Fair Labor

Social Responsibility Topics of the 21st Century: Student Committee Journal

Spring 2025
Volume 5

About Fair Labor Accreditation

The Fair Labor Association (FLA) is an international network of companies, universities, and civil society organizations collaborating to ensure that millions of people working at the world's factories and farms are paid fairly and protected from risks to their health, safety, and well-being.

FLA has approximately 140 member colleges and universities across North America. Students are an essential part of this relationship because on campuses everywhere they are some of the most passionate and vocal defenders of workers' rights.

The FLA Student Committee offers students enrolled at member colleges and universities an opportunity to learn about social responsibility and connect with others who share similar interests. This year, select student committee members chose to write articles about social responsibility and human rights. This collection of their articles is the fifth issue of the Student Committee Journal.

FLA is pleased to provide a platform through which students may share their ideas and opinions about protecting and promoting workers' rights. Share your feedback and questions with FLA's Investigations and Collegiate Program Associate, Lucy Hassel, at lhassel@fairlabor.org.

DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in the Student Committee Journal are those of the students writing in their personal capacities. Opinions expressed in the articles are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Fair Labor Association or the academic institutions where the students are enrolled.

Contents

The green thread: Weaving labor standards and sustainability into the circular fashion transition

VASTY JEAN FRANÇOIS / LEWIS & CLARK COLLEGE

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, the fashion industry is the second-largest consumer of water and a major polluter, accounting for approximately 2-8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. These severe environmental impacts have led to calls for change in how clothes are made and handled after use.

Some brands and manufacturers have responded by pursuing the circular economy model. In contrast to the linear economy model (sometimes called the take-make-waste economy) that consists of producing products with virgin materials and using them until they become waste and are thrown away, the circular economy (CE) offers an alternative. It is a system through which materials are kept in circulation throughout their life cycle, using resources more efficiently while restoring the environment. The circular economy model provides a framework for the fashion industry to adopt more sustainable practices. However, corporations and circularity advocates must ensure that circular practices are adopted throughout the value chain while preventing the repetition of past labor injustices, addressing existing inequalities, and centering the needs of marginalized communities within the transition.

The evolution of circular fashion

The conventional textile value chain framework focuses on mass production and maximizing profits with minimal consideration given to the impact of waste on the environment. However, the discovery of textile waste in landfills worldwide in places like Kenya and the Atacama desert and their effects on the ecological landscape served as an alert to change today's textile production model.

The CE is pivotal in reducing the fashion industry's carbon footprint and meeting sustainability standards through the supply chain. It enables the design of garments with sustainable materials that can last longer and be transformed into new products while encouraging consumers to adopt better

habits. In this closed-loop system, garments are made using sustainable materials that are responsibly sourced. This results in fully utilized products that can be returned to production.

Despite the growing importance of **sustainability**, the model is not yet mainstream. However, pioneering brands like Patagonia, Eileen Fisher, and Levi Strauss & Co. are adopting **circular principles**. They are doing so through designing for longevity, using sustainable and recycled materials, implementing take-back schemes, offering rental and resale platforms, providing repair services, leveraging **digital technology** for transparency and lifecycle management, and engaging in recycling and upcycling initiatives.

The impact of circularity on garment workers

Another **convention** of the linear production model is the reliance on developing countries as their hub of production due to their lower manufacturing and labor costs. Efforts to pivot away from the traditional, linear supply chain towards circularity present a window for creating new jobs and a chance to improve the environmental conditions where the garment-producing labor force lives and works. While this appears to be a positive development, there needs to be consideration as to how these changes may affect millions of workers worldwide, particularly how the transition to CE may impact or disrupt employment in developing countries. For years, organizations, including unions, advocacy organizations, and grassroots campaigns, have pushed for better treatment of workers complementary to consumer demand for corporate transparency and accountability. As we transition to the CE, global traditional garment workers' interests must also be considered.

One example from a **study** in the Resources, Conservation, and Recycling journal found that the shift in apparel value chains towards circularity could lead to an increase in CE jobs in the European Union (EU), like resale and recycling jobs, and a decline in apparel production jobs in low- to middle-income non-EU countries. A significant portion (80%) of used apparel collected in the EU is exported, primarily to low- to lower-middle-income countries. The consumption of this second-hand apparel in these importing countries can substitute the demand for new apparel produced locally or imported through global value chains, leading to potential job losses in apparel production in these importing countries as well.

This potential impact research demonstrates the necessity for corporations and circular economy advocates to think critically about the practical application of the circular economy model. Communities that depend on the clothing industry should not suffer from this "sustainable" model; instead, it should present a chance for governments, businesses, and labor unions to set robust social and environmental sustainability standards while ensuring workers are not left behind.

