. It ranks in the top ten countries to export clothes – from budget fashions to exclusive brands. From the 1700s the region has been renowned world-wide for textiles, such as Bengal muslin. Today, much of Bangladesh's economy is built on clothing. Yet, it is an industry notorious for low wages, poor working conditions and sweatshop conditions.

An accident that should never have happened?

On 24 April 2013 the huge 8 storey commercial building called Rana Plaza in Dhaka, the mega-city capital of Bangladesh, collapsed. The building contained clothing factories, a bank, apartments, and several other shops. The shops and the bank on the lower floors immediately closed after cracks were discovered in the building. Warnings to avoid using the building were ignored by the clothing factories with tragic consequences. Garment workers were ordered to return that fateful day and the building collapsed during the morning rush-hour. The tragedy resulted in 1129 deaths, over 2500 injured people and gave the whole textile industry a wake-up call. Rana Plaza supplied well-known brands such as Primark, Matalan and Bonmarché. Whilst Primark have paid compensation, the others are still in talks.

A dangerous industry...

Although Rana Plaza is considered to be the deadliest garment-factory accident in history, as well as the deadliest accidental structural failure in modern human history, unfortunately it is not at all a one-off. Many workers in clothes factories in Bangladesh, and other production countries, face dangerous conditions. Fire is the greatest threat of all. In November 2012, a devastating fire at the Tazreen Fashions factory killed at least 112 workers and injured many others. Smaller fires or fire-related incidents have been reported at a rate of more than six per month, with over 50 deadly fires in Bangladesh's factories in the last year alone. Death tolls are worsened by illegal practices such as locked gates and lack of fire safety certification. Some buyers have a priority list with price and delivery times at the top and safety at the bottom. Sub-contracting complicates the situation further, with attempts to improve safety and working conditions being obfuscated and avoided.

Clean clothes?

Almost a year on from the Tazreen Fashions and Rana Plaza disasters, the Clean Clothes Campaign is taking steps to organise meetings aimed at providing compensation to survivors and the families of those killed. Reports from the ground indicate that many workers and families are facing desperate situations as they are unable to pay medical bills, rent, or afford food and daily expenses. Brands that have been invited to attend these meetings include Benetton, Mango, Walmart, The Walt Disney Company and international agent Li & Fung, along with UK companies Primark, Matalan, Edinburgh Woollen Mill and Bonmarché. All of these brands had orders placed at factories located in the Rana Plaza building or at Tazreen Fashions. Talks continue...

Ethical Trading

Ethical trade means that retailers, brands and their suppliers take responsibility for improving the working conditions of the people who make the products they sell. Most of these workers are employed by supplier companies around the world, many of them based in poor countries where laws designed to protect workers' rights are inadequate or not enforced. Companies with a commitment to ethical trade adopt a code of labour practice that they expect all their suppliers to work towards. Such codes address issues like wages, hours of work, health and safety and the right to join free trade unions.

Nearer to home than you might think....

There are about 1 million home-workers in the UK and they face problems of their own. Skilled machinists making clothes for many high street companies are paid as little as £2.25 an hour, far lower than the legal minimum wage. An isolated and pressured job, many women are working in this way due to lack of access to affordable childcare or the language skills for the regular workplace. Imagine how they feel when they see something they have made selling in the shops for £100.

Do you mend your clothes?

In the UK 216,000 tonnes of clothing were sold in 2003 and this is set to rise to 403,600 tonnes by 2020. The low cost of clothes hides the true cost of production and leads consumers to discard relatively quickly the things we used to keep for years. This throw-away culture means that the UK Department of Trade estimates that as many as 80% of new products, such as tissues, nappies, cameras and barbecues are discarded after a single use. Clothes are rapidly joining these other disposable goods. In the UK women's clothing prices have fallen by a third in the past ten years, largely attributed to the exploitation of female labour in factories in the global south. Relating this back to Bangladesh, workers who sew fabrics for budget chains and are paid just 6p an hour, totalling £20 a month for an 80 hour week, which is only 36% of the estimated living wage locally.

Up-cycling

Up-cycling is becoming increasingly popular among groups and individuals concerned about climate change. Recycling is great but it requires energy and resources to collect, sort and process unwanted items and waste. Up-cycling is an even greener way of recycling – you find a new purpose for your unwanted items rather than disposing of them.

No easy solutions...

The supplier companies for the high street retailers are supposed to conform to the industry Codes of Conduct stipulating working hours and safe working conditions. But very cheap clothes are produced by breaking these rules in a number of ways. The Bangladesh Solidarity Centre gathers evidence showing that many suppliers frequently run a double book system, with one book of working hours for the retailer and another with the real hours worked. Some retailers placing large orders pressure suppliers for delivery times that as a consequence create conditions where the rules are broken. Turn-around times on a nod and wink – and complicit Western retailers.



