What Countries Are in Your Closet?

by Tricia Donovan

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"What countries are in your closet?" I asked a group of GED learners at the Franklin/ Hampshire Employment and Training Consortium in rural Western Massachusetts. My intent was to get students thinking about the impact of world trade and globalization, the loss of manufacturing jobs in the United States, and the lack of unions in developing countries. But I also hoped to get students looking behind the surface of the clothing ads they "consumed" daily so that they might discover who actually made what they wore and under what conditions.

The seven women in the class began squirming this way and that, trying to get a look at their own clothing tags and those of their classmates. Having thought their garments were manufactured mainly in the United States, many were surprised to be calling out names such as Malaysia, Mauritania, and China.

That evening, students went home and collected data on ten items in their closet. For each item, they wrote out the type of clothing, its fabric content, and the name of the country in which it was made. The next day, the class created tables of the data and attempted to convert the tables into graphs. In our efforts to categorize the countries by continents, we discovered that no one could identify the large landmasses. Immediately, the atlas became everyone's friend. "Hey, Africa is the continent down here with the big bulge."

"Look here, Japan is just this tiny island off of China..."

"Where's China?"

"How do you pronounce this country: Ma-lay-sia?"

Once the geography of our clothing was firmly established, we completed graphing our data. Some tried single or double bar graphs; others struggled with pie charts that contained angle measurements calculated to create as accurate a picture as possible. As we worked together, we learned about many kinds of fabrics and speculated about where they might be made. Which countries or regions had the best land and weather for growing cotton? Which had sheep and the right climate for producing wool? Which had access to the petroleum used to manufacture synthetics?

Mostly, the women focused on the fact that the clothes they wore were made in countries they had never even heard of, such as Qatar or Bahrain. Of equal interest was the discovery that although people had garments from Asia hanging in their closets, few had any shirts, pants, or dresses from Europe. No clothing came from Australia. Hardly any items came from African countries. In fact, Asia and North America—notably China and the United States—were the most frequently represented in our closets and on our graphs. Why were the data distributed this way?

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Some students said they "buy American" to keep Americans working, and that's why many of their garments came from the United States. But what about all the clothing we had from China and other Asian countries? I suggested we look at the per-capita incomes for countries in Asia. In doing the math, we calculated what such a person would earn in a week. With these figures in front of them, students wondered how it is possible for individuals and families to survive on such small incomes.

We didn't stop there, though. We pressed on to examine sweatshops and foreign labor conditions from information distributed by alternative media. We looked at average wages, average workweeks, and working conditions in different parts of the world. Why did people make so little money, even though they labored long and hard? Who really profits if not the workers? Several students said that they now had a real sense of what it means to be poor.

Most of the students in the class had never read or heard about such working conditions, or that workers on other continents often labored without health care, retirement funds, worker's compensation, or the right to organize for those benefits. Suddenly, our clothes seemed more than simple necessities or fancy fashion statements. They represented the world—our world—with all its inequities. No longer could students open their closets without thinking about the countries and people represented by the clothes hanging there.

- Resources for researching per capita incomes include: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/socind/inc-eco.htm and www.prb.org/datafind/datafinder6.htm.
- Press for Change, Box 161, Alpine, NJ 07620; National Labor Committee, 275 Seventh Avenue, New York NY 10001; and Sweatshop Watch: www.sweatshopwatch.org.

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