Considering the local context, companies and institutions in Southeast Asia are working to establish initiatives to tackle the imbalances that the transition to a circular model may cause by collaboratively developing reuse, recycle, and remodel systems that benefit local economies through job creation and better working conditions. For instance, the Global Fashion Agenda's **Upstream Circularity playbook** shows that capturing and recycling

post-industrial textile waste within countries producing clothing presents significant economic development and job creation opportunities. A recycling industry based on the vast volumes of uncontaminated waste created during production could help these countries create jobs in sorting, segregating, and processing waste, boosting local economies.

The importance of government intervention

Governments also have a role to play in helping workers make the transition to new jobs in the circular economy. Providing incentives and regulations to companies for informal waste management can encourage recycling and discourage textile exports. Investing in capacity building and skills development is also necessary, including training factory workers in waste management and supporting the informal sector with traceability technologies.

Numerous regional case studies provide concrete examples of how circularity is already generating employment and retaining value in garment-producing countries. These include **RECYCLE-RAW** in Bangladesh, focusing on safe waste handling; **Artistic Milliners**' Circular Park in Pakistan; and **Shun Wei** in Cambodia, which aims to improve waste management practices. In this way, these countries can avoid a job shift to the EU and become hubs for textile recycling, leading to economic gains.

Opportunities for economic development and job creation

The fashion industry needs to shift from a linear to a CE model to address its significant environmental impact and provide better conditions for workers. The CE model presents opportunities for economic development and job creation in garment-producing countries through the recycling and upcycling of textile waste, and the opportunity to equip workers with new skills. However, this transition must be made carefully to avoid negatively impacting the millions of workers who depend on the garment industry for their livelihoods.

To ensure that circularity delivers significant benefits to producing countries, supportive policies, investments in infrastructure and technology, and capacity building across supply chains, including the informal sector, are needed. Case studies from manufacturing regions demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of circular practices, offering applicable models for broader adoption that other regions can follow. A just transition necessitates coordinated efforts by firms, governments, and unions to establish high social and environmental standards, promote worker training and adaptation, and address structural job disparities. Putting workers at the core of the growing circular economy is critical for building a sustainable and equitable fashion system.

Combating child labor in Nepal with alternative measures

CARSYN STIPP / LEWIS & CLARK COLLEGE

Child labor is not confined to a specific industry, border, or culture; it is a global issue deeply intertwined with consumer economies. Without viable alternatives or targeted interventions, progressive laws alone remain insufficient. Addressing child labor requires a multifaceted approach that includes social, economic, and academic interventions to ensure that children are not forced into exploitative labor conditions out of necessity. This article examines the challenges of addressing child labor, particularly in Nepal's brick kilns, and highlights why expanding educational and financial opportunities is a more effective approach than traditional labor reforms.

Conditions that perpetuate child labor

The exploitation of children demands dedicated research, legislation, and prevention programs. Unlike strategies targeting violations of adult labor rights, efforts to combat child labor face added barriers—familial expectations, unregulated work sectors, children's limited ability to advocate for themselves, cultural normalization, and fear of **retaliation**. Many children work because their families depend on their income for basic survival, and without accessible alternatives, families have **little choice** but to send their children to work.

Nepal exemplifies these challenges. Despite progressive policies, child labor remains prevalent. According to the **World Population Review**, 22% of Nepalese youth were engaged in child labor between 2015 and 2023. **The National Master Plan for the Elimination of all Forms of Child Labour (NMP-II) and the Act Relating to Children (ARC)**, both enacted in 2018, identified 17 high-risk industries, including agriculture, domestic work, and brick production. However, these policies fall short in eliminating child labor due to the absence of viable childcare, supervision, and meal alternatives for working children. Furthermore, implementation and enforcement remain inconsistent, and many industries that rely on child labor operate in **informal sectors** where government oversight is weak or nonexistent. The economic pressures that drive families to rely on child labor persist, making it clear that legal frameworks alone are insufficient to eradicate the problem.

Brick kilns in Nepal

The brick kilns of Nepal reveal both the harsh reality of child labor and the promise of alternative solutions. An estimated 28,000–30,000 children work in these kilns, with nearly 20% aged 15 or younger. One brick earns about 1.3 rupees per brick (a little over one cent in USD), forcing children to make 500 bricks a day just to reach minimum wage. Around 6,000 children endure grueling schedules, working seven days a week for over 15 hours a day. Many migrate with their parents, who work in agriculture from Nepal's northern mountains to the Kathmandu Valley from October to June, trapping them in cycles of poverty, exploitation, and heightened risk of trafficking. The harsh conditions in brick kilns, including exposure to extreme heat, dust, and physically demanding labor, can have long-term health consequences. In addition to physical harm, child laborers in brick kilns are often deprived of educational opportunities, which severely limits their ability to break out of poverty and improve their futures.

