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A World Without Sweatshops: Abolition Not Reform

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*COVID-19 showed us how the entire planet is knit together ... [The] riveted gaze that we all have to put on it makes it possible and necessary for us to look at all of the other ways that the world is knit together—and what divides us.*¹

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore, prison abolitionist and scholar

Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words—especially her choice to use a sartorial metaphor—makes me think two things. First, if COVID-19 showed us how the planet is knit together, it has also shown us that essential workers and, in this discussion, specifically garment workers—a labor force that’s 85 percent women and largely women of color—are the ones doing the knitting. That is to say, the deep and extensive social, trade, capital, and labor systems that link the world together run on the labor power of poor and working-class women of color workers, often to their detriment. Second, Gilmore’s comments, made during an online event called “A World Without Prisons” with fellow abolitionist and organizer Mariame Kaba, suggests to me that those working to abolish sweatshops have something to learn from those working to abolish prisons—and to press this point further, that a world without sweatshops must be understood as part of, and in relation with, a world without prisons.

Sweatshops and prisons are linked in some obvious ways. For example, there are garment sweatshops in prisons. These have existed for centuries—as early as the 1700s—and

continue to operate around the world in the U.S., China, Thailand, Peru, England, Italy, and elsewhere. Prison workers have manufactured products for labels including Gap, Adidas, Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Victoria's Secret, and J.C. Penney. While these brands would prefer we didn't know the carceral conditions in which some of their products are made, other brands like Prison Blues (U.S.), Stripes Clothing (Netherlands), and Carcel (Denmark) advertise them as part of their brand identity.²

These brands claim to offer on-the-job training but inmates aren't employees. They're not entitled to unemployment benefits, sick leave, paid time off, and they're not protected by labor or health and safety laws. Ironically, this is another point of connection between prisons and garment sweatshops. Incarcerated and non-incarcerated garment workers are paid substandard wages and are subject to extreme forms of surveillance and discipline including physical and verbal abuse, cut wages, and punitive job loss. Incarcerated workers also face the added threat of having their sentences extended if they get sick or don't make their quotas.

Today, prison garment factories are also producing cloth face masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE). State and federal inmates across the U.S. are sewing masks for fellow prisoners, guards, and governmental agencies.³ In California, prison workers sew masks for as little as 8 cents an hour, 12 to 14 hours per day, every day. The masks are sold to a wide range of state agencies from the California Highway Patrol to the Departments of Consumer Affairs, State Hospitals, and Parks and Recreation. The masks, which help finance the Prison Industry Authority, have become a lucrative revenue stream for the agency. In May 2020, the Franchise Tax Board placed a single order for 7,000 masks totaling \$17,150.⁴

Like commercial garment workers, prison workers—even those producing masks—rarely have access to them. Without adequate PPE, space for social distancing, or sick leave, garment sweatshops inside and outside prisons have become COVID hotspots. Going into the summer of the pandemic in May 2020, prison factories in states including Louisiana, Maryland, and California reported hundreds of COVID cases and a significant number of deaths among prison workers.⁵ In December 2020, a study by The Marshall Project found that one in five inmates across all U.S. state and federal prisons had tested positive for COVID.⁶

Sites and Sources of Organized Abandonment

Beyond the obvious relationships between garment sweatshops and prisons, they also share some basic structural features. Sweatshops, like prisons, are what Gilmore has theorized as “forgotten places.”⁷ Forgotten places are constituted by racialized patterns of organized abandonment in which state and corporate sectors work together to extract value from people and places largely of the Global South in the creation of profits that benefit people and places largely of the Global North. Garment sweatshops are distinct from prisons, though, in that the processes of abandonment derive from three extractive sources: state, capital, and culture—specifically neoliberal or “free market” feminist discourses.

Beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s and 1990s, trade liberalization or deregulation policies that gradually eliminated import quotas and reduced tariffs restructured the global economy. These policies enabled western companies to simultaneously minimize their production costs and maximize their profits by seeking out cheaper labor and cheaper source materials in other parts of the world. Thus the center of apparel production

moved from the U.S. and Europe to the Global South in designated Export Processing Zones (EPZ) where factories are exempt from most labor, health and safety regulations, taxes, and trade duties. (In this period, EPZs were mostly established in Mexico, Central America, Asia, Micronesia, and Haiti).