Learning in a global context

Children are entitled to learn in a global context. They encounter world views from their families, cultures and communities. A school curriculum, set in a global context, deepens their understanding and engagement with the complexities of that world. Teaching about **Clothing** requires teachers to be familiar with global issues that affect all our lives and to impart knowledge, skills and values that will equip children to live and be active in an interdependent, globalised world.

Real, relevant, current issues

The topic of **Clothing** links to pupils' daily lives. Ethical consumption requires us all to develop new ways of thinking, acting and living for a sustainable, equitable future. Understanding where the goods we consume come from, how they are made and conditions and lives of the people they connect us to, contributes to good global citizenship and taking responsibility for our own consumer choices. Learning about clothes gives purpose to work across the curriculum with rich data and real-life scenarios around themes of consumerism and the power consumers have to effect change. It opens up debate around alternative ways to tackle extreme poverty and inequality and offers differing perspectives on poverty and wealth.

Social justice, not charity

Fundraising campaigns that aim to evoke sympathy may instil feelings of guilt, with limited educational value. Encouraging children to research and question global issues helps them understand that there are more effective ways for governments and people to achieve a more sustainable and equitable world than charity

Broaden perceptions, counter stereotypes

No country is uniformly rich or poor: inequality exists within, as well as between countries, including the UK. There is much to be learnt from others, whatever their situation. Media coverage of people and places may reinforce common stereotypes. Adverts and images can imply dependency and uniform poverty in southern countries, especially in the diverse continent of Africa.

Curriculum planning

Thinking critically about Clothes

In 2013, 1129 died and 2,515 were injured when Rana Plaza, an unstable eight story block in Bangladesh, which housed a clothing factory, collapsed. The industry promised to change. Many thousands of garment factories are built to supply our high streets with cheap clothes. Garment workers are trying to improve working conditions. Consumers can support them by using purchasing power to encourage retailers to place pressure on suppliers to improve working conditions. The more consumers question, campaign and demand, the more retailers feel they must pay attention.

With this in mind, consider these questions:

Self-reflective questions:

Focus - what do I think about this?

Why do I think like that? To what extent am I open to changing my point of view?

- ~ What do you consider when buying clothes?
- ~ Do you ever consider the conditions under which your clothes have been made?
- ~ What does it have to do with you personally?
- ~ Do you have responsibilities as a consumer?

Group Dialogue questions:

Focus - what do other people think about this?

How can I find different perspectives?

Analyse assumptions, implications and contradictions? And how can I engage with complexity, conflict, uncertainty and difference?

Discuss these questions with others:

- ~ What do you think consumers should consider when buying clothes or products?
- ~ How can consumers know the origin of what they buy?
- ~ When wages are so low that people have to work extremely long hours to put food on the table, is there free choice?
- ~ Do you know of any local examples of exploitative employment practices?
- ~ Organisations, such as Labour behind the Label, liken conditions in the clothing industry to modern day slavery. Do you agree?
- ~ What responsibilities do Western retailers have for making sure their suppliers abide by the codes of conduct? What should the penalties be?

Literacy, Language and Communication

- ~ debate the issue of Fairtrade cotton and clothing, articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions for 'throwaway culture clothes' vs. labels with ethical policies;
- ~ learn how to be critical consumers by critically investigating the language of advertising that tells us to buy products yet hides the conditions under which they are made and the environmental impact

Physical

- ~ After a study of the conditions for some clothing workers, groups of pupils plan and perform a contrasting dance or performance that shows scenes from a fashion show catwalk juxtaposed with a factory scene where the garments may have been produced

Personal, Social, Health, Citizenship and Economic Education

- ~ Pupils develop their sense of social justice and moral responsibility and begin to understand that their own choices and behaviour can affect local, national or global issues;
- ~ They know about rules and laws that protect us, including The UN Rights of the Child; developing their ideas about what is right and wrong, what is just and fair, and the work of social justice organisations such as the Fairtrade movement;
- ~ Pupils undertake enterprise activities, for example by having upcycle events where pupils and adults can trade and exchange clothes or other items.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- ~ research historical dress from a variety of cultures and if possible, through school library services or local museums, visit, borrow and try some on, investigating the significance of styles, designs and fabrics;
- ~ examine different kinds of religious clothing, are able to name the item and which religion it might be associated with;
- ~ use locational knowledge to research which countries are the major suppliers of British clothing by surveying labels in their garments and at home.

Creative

- ~ bring in an old item of clothing to be given a design makeover using tie dye, embellishments and fabric pens, any that are too small can be redesigned into bags;
- ~ investigate the fabrics, patterns and designs of different cultures e.g. Adinkra

Mathematical, Scientific and Technical

- ~ play an adapted version of The Trading Game to consider how resources are unequally distributed and produce paper T-shirts instead of rectangles;
- ~ compare the prices of fairly traded school uniforms against the cheaper brands, and present their finding through ICT to decision makers in their school and parents;
- ~ learn how to repair clothes simply- i.e. sew on buttons, use simple stitches to hem.

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