While governmental efforts have improved monitoring, they have not adequately addressed the root causes of child labor. Merely enforcing laws does little when families rely on their children's income for survival. Without addressing the underlying economic drivers, interventions focused solely on punitive measures against employers or families often fail to create sustainable change. Families need support in the form of financial assistance, fair compensation for adults, and education programs for children to create long-term solutions that prioritize their well-being.

Alternatives: Educational programs and financial assistance

Children in brick kilns often move from one kiln site to another, leaving them without opportunity for formal education. However, as noted by Gordon Brown, "educational opportunities can break the cycle of child labor," especially when paired with financial support mechanisms. Interventions include mobile schools that provide uniforms, supplies, and transportation, and working around parents' schedules, ensuring children can attend without disrupting family income. Schools that provide meals or take-home rations significantly increase parental willingness to send children to class. Providing necessities through educational programs can make schooling a more viable option for families who might otherwise feel compelled to send their children to work.

Financial assistance is another critical factor. Scholarships, micro-enterprises, and microfinance savings programs help compensate for lost income, making school attendance more viable. Many NGOs and local organizations are working to implement such programs, but the scale of these efforts must expand to reach more children. Additionally, NGOs are expanding education campaigns to challenge the normalization of child labor. Informing parents about risks such as trafficking and psychological harm can shift attitudes toward prioritizing schooling. Community engagement programs that involve parents, educators, and local leaders can foster a collective effort to reduce child labor and promote education.

The importance of systemic interventions

These strategies are not entirely new, but their success depends on coordinated efforts among governments, NGOs, employers, and local communities. In Nepal, organizations like the **GoodWeave Foundation** and **Save the Children** are already committed to fighting child labor. The Fair Labor Association (FLA) also works to eliminate child labor across multiple countries, including **Egypt**, **Türkiye**, and **Côte d'Ivoire**, and within industries such as jasmine, rose, and cocoa. These international collaborations highlight the importance of a global approach to child labor, as many industries rely on supply chains that span multiple countries.

Furthermore, governments must work collaboratively with the private sector to ensure that industries are held accountable for labor practices within their supply chains. Companies that benefit from child labor must be incentivized to adopt ethical labor practices through policy regulations and consumer advocacy. Additionally, companies need to invest in supply chain traceability to better understand where child labor risks exist and how to remediate them. By fostering an environment where education is prioritized and economic opportunities for families are strengthened, sustainable solutions can be achieved that protect the rights and futures of children.

Conclusion

Eliminating child labor in Nepal requires a multifaceted approach that addresses its root causes rather than simply enforcing punitive measures. While policies and monitoring have improved, these efforts remain inadequate without viable alternatives for families who depend on their children's income. Education is a fundamental tool in breaking the cycle of child labor, and efforts such as mobile schools, scholarships, and meal programs have shown promise in encouraging attendance and reducing child labor. However, initiatives need broader implementation and financial backing. Stronger collaboration between governments, NGOs, local communities, and the private sector is essential to creating sustainable solutions. A long-term commitment to education, economic support, and ethical labor practices will help ensure that Nepali children can pursue a future free from exploitation. Only by addressing systemic inequalities and prioritizing children's rights can Nepal and the global community achieve meaningful progress in eradicating child labor.

An overview and future outlook for Bangladesh's apparel industry

KENDALL LUDWIG / UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

It has been over a decade since the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh took more than 1,100 lives. Unfortunately, garment workers account for the majority of this number. Rana Plaza, a building housing five garment factories in Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed in 2013 due to a disregard for workplace safety and worker wellbeing. Just one day before the building collapsed, despite visible cracks in the building, workers were ordered to return to work after a short evacuation. The tragedy was a wake-up call for stakeholders in the textile and apparel industry worldwide who were not paying attention to the true cost of cheap labor. As the second largest apparel exporter globally, Bangladesh's economy relies on fashion. Therefore, strengthening labor rights for garment workers was critical for both the social and financial wellbeing of the country. Fashion brands and trade unions signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh to protect worker health and safety. This agreement is still prevalent today, becoming the International Accord in 2021, with new signatories each year.

According to the International Labour Organization, while there have been many safety and labor rights improvements in Bangladesh since Rana Plaza, there is still a lot of work to be done. Events in Bangladesh in the past year, such as wage and anti-government protests and the subsequent ousting of the prime minister, are having adverse impacts on garment workers. These developments are also challenging the country's future as a global supplier of apparel, as brands worry about the stability and ethicality of sourcing from Bangladesh. The Fair Labor Association (FLA) and others have pledged their support to workers and suppliers in Bangladesh and are working to mitigate adverse effects from these recent events. This article delves into each of these events, examines how they highlight pressing workers' rights issues, and evaluates the status of current remediation measures.