But governmental and economic incentives weren't the only factors that led western brands to move their production offshore. There were also race- and gender-based incentives. EPZs promised a ready, docile, and cut-rate labor force. Local and foreign governments represented poor women of color as naturally suited for the demanding and "unskilled" work of apparel production by emphasizing their "nimble fingers" and their compliant dispositions.⁸ In the words of a Malaysian investment brochure written for western brands:

The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl[?]⁹

The racial, gendered, and sexualized association of apparel production with Asian women and other non-western women and women of color provided a cultural basis for slashing work conditions, worker protections, and wages in garment factories. Sweatshops are structurally produced from this trinity of state, capital, and cultural forces. They're not "bugs" in the global supply chain or the results of some individual brands misbehaving. They're built into the racialized, gendered, and colonial structure of international trade and labor arrangements that are designed precisely to extract from, neglect, and forget an array of human and environmental

resources (e.g., skill, knowledge, time, health, wages, clean water, clean air) from the people and places of the Global South.

In the 1990s in the midst of the implementation of liberalization policies, garment sweatshops proliferated globally. Factories in Saipan, a U.S. territory near the Philippines, produced 20 percent of the clothes sold by U.S. brands.¹⁰ Saipan was an attractive manufacturing site for brands like Tommy Hilfiger, Gap, Nordstrom, J. Crew, the Limited, Eddie Bauer, Liz Claiborne, and Levi's because it was exempt from U.S. trade and labor laws *but not exempt* from U.S. supplier status.¹¹ In other words, factories in Saipan provided U.S. fashion companies with below-cost labor, no tariff and import barriers, and an unrestricted supply of Made in the USA labels. Saipan garment workers, predominantly women, were recruited from the Philippines, China, Bangladesh, and Thailand with promises of good wages. Instead, they were paid \$2-3 per hour or 50 percent of the then-U.S. federal minimum wage. In 1999, a class action lawsuit against eighteen U.S. brands turned up more than 1,000 safety violations and millions of dollars in stolen wages.¹²

Around the same time, we learned that Kathie Lee Gifford's line of children's clothing for Walmart was being made by children in Honduras.¹³ Workers as young as 13 years old, were paid 31 cents an hour to work 20 hours a day.¹⁴ Closer to my home in California, 72 Thai garment workers were discovered to have been held for years against their will in a residential complex in El Monte (just east of Los Angeles). They were forced to work 17- to 22-hours per day sewing clothes for then-popular U.S. brands such as Anchor Blue and B.U.M. Equipment.¹⁵ Workers were paid 70 cents per hour but much of their income was garnished by the factory owners to pay off illegitimate recruitment fees as well as food and rent.¹⁶ The media treated the

El Monte case as an outlier in the U.S. garment industry. In fact, the El Monte case wasn't too far from the norm. A survey of Los Angeles garment factories in the same period found that 96 percent were in violation of health and safety regulations (72 percent were judged serious enough to result in injury or death).¹⁷ Two decades later, the reality of the U.S. garment industry is much the same. In 2017, the California Department of Labor found violations at 85 percent of the garment factories it visited in Los Angeles and that workers were owed "\$1.3 million in back wages, lost overtime, and damages."¹⁸

Sweatshops, Free Market Feminism, and the "Bad Brand"

As well as sweatshops, the early years of apparel trade liberalization produced a wave of pro-sweatshop feminist thinking and writings. Articles in prominent media such as the *New York Times*, AP News, and *Slate* endorsed sweatshops using the language and logics of feminist empowerment. Some representative headlines include: "In Praise of Cheap Labor"; "In Principle, A Case for More 'Sweatshops'"; and "In Honduras, 'Sweatshop' Wages Better Than Nothing for Many Workers."¹⁹ Briefly, the pro-sweatshop feminist position holds three core beliefs: (1) that the right to paid employment is an essential feminist principle; (2) that garment work "modernizes" Global South women and Global South countries (e.g., bringing "fashion" and a technical education to poor and often rural women of color and bringing technological infrastructure to their countries); and (3) that garment work is liberatory (e.g., paychecks, however small, free garment workers from patriarchal cultural and family expectations). In this upside-down worldview, sweatshops lift women of color out of socially, culturally, and economically impoverished circumstances. The reality is that sweatshops pull workers deeper

into poverty, precarity, and abandonment at the hands of a powerful global network of international monetary organizations, corporate actors, and local factory owners and governments.

