

Garment workers' rights are women's rights: Suggestions for future studies on support for socially responsible businesses

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In 1995 in Beijing, China Hillary Clinton proclaimed, "Human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights" in her speech to the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women. This quote was widely discussed in the media and brought to the forefront of many peoples' minds during the previous election as Secretary Clinton ran for President. The fervor of the notion of the first female president contrasted with the offensive remarks by the other candidate inspired a resurgence in the women's movement. Women marched in the streets around the world on January 21 and again on March 8, International Women's Day, to stand up for their rights. Design houses such as Missoni, Prabal Gurung, and Dior campaigned for equality on the runway in multiple cities this winter. There is a renewed focus, not only in this country but also globally, about the rights, responsibilities, and roles of women.

At the same time, 80% of the garment workers around the world are women, and they continue to be subjected to verbal and physical abuse as well as unsafe working conditions (Clean Clothes, 2013). The current literature has investigated factors that increase the likelihood of consumers supporting socially responsible businesses, yet no extant study has explicitly framed sweatshops as a women's issue. Therefore, the purpose of this conceptual paper is to propose future research studies framing garment workers' rights as women's rights to yield greater support for socially responsible businesses.

Results from previous studies support this proposition. Findings suggest that consumer support for socially responsible businesses is more strongly influenced by an emotional response to the worker conditions (i.e., concern) rather than a cognitive acknowledgement of the issues. For example, while Dickson (2000) found that knowledge about apparel industry issues was related to increased support for socially responsible businesses, Shen, Wang, Lo, and Shum (2012) found that compared to other factors, knowledge of sweatshops had the least impact on support, and Pookulangara, Shephard, and Mestres (2011) demonstrated that knowledge negatively influenced support for socially responsible businesses. Instead, factors such as concern about sweatshops and beliefs about foreign industry (Pookulangara et al., 2011; Shen et al., 2012), and attitudes toward social consequences of sweatshops and integrity (Phau, Teah, and Chuah, 2015) positively influenced consumer support for socially responsible businesses. Therefore, one way to make garment worker's rights a more personally relevant issue to consumers is to frame it as a women's issue.

The theoretical foundation for this proposition is the construal-level theory of psychological distance. Extant studies on factors that increase support for socially responsible businesses use the more abstract term *garment workers* (i.e., a higher-level construal). The construal-level theory of psychological distance suggests that focusing on the fact that the vast majority of garment workers are *women* (i.e., a concrete, lower-level construal) shortens the

social and psychological distance and increase consumers' involvement in the message (Troe and Liberman, 2010). Previous research supports this notion, as consumers preferred garment hang tags with a concrete description of how a garment was sustainable (e.g., materials used) over hang tags with the abstract term environmentally-friendly (Hyllegard, Yan, Ogle, and Lee 2012).

Framing garment workers' rights as women's rights is justified for a number of reasons. First, the heightened focus on the rights of women presents an opportunity to gain support for garment workers' cause. Next, women have shown higher concern for sweatshop issues than men. Dickson (2001) found that women were more likely than men to use a no sweat label. Women were also more likely than men to seek information about socially responsible business practices on garment hang tags, read information printed on hang tags, and to use this information to guide their purchase decisions (Hyllegard et al., 2012). Finally, as women make 70-80% of the purchase decisions in the household, it make sense to appeal to them.

Future directions would be to conduct qualitative and quantitative studies based on this proposition and, based on results from the studies, implement a "Garment workers' rights are women's rights" campaign on a large scale. Anti-sweatshop scholars have stated, "Organizing consumers may prove to be the catalyst for better regulation in the textile and apparel industries" (Pookulangara et al., 2011, p. 481). Throughout history women around the world have certainly shown that they are very powerful force when they come together.

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