The fight for living wage

Poverty wages have historically been a pressing issue for Bangladeshi garment workers. The country's Wage Board holds minimum wage negotiations

every five years, but workers are consistently disappointed by the outcome. In December 2023, the Wage Board updated the monthly salary for garment workers to 12,500 Bangladeshi taka (BDT), equal to $113 USD. This was only half the minimum wage amount that garment workers were calling for (23,000–25,000 BDT, or $215 USD). According to FLA's Fair Compensation Dashboard, the newly updated minimum wage falls short of the Global Living Wage Coalition's (GLWC) 2022 living wage estimate for Dhaka, Bangladesh, meaning that the minimum wage is not a sufficient income for garment workers, who will continue to live in poverty.

Garment workers are paid so poorly, according to a 2023 study by the Bangladesh Institute for Labour Studies, that workers often find themselves facing an income-expenditure deficit every month. The study also notes that 82% of garment workers regularly borrow or take loans from friends, family, or neighbors, as a result of being unable to meet basic needs such as feeding their families. These dire economic conditions are exacerbated by inflation being at an all-time high in Bangladesh.

With wages being fundamental to workers' quality of life, strikes and protests ensued in October 2023 during the recent negotiation period. At least four garment workers died from clashes with Bangladeshi police and union leaders were surveilled by security forces. Despite garment workers' efforts and the loss of multiple lives, the minimum wage set in December 2023 has not budged. In early 2024, FLA published recommendations for companies and suppliers to make continuous progress toward paying a living wage based on GLWC's estimates in order to support workers. In addition to respecting workers' rights to a living wage, it is also important for stakeholders with significant economic power over Bangladeshi garment factories to be held accountable to protecting their workers. It is crucial that they publicly denounce violence against workers and support their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Civil unrest and its impact on garment workers

Unrest continued following the wage negotiations in Bangladesh, culminating in then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fleeing the country in August 2024 amid anti-government protests and the establishment of an interim government. This wave of protests broke out in 2024 as part of student-led demonstrations to end a quota system on civil service jobs. They then escalated into national protests to oust the former ruling party government after committing serious human rights violations, according to a report from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The report estimated around 1,400 people suffered protest-related deaths, including incidents of protesters being shot at point-blank range. There were also cases of torturing and maiming.

Garment production was disrupted and factories were shut down due to protests as well, with an estimated $400 million lost during this time. Garment workers also faced delays in receiving wages due to the political disruptions. Rebuilding Bangladesh's government will take time, and the political instability and uncertainty may deter buyers from remaining in Bangladesh.

A recent wave of foreign aid cuts

In 2025, foreign aid cuts by the Trump administration, such as the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are negatively affecting workers in Bangladesh. Nonprofits such as the Awaj Foundation, which teaches 600,000 garment workers in Bangladesh about their rights and how to advocate for better conditions, are being severely impacted by the cuts to foreign aid. To put the importance of foreign aid into perspective, USAID provided $22 million after Rana Plaza to help suppliers finance safety improvements. For the sake of garment workers and the apparel industry in Bangladesh, it is more important than ever before that brands show their support and continue sourcing from the country, carefully monitoring the sensitive nature of labor rights and ensuring workers are paid fair wages.

Recommendations for companies sourcing from Bangladesh

Following the ousting of the former prime minister, FLA published joint recommendations for responsible business conduct in Bangladesh urging brands to demonstrate their commitment to suppliers and garment workers. More recently in January 2025, FLA, the American Apparel & Footwear Association (AAFA), and other stakeholders visited Dhaka to reiterate the need for improved worker rights and a sustainable partnership between US brands and the Bangladesh garment industry. This delegation follows a letter signed by FLA and AAFA from September 2024 urging the government to release those still under arrest from wage negotiation protests in 2023, implement an annual minimum wage review mechanism, and reintroduce conversations about amending the Bangladesh Labor Act to align with international labor standards.

While apparel exports from Bangladesh increased from 2023 to 2024, showing the country's resiliency in spite of the setbacks it has faced, it is evident that labor rights have to be carefully protected. It is crucial that brands and other stakeholders in the fashion industry worldwide continue publicly supporting Bangladeshi garment workers and their fight for higher wages, including working with suppliers and FLA to ensure there is a path towards paying living wages. This support and attention is what prevents another Rana Plaza.