Pro-sweatshop feminism, or the belief that sweatshops and global free trade capitalism are civilizing feminist projects that save Black and brown women from Black and brown patriarchal and “undeveloped” cultures to western liberalism and global capitalism, is now widely promoted on the world stage. As Hester Eisenstein has documented in her research, “international financial institutions—including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, and a raft of NGOs like CARE—along with corporate entities like Nike” have now co-opted neoliberal feminist discourses to declare that sweatshops offer a “solution to the world’s problems” by providing jobs to women in and of the Global South.²⁰ Like all civilizing missions, the oppressive reality of racism and colonialism is whitewashed by a moral-capitalist discourse about women’s “freedom.”

Western neoliberal feminism isn’t always as crude or explicit in its support of sweatshops, though. For example, in the 2010s western feminists were surprised to learn that their “girl power” themed fashion collections and statement T-shirts had been made in sweatshops in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius where workers were paid poverty wages (when they were paid at all).²¹ Some of these garments were created to help fund U.S. and European activist organizations and charities. The public and media generally treated these incidents as ironic revelations about a complex global supply chain. Meanwhile, the feminist entrepreneurs involved in these stories promised to do better. Danielle Newnham, co-founder of F= (a British non-profit that claims to be “all about inspiring and empowering girls”) and the

designer of “Girl Power” statement T-shirts made by Bangladeshi garment workers for pennies per hour, promised to find another supplier *if presented with sufficient evidence*: “we are always concerned if anyone is treated badly—our entire mission is based on empowerment and if we receive evidence of poor treatment, we would look for another supplier immediately.”²²

Newnham expresses a common neoliberal feminist position that obscures the structural realities of the global fashion industry. For her and other feminist entrepreneur-activists, sweatshops are isolated problems specific to individual bad factories that can be resolved by adjusting individual corporate and consumer behaviors (“we would look for another supplier immediately”). By treating sweatshops as flaws rather than structural features of the global fashion industry, neoliberal feminist positions tacitly legitimize the trade liberalization policies, corporate business strategies, and racially gendered geopolitical ideologies that gave rise to (and continue to sustain) the conditions that make sweatshops not only possible but inevitable.

Similar individualizing feminist strategies have been implemented in the COVID-19 era. In the early weeks of the pandemic, a wide range of western brands from H&M and Gap to Oscar de la Renta and Balmain scrambled to protect their bottom lines from the inevitable drop in consumer spending by abandoning their suppliers. By March 2020, a long list of brands had “cancelled” their orders and exercised their contractual right to refuse to pay for an estimated \$40 billion dollars’ worth of almost-complete and completed apparel orders.²³ (Some of these orders had already shipped.) The media and many activist groups viewed these cancellations as examples of brands behaving badly, of brands acting outside the range of normative corporate conduct. But the right to withhold payment—indeed, brands’ unilateral right to amend any part of the contract—is enshrined in standard contracts between Global North buyers and Global

South suppliers and protected by international trade and labor governing bodies that have restructured the global economy to privilege corporations. Put another way, the forces that constitute the organized abandonment of garment workers is not only systemic but contractually specified.

Other standard contractual conditions that exploit supplier's structural vulnerability include allowing brands to cancel purchase orders "in whole or in part without [supplier] authorization and at [the buyer's] sole and absolute discretion."²⁴ (This clause is taken verbatim from a Kohl's contract dated on March 2020.) Canceling the order doesn't preclude the buyer from taking possession of the order mid-production or, in the event that the order's already been shipped, taking possession of the order post-production. Many contracts also stipulate that "the cost of the Goods, the cost of any fabric, or any other cost at all" — including the cost of labor—become the supplier's responsibility once orders are canceled.²⁵ For example, an Arcadia (e.g., Topshop) contract states: "If we suspend or cancel an order we will not be legally responsible for any direct or indirect damage or loss this may cause you."²⁶

