

Fashion Victims

Be **Vocal**

Uzbekistan



A Common Thread

The clothing that fills our wardrobe passes through a vast and complex supply chain as it travels from dirt to shirt. The primary raw material present in much of our clothing is cotton, an agricultural crop with a very checkered past.

For two-hundred years, the United States has been the undisputed leader of the global cotton industry, completely dominating the foreign export market. Whilst this is an admittedly impressive feat, it is important to acknowledge that American cotton industry was

first built on the backs of African slaves.

Up until 1807, when the importation of human beings was outlawed in the US, slaves were imported in horrifically large numbers for the cultivation of American crops. Often, it's all too easy to think of this sort of exploitative practice as a distant (if shameful) period of humanity's history. Centuries separate us from such atrocities and the passing of time has given us a false sense of indifference. History is exactly that: history. And instead of learning from it as we ought, we simply shake our heads and thank our lucky stars

that we live in a different world today.

But how different is it really?

Sadly, forced labour is a common thread in the cotton industry and one which ultimately continues to be perpetuated by the consumer desire for cheap clothing.

Cottoning on

Child and forced labour would be devastating concerns in any scenario, but in Uzbekistan, the fact that these practices are enforced by a corrupt and dictatorial Government makes the issue even more abhorrent.



Uzbekistan

The history of child labour in the Central-Asian nation is such that its cotton industry has become an area of global humanitarian concern and advocacy. In protest of the country's use of child labour during harvest time, many major fashion brands and notable companies pledged to ban the use of Uzbekistani cotton in their products.

In 2008, responding to this international criticism, the Uzbekistani Government ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age for Employment.

While this move is a clear indication that the Government is not immune to the pressure it has come under as a result of continuing advocacy on these issues, it has done little more than shift the burden of exploitation from one vulnerable group to another.

Cut from the same cloth

Although the IOL has been

pleased with the gradual progress that Uzbekistan has been making in its bid to eradicate child labour, the reality is that state led exploitation continues to be a major issue.

The bleak outcome of a reduction in the child labour force has been a consequent upswing in the percentage of the adult Uzbekistani population engaged in forced labour.

In previous years, public service organisations such as schools, hospitals and local administrations had been required to send up to 16% of their employees to pick cotton at harvest time. In 2014 this percentage spiked radically due to new government imposed quotas, obligating such organisations to send 30%-60% of their staff for the entire length of the harvest period and in some documented cases, 80% of the staff from a single organisation were sent.

It goes without saying, that this kind of practice critically undermines the ability of such public service organisations to

function. In one reported case, a medical clinic in the Khorzem region lost a doctor and twelve nurses for the duration of the 2014 cotton harvest, leaving the clinic to be run by a single doctor and a single nurse.

Uzbekistani public service organisations are left with little other choice than to operate at this diminished capacity, given that their employees are coerced into complicity by a corrupt government which controls "every aspect of the national cotton industry". And it's not just public service employees that are being coerced into joining the cotton picking labour force. University students are also being intimidated under threat of expulsion.

Throughout Uzbekistan, “people are forced or coerced to pick cotton under threat of penalty such as loss of social benefits payments, loss of employment, loss of utilities and other public services, social exclusion, fines, administrative harassment, and criminal prosecution”.

Unsurprisingly, conditions do not improve once at the harvest.

There are daily picking quotas to be met (60-70kg for adult workers, 50-60kg for college students) and upwards of 10 hour work days to be contended with. For workers who are unfortunate enough to live a good distance from the cotton field, temporary housing is provided. The housing itself is frequently unheated and often “crowded, and unsanitary, with many workers being housed in garages, unused farm buildings, or local schools”.

It is also obvious that work safety is a major issue, with the 2014 harvest recording a higher than usual incidence of injury and death. In one case, a cotton farmer committed suicide after being ridiculed and threatened over his inability to meet the farm’s quota. While workers do receive payment for their labour,

it is nominal at best, and any earnings are usually diminished by “fines for failure to meet the quota, for cotton evaluated to be of lower quality, and the price of food, housing, transportation or other costs”.

A continuing issue

Despite the decrease in the use of child labour for the Uzbekistan cotton harvest, it has not yet been eradicated completely. In many cases older teenagers, from 15-18 years of age, are still being employed at harvest time. Furthermore, toward the end of the 2014 harvest season, children in some regions were employed by the local authorities to ensure that the state set quotas for harvest were still met, a clear indication of the heavily embedded belief that reaching quota is of more importance to the government than the enforcement of any new laws.

A perpetuating cycle

While “the systemic use of forced labour [in Uzbekistan] has resulted in institutionalised harassment, extortion and deaths”, it is imperative that we recognise that this is not simply a national problem. The symptoms may be contained at a state level, but it is impossible for the rest of us to entirely shirk responsibility for the underlying cause.

The practices of the rich and powerful are still stitching up the efforts of the most vulnerable. The world price for cotton has been in steady decline for the past few years, lowering the income and threatening the livelihoods of many producers in the developing world. Adding further pressure are US Government subsidies, which shield American farmers from the volatility of global cotton prices. These subsidies enable the US to export cheaply, depressing the price for cotton producers in some of the poorest regions of the world, leaving them unable to compete with their richer American counterparts.

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