Child labor resurgence in the U.S. meatpacking industry

LOREN STEINBERG / UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Time seems to reverse as states loosen child labor laws. At least ten states became less stringent on child labor between 2021 and 2023, and six states further reduced protective measures in 2024. The meatpacking industry, known to be an extremely hazardous place to work, has experienced a significant increase in underage employees within these states in the past few years. Iowa, for example, recently allowed meatpacking plants within state boundaries to hire 14-year-olds to work on meat processing lines, where clothing and body parts could easily get caught, mangled, and injured in the machines.

This article exposes the alarming realities of child labor in meatpacking and showcases the devastating consequences that vulnerable youth face when working in dangerous conditions.

Meatpacking explained

From farm to fork, meat goes through production, processing, distribution, and finally, consumption. Meatpacking falls within the processing stage, where it is prepared and packaged to later be distributed to retailers and wholesalers. However, the scope of operations within meatpacking plants varies. Certain companies provide services across the complete supply chain, including raising, slaughtering, and packaging the meat into supermarket-ready products, while others may focus solely on processing and packaging already slaughtered livestock.

Dangerous working conditions

The demanding and dangerous conditions in these facilities create an environment that is highly susceptible to worker exploitation. In US meatpacking facilities, workers slaughter, cut, and package 9.3 billion chickens, 34 million cows, and 130 million pigs each year. Some of those workers make as many as 24,000 knife cuts and lift up to 15 tons of meat each day on the job. Employees also use fast machines with rapid chopping

motions, which has led to many severe injuries. Two pork plant workers in Nebraska shared that they were close to cutting their fingers off because of how fast they were forced to work.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) data from 29 states reveals the daily occurrence of amputations or hospitalizations, while another report highlights the sheer volume of injuries: 26,600 incidents in meat and poultry plants in 2022, a rate almost twice the size of all other industries. Plus, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) discovered that 81% of meatpacking workers have a high risk of workplace injury, highlighting how frequently workers suffer harm in this industry.

Risks to children in meatpacking facilities

The risk of serious injury is a daily reality for all U.S. meatpacking workers, but children face a significantly higher risk, as they are twice as likely to suffer workplace injuries. In 2022, 3,876 minors were illegally employed in meatpacking plants, a 50% increase from 2018 numbers. As state child labor laws loosen, more cases of child labor are uncovered, revealing a disturbing trend that threatens the safety and well-being of vulnerable minors.

The dangers of meatpacking extend beyond physical risks, taking a severe toll on the mental health of its workers. Research indicates that individuals in slaughterhouse jobs face greater psychological challenges such as trauma, shock, paranoia, fear, anxiety, guilt, and shame, especially after their initial exposure to livestock slaughter, compared to other occupations. Exposing children to this environment at a young age can have devastating and long-lasting consequences on their mental health, potentially leading to serious conditions. In fact, studies have shown that child labor in any form results in significant damage to their health, affecting both their bodies and minds. Therefore, the added strain of meatpacking work creates an exceptionally harmful environment.

Solutions and recommendations

Stricter oversight and protection within the meatpacking industry is not only necessary but also a fundamental obligation to protect some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Whether in the supply chains of meat products, garments, or hard goods, we continue to see the threat of child labor in upstream supply chains. It is crucial for organizations or companies to prioritize the rights of workers and comprehensively integrate social compliance principles throughout their operations. For example, companies seeking or maintaining Fair Labor Association (FLA) membership are required to uphold the Fair Labor Code standards and benchmarks related to child labor and partner with suppliers who uphold these standards as well. All members must proactively implement measures to verify the age and educational status of all workers, ensuring no individual under the age of 15 or who has not fulfilled mandatory schooling requirements are employed, especially within hazardous work environments.

Additionally, **funding cuts to the federal agencies that would previously uncover these cases of child labor**, combined with the current trend of states loosening regulations without proper oversight, presents a serious threat to child labor protections. This combination could lead to a surge in both the exploitation of children in the workforce and the occurrence of dangerous workplace violations. To counteract these possibilities, a collective effort is required. Civil society organizations, academic institutions, and businesses must all actively contribute to combat these issues. The urgency of this situation demands concrete action from many sectors to prevent vulnerable children from exploitation and involvement in dangerous work environments.

From crisis to control: How the International Monetary Fund undermines labor rights

BRIDGET FAHEY / BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

Since its creation in 1945 as part of the Bretton Woods agreement, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has **branded itself** as an organization that fosters international stability and economic growth through loans to developing countries. These loans are designed to provide breathing room to countries that experience fiscal, environmental, or political crises. Without these low-to-no interest loans, the **IMF claims** that the road to economic recovery would leave unstable economies even more vulnerable to the volatility of global capitalism. Despite the IMF's altruistic veneer, a deeper dive into its loan stipulations reveals a financial organization that exists to advance neoliberal financial policies. The IMF imposes austerity measures that harm working people and undermine the precarious position of labor movements in developing countries.