In the COVID era, brands specifically invoked a contractual provision called "force majeure." Again, force majeure—a legal doctrine that excuses the parties from their contractual obligations due to impediments beyond their control—is a common feature in many kinds of contracts. Contracts between fashion brands, their various subcontractors, and garment factories are distinct, though, in that the force majeure event is defined in vague terms and that apparel production contracts provide buyers' *the exclusive right* to invoke force majeure. Arguably, the one-sided terms of the contract would give suppliers grounds for legal action but the same contracts also provide brands protections against such actions in several ways. For

example, they require “legal action to be filed in the courts of the country where the brand is headquartered, not the supplier’s country” and require that the supplier “pay the brand’s attorneys’ fees if it loses.”²⁷ Racialized exploitation (e.g., the sweatshop) is not the unfortunate outcome of a few brands behaving badly but a contractual condition of participating in the global fashion economy for poor countries and millions of racialized and gendered workers in and from the Global South.

The contractually binding organized abandonment of garment workers directly led to an unprecedented loss of jobs and wages in garment industries around the world beginning in February and March 2020. Numerous media outlets characterized the situation as a humanitarian crisis.²⁸ Bangladesh, the world’s second largest apparel exporting country, saw the biggest losses in jobs, wages, and export revenue. In March 2020, “orders for over 900 million garments worth \$2.9 billion [were] cancelled.”²⁹ By the end of June, Bangladeshi factories reported that 1,931 brands had suspended or “cancelled” \$3.7 billion worth of orders.³⁰ In Myanmar, 150 of the country’s 600 factories shut down.³¹ In Cambodia, 200 of 600 factories shuttered.³² In Viet Nam, an estimated 30 to 50 percent of garment workers or about one million workers lost their jobs.³³ And in the Philippines, approximately 60,000 workers or 30 percent of the garment industry were let go.³⁴ Most garment workers were dismissed without their owed wages. In Bangladesh, “72.4 percent of furloughed and 80.4 percent of dismissed workers were sent home unpaid.”³⁵ While brands were quick to abandon garment workers (as they always are), they didn’t abandon their investors. Several weeks after Kohl’s reneged on its orders with Korean and Bangladeshi suppliers (apparel orders worth \$100 million and \$50 million

respectively), the U.S.'s largest department store paid \$109 million in dividends to its stockholders.³⁶

By October 2020, about 40 percent of the garment workers who were laid off at the beginning of the pandemic due to contractually binding organized abandonment were still out of work³⁷ and many more were still waiting to be paid an estimated \$3.19 to \$5.78 billion in back wages.³⁸ And as staggering as these numbers are, they don't include homeworkers or other workers left off official factory payrolls. They also don't account for outstanding overtime pay and severance pay.

In response, activists—a predominantly multiracial network of young women in the Global North—launched social media campaigns³⁹ to pressure brands to commit to paying for their abandoned orders in full.⁴⁰ Hashtags like #PayUp and #PayYourWorkers began trending on social media platforms in posts naming and shaming specific brands for their COVID-19-induced “cancellations.” The public and media have credited the hashtags and the online campaigns with recovering a significant portion of garment workers' wages. A *Vogue* article praised social media activists for “unlock[ing] around \$1 billion in Bangladesh and \$15 billion globally, which accounts for over one-third of the \$40 billion worth of wages owed to garment workers at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis.”⁴¹ According to *Vogue*, the #PayUp hashtag campaign is “a true sign of the power of social media activism” and “really does show the deep impact that a single hashtag can have on an entire industry and population.”

In reality, it's unclear how much of the money recovered by social media campaigns actually made its way back to garment workers. In Bangladesh as late as December 2020, garment workers *who have been on the street protesting their lost wages and jobs since April 2020*, still

had not been paid. In the words of one garment worker named Salma, “we have been protesting for our wages multiple times. We were beaten by the factory-backed goons, water cannoned by the police, been promised 19 different dates to settle what we are owed. But nothing materialised.”⁴² In India, recovered wages were being garnished to repay employers for relief money workers received while they were unemployed. “Workers say they are being offered the choice of less money or working extra shifts for free to pay back their bosses, who dangle the threat of unemployment if employees refuse.”⁴³ A report published in April 2021 by the Worker Rights Consortium states that wage and severance theft “across the global apparel supply chain very likely exceeds half a billion dollars” and that “virtually every major apparel brand and retailer [is] implicated.”⁴⁴