The IMF's perspective on labor and the economy

Labor flexibility is considered by both the IMF and the World Bank to be an important tenet of a competitive economy. **In the World Economic Forum's 2012-2013 Global Competitiveness Report**, founder Klaus Schwab wrote that "labor markets must have the flexibility to shift workers from one economic activity to another rapidly and at low cost, to allow for labor fluctuations without much social disruption." Countries that have lower labor flexibility are ranked lower on the Global Competitiveness Scale, insinuating that workers with higher wages and more job security make it more difficult for the economy to function.

In addition, loans are ultimately negotiated between governments and IMF employees, with no labor representation present. Denying workers a seat at the bargaining table sends a very clear message about how important their rights are. The IMF's and the World Bank's policies reflect that unskilled and unrepresented cheap labor is the recipe for a competitive, viable economy, and their loan stipulations reflect this sentiment.

Cuts to social services and impacts to workers

One way that this goal is accomplished is the inclusion of belt-tightening labor laws that harm those who are most in need. A 2023 report by Human Rights Watch identified three policy measures included in IMF loan packages: "reductions in public wage bills; reducing or eliminating energy subsidies; and increasing revenues through value-added taxes (VAT). It finds 22 programs include structural benchmarks or general advice to lower the public wage bill, generally through freezing hires and capping or lowering salaries." Though these policies are undoubtedly effective cost-cutting measures, they exacerbate problems that people in developing countries already encounter when trying to take advantage of public services, thus pushing more people into poverty, starvation, and marginalization. Cutting wages and slashing public services also creates a surplus labor pool that willingly accepts a lower wage out of desperation. A labor pool that is desperate for work is one that is more easily taken advantage of, overworked, and underpaid.

The IMF has a long-held policy of including social spending floors in their loan stipulations. Oxfam International reported that 85% of IMF loan programs granted between March 2020 and March 2023 included social spending floor requirements. Social spending floors dictate a minimum amount of money that can be spent on public services, and the IMF claims that this policy protects social programs from austere structural adjustments and limits the amount that can be cut from areas such as health and education. However, these measures further undermine the ability of workers to access life-saving social services. The administration of these policies is not consistent from country to country, as different economic situations require different solutions. The unpredictable manner in which social spending floors are categorized and administered means that many social programs are left out. For example, social spending floor requirements in Benin led to the removal of value-added tax exemptions from electricity, water, and rice, with little regard to the fact that one in three children under the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition. Despite the positive intentions behind these measures, social spending floors, like many other IMF loan stipulations, harm the people that are already on the margins of society and exacerbate issues like starvation, poverty, and disease.

Long-term declines in workers' rights

IMF advocates claim that austere policies are a short-term pain, and that economic reform is a process that takes years to bear fruit. However, a 2015 study published in the Political Research Quarterly journal revealed that IMF loan conditions correlate with a decline in workers' rights in the long term, despite the IMF's claims that its primary goal is to ensure the economic stabilization and independence of its client base. This report, using IMF programs as the key variable, found that these programs were "statistically and substantively significant in predicting the change in labor rights, and come at the cost of collective bargaining and free association rights, [which] undermine both labor laws as well as protection of labor rights in practice." The long-term effects of these programs are ultimately harmful to the very people that are tasked with rebuilding the economy.

It is worth remembering that the primary metric of improvement of the IMF and other international finance organizations is the GDP of their client

countries, not the living conditions of working people and their families. In his 2010 book titled "The Enigma of Capital," David Harvey categorizes labor organization and mobilization of the working class as a barrier to capital accumulation: "If labour is too well organised and too powerful," he explains, "then the capitalist class will seek to command the state apparatus to do its bidding." The IMF represents the interests of the capitalist class; indeed, its policy of labor flexibility mandates that labor stays cheap, mobile, and unorganized. The IMF's policies in many cases result in governments loosening labor laws and cutting funding to life-saving public programs.

The invisible chains: How Amazon's surveillance culture harms women workers

NOEL SEO / STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Since COVID-19, companies like Amazon have dramatically increased workplace surveillance through keystroke tracking, video monitoring, and GPS tracking. Amazon relies on AI-driven cameras, handheld scanners, and performance-tracking badges in its warehouses, recording every action of its workers. The result is a high-pressure environment where employees must constantly monitor their performance, often at the expense of basic needs like rest, meals, or bathroom breaks.

Using Amazon's warehouse surveillance as a case study, this article analyzes how real-time tracking, strict quotas, and constant monitoring create an oppressive work environment that disproportionately affects women, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. By synthesizing feminist theory and testimony from Amazon warehouse workers, this paper highlights the unique challenges these employees face in highly surveilled male-dominated industries and argues for reforms that amplify their voices within the conversation on labor rights and workplace equality.

Feminist surveillance frameworks

Surveillance is not neutral—it is embedded in racialized and gendered power structures. Its effects are acute for marginalized groups, as surveillance technologies and practices have long reinforced gender-based violence and systemic oppression. For example, originally designed for workplace monitoring, GPS tracking has been repurposed in abusive relationships to stalk intimate partners. In the carceral system, surveillance disproportionately targets women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, reinforcing existing inequalities. Racialized surveillance often hinges on arbitrary physical markers such as skin tone and body size, subjecting women of color to heightened scrutiny. Professor of Black Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Simone Browne, traces these practices back to slavery, arguing that modern surveillance echoes the violent control mechanisms once imposed on enslaved people. Contemporary forms of workplace surveillance,

such as those employed in Amazon warehouses, continue to replicate these oppressive dynamics and intensify socioeconomic disparities for already vulnerable workers.

Regardless of the actual level of surveillance, women are deeply affected by **"imagined surveillance,"** a form of self-monitoring that arises from the expectation of being watched. This leads to constant behavioral adjustment, increased emotional labor, and **psychological distress**, as women attempt to conform to narrow and often racialized workplace norms. These imagined and real forms of surveillance are not separate. They operate in tandem, reinforcing one another and demanding an intersectional, feminist understanding of how surveillance influences workplace power dynamics.

Emotional exhaustion under surveillance

Amazon's surveillance culture subjects women to both performance- and gender-based scrutiny. Studies find that **women express greater concern than their coworkers over workplace surveillance**, particularly with invasive technologies like AI-driven cameras. Consequently, **44% of female Amazon workers report feeling pressured to work faster than male workers.**

This environment fosters a cycle of emotional exhaustion. **Wendy**, an Amazon warehouse worker in Missouri, describes the constant tracking, saying "every move you make is being monitored... you feel uncomfortable, and you're not able to talk about the unsafe work environment with coworkers." The surveillance-induced anxiety forces workers into self-regulation, echoing feminist theories of imagined surveillance. Other workers report similar struggles. **Courtenay** describes Amazon's tracking as dehumanizing: "They don't value you as a human being. It's demeaning." Another worker, **Harper**, recalls neglecting basic needs: "I forgot to eat because I'm on a mega shift, and I have to meet a certain standard. I start forgetting who I am." This pattern of neglecting self-care illustrates the profound emotional toll surveillance takes on female workers.

Physical and mental health consequences of Amazon's bathroom policies

Amazon's surveillance goes beyond productivity tracking, infringing on workers' basic physiological needs. **Strict quotas make bathroom access difficult for 23% of employees**, as time away from workstations is logged as "time off task." This restriction poses serious health risks for women, particularly those with menstrual needs. **Workers like Kristi and Faith** have suffered urinary tract infections from being denied restroom breaks—Faith dryly jokes about using "puppy pads" at work. But the fear is real. **Akilah** shares, "People literally pee in water bottles because they're afraid of being written up or fired." This constant surveillance makes workers feel as if even their most private activities are being monitored, echoing concerns about **online stalking** and other forms of gendered surveillance. Beyond physical harm and job insecurity, these policies foster a culture of privacy violations and humiliation, significantly reducing the self-esteem of female workers among their peers.

Social isolation and the erosion of worker solidarity

Sociologist David Lyon suggests that surveillance cultures heighten control by making individuals feel visible and exposed. In contrast, communal support can provide a crucial buffer, offering emotional support and reducing feelings of isolation. However, at Amazon, the pervasive surveillance system actively undermines the ability to form such bonds. Workers' physical proximity is constantly monitored, and supervisors are alerted when employees gather, particularly during unionization efforts.

The resulting emotional toll is evident in cases like Harper, who was reassigned to isolation after speaking out about workplace policies, saying "it really took a toll on me mentally. They moved me from pick to pack, where you're isolated. There's no community. There's no people. I wasn't in a good place. I think I cried every day." Nearly half of Amazon workers talk less to colleagues due to surveillance concerns and warehouses remain eerily silent, with little interaction beyond the beeping of scan guns and verbal managerial orders. This enforced isolation makes it even harder for female workers to build solidarity and cope with the emotional strain of constant monitoring.