There’s no doubt that popular ethical consumption campaigns helped raise the public’s awareness about the abandoned orders and that they succeeded in pressuring some brands to pay up (or at least pressured them to issue press releases promising to pay up). But by calling out specific brands, these campaigns individualize what is a systemic problem. Again, the mass abandonment wasn’t the result of a handful of individual brands behaving badly. Indeed, they were acting within their legal right—at least as they interpreted them. Their contractual agreements include clauses that allow for the possibility of “canceling” orders (anytime including post-production) and even dropping suppliers altogether. These are longstanding entitlements, outcomes of decades of western corporate political lobbying and other corporate-driven and -funded policy-making activities. The abandonment of garment workers is built into the unequal trade and labor arrangements between consumer countries in the Global North and supplier countries in the Global South.

In failing to identify the institutional sources of organized abandonment—economic liberalization policies, racially and colonially extractive contracts, and free market ideologies—these campaigns are unable to intervene in, much less challenge, the global fashion supply chain’s structure of power. And in some ways—no doubt inadvertent—they serve to legitimate global fashion’s dominant power structure. For example, the push to get specific brands to pay for their orders reinforces the myth of corporate social responsibility. This myth rests on two wobbly pillars. One, that global capitalism can be ethical and two, that corporations can and should regulate themselves. Such approaches reinforce the supply chain’s top-down power relations under the guise of a feminist and humanitarian concern for protecting and caring for a predominantly women of color labor force.

Misdiagnosing the sweatshop problem also lets other agents of this extractive industry off the hook. Along with international trade, financial, and corporate entities, supplier countries and sweatshop factory owners play a significant if more localized role in global fashion’s extractive operations. In the middle of the pandemic, local governments and factory owners not only failed to protect garment workers in their factories, they intensified the conditions of organized abandonment. Promises to help workers in the form of government-provided disaster relief funds or factory-provided severance pay have mostly rung hollow. When workers speak up to demand their legally entitled compensation they’re typically met with harassment, violence, and punitive job loss.

Factory owners specially targeted unionized workers and labor organizers. A report by the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre found over 4,870 cases where unionized workers and labor activists in nine factories in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Cambodia

were dismissed during the pandemic.⁴⁵ These factories produce clothes for major U.S. and European brands like H&M, Primark, Inditex (Zara), Levi Strauss & Co., MANGO, BESTSELLER, Michael Kors, Tory Burch and Kate Spade (Tapestry). Some of those targeted were fired just days after joining a union.

A notable example involved Cambodian garment worker Soy Sros who was arrested and jailed for 55 days after posting a Facebook message critical of her factory's plan to lay off 88 unionized workers.⁴⁶ Sros is an employee at Superl Holdings, a factory in Phnom Penh that makes luxury handbags for Michael Kors, Jimmy Choo, Kate Spade, Coach, and Versace. For months, labor activists in Cambodia and elsewhere pleaded with these brands to intervene on Sros' behalf and to protect workers' rights to demand better working conditions. Brands ignored their calls, hiding behind the long and convoluted subcontracting system that was designed precisely to allow brands to evade responsibility for their factories' labor conditions.

Prison abolitionists classify reforms that seek out gentler and/or fairer ways of imprisonment and punishment as "reformist reforms." Reformist reforms—however well-intended they may be—are harmful because they ultimately legitimize and reinforce the prison system. I suggest that free market feminist or ethical consumption reforms are also reformist reforms. They pursue gentler, fairer, and more inclusive forms of upstream labor and resource extraction (from the Global South to the Global North) rather than the abolition of this extractive industry altogether.

Reformist reforms ask brands to pay workers their owed poverty wages without interrogating much less challenging the sociopolitical economic order under which workers in a \$2.5 trillion-dollar industry are paid poverty wages in the first place. Reformist reforms demand

local minimum wages rather than actual living wages for garment workers. Reformist reforms call for “inclusion” and “diversity” at the top of the supply chain in the modeling, fashion design, and media industries while ignoring the underlying racial, gendered, and geopolitical inequalities that garment workers bear no matter who is on the runway or at the top of a masthead. Likewise, knee-jerk calls to boycott “fast fashion” are reformist reforms that isolate sweatshops to a specific market sector while giving a pass to designer and luxury markets whose products are often made in the same factories, under the same conditions, and by the same hands as budget and mass market fashions. Movements to boycott fast fashion at best misunderstand and, at worse, distort the structural reality of fashion production under global capitalism. In doing so, they elevate elite fashion brands and consumers as fashion’s moral leaders and as garment workers’ western and tacitly white saviors. All reformist reforms sustain sweatshops and share a common theme: they rely on and reproduce the racial, regional, and class hierarchies that make women and girls of the Global South disproportionately (and almost entirely) vulnerable to the organized abandonment and violence of global fashion.

Sweatshop Abolition in Practice

Sweatshop abolition cannot be achieved through an individualist analysis or an individualist response. Abolishing sweatshops requires building solidarity across the various units of the supply chain; across geopolitical and hemispheric divisions; and across race, gender, and class differences. Essentially, it means shifting away from individualist free-market feminism towards radical anti-capitalist women of color feminisms that have always insisted on structural critiques of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy and on prioritizing the

collective, the collaborative, and the relational. Sweatshop abolition doesn't seek to improve but rather to dismantle the conditions that underwrite the organized abandonment of garment workers—the social, material, political economic, and environmental relations that currently hold global fashion supply chains together. Sweatshop abolition works to end exploitation not to lessen the degree of exploitation (e.g., fighting for a minimum wage or even a living wage that just covers workers' basic needs). Indeed, abolition isn't about doing, getting, or wanting the bare minimum for workers. Abolition opposes and antagonizes “the bare minimum” to demand, in Gilmore's words, “a future that has some sense of all the voluptuous beauty that life should hold.”⁴⁷

Examples of sweatshop abolition in practice already exist in garment worker cooperatives. To conclude, I want to call attention to two visionary examples: the Los Angeles based group Homework for Health (H4H) and the Chicago based Blue Tin Productions. H4H and Blue Tin share fundamental organizational features. Both co-ops challenge the vertical structure of the garment factory model. Workers, not brands or factory owners, determine their employment conditions. Pricing, production schedules, payment structure, and whether to take a job or not are decisions that get made collectively rather than handed down from above.

H4H was founded in late March 2020 as a health and economic justice initiative between the Garment Worker Center and Al Otro Lado (a social justice legal organization serving indigent deportees, migrants, and refugees). It began as a means of organizing in and against the crisis of COVID-accelerated abandonment. As the name suggests, H4H workers make and sell cloth face masks at home. They share decision-making power, materials (e.g., fabric and elastic bands), workloads, and profits. While H4H workers produce fewer masks, they earn far

more per mask than factory workers. Garment factory workers in Los Angeles make \$5.50 per hour making masks. H4H workers make approximately \$5.50 per mask.

H4H garment workers also have access to and can participate in various workshops focusing on online payment systems, photographing and posting photos of masks online, web design, Spanish and English language acquisition, and personal and business income taxes. The emphasis on workers' personal growth and well-being means that members choose how they work (one member, Yeni, often sews by hand) and when they work. H4H's organizational structure not only allows but encourages workers to prioritize familial and community responsibilities above work responsibilities. In Yeni's words, "I don't rush myself to do a very quick job [...] to get more work. What I want is only to maintain the work, to get an income, pay my taxes, and take care of my kids at home. That's enough for me." Paulina, another H4H worker, states, "I don't know how many masks I make an hour or a day. That's the awesome thing [about Homework 4 Health]."⁴⁸

H4H paused its operations around November 2020 due to dwindling sales. But both its rise and decline are exemplary models of sweatshop abolition in practice. Currently, H4H members are organizing workshops and other activities (e.g., fundraising, training, and advocacy) alongside the larger Garment Worker Center membership (nearly 500 members) to develop and expand its mission. H4H is scheduled to relaunch in 2022.⁴⁹

Blue Tin opened its doors in January 2019. Its current four members—all immigrant women from Nigeria, Turkey, Philippines, and Iran—work together in a studio in Chicago sewing collections for smaller labels with smaller runs. Blue Tin prioritizes designers who use

sustainable fabrics, know the supply chain for their fabrics, design for non-normative bodies, and/or have limited resources. (Blue Tin offers a sliding scale production rate.)