The intersectional burden of surveillance on Women of Color

African American and Latina women experience Amazon's surveillance at disproportionately higher rates – 60% of African American women report feeling monitored "always" or "most of the time," compared to 43% of white women. Many perceive surveillance as a disciplinary tool rather than a productivity aid, reinforcing racialized labor control. One African American worker describes the indignity of having to justify basic bodily movements, stating "I have to explain why I need to move my body. Am I not a human being?" Another worker recounts the mental toll of random security checks, sharing, "if you get pulled for a security check, it does something to you mentally. I'm afraid. Are you trying to plant something on me?" Such hyper-surveillance practices strip workers of their autonomy while evoking the violent labor control systems historically inflicted on communities of color. During peak seasons, some African American women compare their experience to slavery. One worker calls Amazon's conditions a "slave mentality work environment."

Conclusion

As surveillance technologies continue to proliferate in the post-pandemic era, it is crucial to recognize their detrimental effects on the most vulnerable workers, as highlighted by feminist and intersectional frameworks. Future research should explore workplace reforms that limit surveillance, strengthen labor unions' ability to challenge intrusive monitoring, and push for policies that protect workers' privacy. Unions can mobilize by raising awareness, training representatives, and advocating for grievance mechanisms that ensure workers can report concerns without retaliation.

Ensuring transparency in data handling and allowing workers to have a say in how their data is used are essential first steps toward fostering a more equitable and just work environment across industries. By amplifying their voices and advocating for systemic change, we can create a future where labor practices uphold respect, dignity, and the well-being of all workers.

FLA Student Committee biographies

Authors and Peer Editors

BRIDGET FAHEY, AUTHOR AND EDITOR

Bridget Fahey is a junior political science major at Boise State University, with a deep passion for worker advocacy and economic justice. She is dedicated to understanding and addressing the systemic challenges that impact workers' rights and economic equality. In her free time, Bridget enjoys fishing, camping, woodworking, gardening, and riding her bike on Boise's greenbelt.

VASTY JEAN FRANÇOIS, AUTHOR

Vasty Jean Francois is a graduating senior at Lewis & Clark College, majoring in international affairs and environmental studies. Being from Haiti, a country where garment workers' conditions are often neglected, Vasty is interested in issues surrounding sustainable supply chains and corporate social responsibility within global industries. He is also an avid enthusiast of strategic energy management and is currently serving as the energy efficiency intern at the Sustainability Office at Lewis & Clark College.

KENDALL LUDWIG, AUTHOR

Kendall Ludwig is a recent graduate of the University of Delaware's fashion and apparel studies 4+1 master's program. She also holds a graduate certificate in socially responsible and sustainable apparel business. Kendall has dedicated her academic career to the intersection of social responsibility, environmental sustainability, and green trade as it pertains to the textile and apparel industries. Her experience ranges from published research on post-consumer textile recycling solutions to interning for the American Apparel & Footwear Association. She seeks to continue following these passions into her professional career.

IANNA MADDEN, EDITOR

Ianna Michaela Madden is a junior at San Diego State University majoring in history with plans to attend law school after obtaining her bachelor's degree. She began attending Modesto Junior College in 2022 and transferred to SDSU in 2024. She is interested in the relationship between history, law, and human rights, and has spent much of her higher education studying historical human rights issues. She is currently a member of San Diego State University's Empowering Women in Law club and has intermittently done work as a copy editor since high school.

NOEL SEO, AUTHOR AND EDITOR

Noel Seo is a senior at Stanford University, majoring in sociology with minor in human rights and ethics in society. She has a strong background in human rights and corporate legal accountability, gained through internships with the National Labor Relations Board Division of Judges and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, which publishes the annual "Dirty Dozen" list highlighting corporations failing to combat sexual exploitation. Committed to advocating for workers and at-risk individuals, Noel plans to pursue a career in public interest law and will be attending law school this fall.

LOREN STEINBERG, AUTHOR AND EDITOR

Loren Steinberg is a Master of Science candidate at the University of Michigan in the School for Environment and Sustainability who is particularly interested in the role of corporate supply chains and how businesses can work with their suppliers to reduce their negative environmental and social impacts. She holds a bachelor's degree in environmental studies from Santa Clara University and has previous experience in renewable energy and sustainable development. Upon graduation in May, Loren will enter the fashion industry where she will leverage her expertise to promote sustainability, responsibility, and transparency.

CARSYN STIPP, AUTHOR AND EDITOR

Carsyn Stipp is a third-year international affairs student at Lewis & Clark College, set to graduate in Spring 2025. Her studies have deepened her interest in international political economics and its far-reaching effects, from her family farm in rural Illinois to laborers across the globe. As a member of the FLA Student Committee, Carsyn has developed a strong passion for labor rights, particularly those affecting children both in the United States and abroad. After graduation, she plans to teach English as a foreign language, furthering her commitment to global engagement and education.

FAIR LABOR ASSOCIATION

2033 K St NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20006, USA
+1 202 898 1000

@fairlabor.org
fairlaborassociation
fair-labor
fairlabor.org