Like H4H, Blue Tin places their members' personal well-being over profits. Hoda Katebi, founding member of Blue Tin, explains:

Usually a company will grow and then think about labor and sustainability but that goes against the core of what we're trying to do at Blue Tin [...] We're developing Blue Tin's culture and organization *around* ethics and sustainability. We're trying to imagine what that world can look like where clothes can be made not only without violence but with care.⁵⁰

This ethic of mutual care and responsibility means that members might stop working to comfort another member suffering personal distress. Katebi related a couple of instances to me in which Blue Tin lost a client because members decided to "stop production to walk together, to get ice cream" and in another case, help a member leave an abusive relationship by helping her look for an apartment. Blue Tin envisions itself as a "a place where we can learn and grow and not just [a place] to earn a paycheck." Like H4H, Blue Tin organizes a variety of workshops. The topics are based on members' interests. Past workshops have focused on subjects such as post-menopausal self-care, domestic violence, and somatic coaching (a holistic mind-body-spirit approach to self-improvement and self-healing).

Homework 4 Health and Blue Tin Productions oppose fashion's extractive structure not by reforming it but by building entirely new relations and conditions of living and labor. Their practices recall for me Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's observation about the opposite of dispossession:

[W]hat's the opposite of dispossession in Indigenous thought again? Not possession, because we're not supposed to be capitalists, but connection, a coded layering of intimate interconnection and interdependence that creates a complicated algorithmic network of presence, reciprocity, consent, and freedom.⁵¹

For H4H and Blue Tin Productions, “presence, reciprocity, consent, and freedom” are not only social forms but social and labor practices. To learn more about how to support Homework 4 Health/Garment Worker Center and Blue Tin Productions, please visit their websites.⁵²

¹ The Graduate Center at CUNY. talk “A World Without Prisons” September 16, 2020 Conversation with Mariama Kaba https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1031007084026178&ref=watch_permalink.

² For more on prison garment factories, see Chiara Spagnoli Gabardi, “The Ethics of Fashion Brands Made in Prisons,” *Eluxe Magazine*. August 25, 2017. <https://eluxemagazine.com/culture/articles/fashion-brands-made-in-prisons/>; Annie Kelly, “‘Virtually entire’ fashion industry complicit in Uighur forced labour, say rights groups,” *The Guardian*. July 23, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jul/23/virtually-entire-fashion-industry-complicit-in-uighur-forced-labour-say-rights-groups-china>; Elizabeth Paton and Andrea Zarate, “Made on the Inside, Worn on the Outside,” *New York Times*. February 21, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/fashion/prison-labor-fashion-brands.html>.

³ Hannah Dreier, “‘A recipe for disaster’: American prison factories becoming incubators for coronavirus,” *The Washington Post*. April 21, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/a-recipe-for-disaster-american-prison-factories-becoming-incubators-for-coronavirus/2020/04/21/071062d2-83f3-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7_story.html.

⁴ Wes Venteicher, “California prisons sell coronavirus masks to the state. Are the prices too high?” *The Sacramento Bee*. May 10, 2020. <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/the-state-worker/article242614381.html>.

⁵ See Venteicher, “California prisons sell coronavirus masks to the state”; Cary Aspinwall, Keri Blakinder, and Joseph Neff, “Federal Prison Factories Kept Running as Coronavirus Spread,” *The Marshall Project*. April 10, 2020. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/04/10/federal-prison-factories-kept-running-as-coronavirus-spread>; and Luke Broadwater, “As coronavirus spreads in Maryland prisons, a small team of inmates makes 24,000 masks, other protective gear,” *Baltimore Sun*. April 27, 2020. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/coronavirus/bs-md-pol-prison-masks-20200427-fewq4quw6bd63n7fbdcx66rkj4-story.html>.

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- ⁶ Beth Schwartzapfel, Katie Park, and Andrew Demillo, "1 in 5 Prisoners in the U.S. Has Had COVID-19," *The Marshall Project*. December 18, 2020. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/12/18/1-in-5-prisoners-in-the-u-s-has-had-covid-19>.
- ⁷ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning," *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* edited by Charles R. Hale. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): 32.
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⁴⁹ My thanks to Garment Worker Center Director Marissa Nuncio who provided me with an update of H4H’s current status and future plans. We spoke by phone on June 3, 2021.

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