



Partnering with the People Who Make Our Clothing

How Fair Trade makes an impact

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Helena Barbour is one of the driving forces behind our partnership with Fair Trade USA and the ongoing initiative to steadily increase the number of Fair Trade products at Patagonia. We spoke with her to get some insight into the early steps she took to usher in this companywide change.

Why did you want to create a Fair Trade apparel line?

In early 2014, I visited several factories in Sri Lanka with our production team. It reminded me that although we purchase clothes based on fabric and fit in the store, the people who make our clothes are a huge part of the equation and are often forgotten. Most people—including myself—know very little about the people who make our clothing.

I came back wanting to do something, and after a colleague mentioned Fair Trade USA (FTUSA) was in the early stages of partnering with apparel companies, I was hopeful that this could be a tangible solution to empowering workers.

FTUSA provided the link between what I saw in the factories and how we could make further improvements. And in terms of the opportunity to scale, I knew that we could use the sportswear product line to amplify the really good work our social responsibility team was already doing in our factories.

One of the most empowering aspects of the FTUSA program is that a brand pays a premium to a worker's fund, and through a democratic process, workers decide how to spend the money. By making workers central figures in financial decision-making, it creates a true sense of partnership.

Because we were able to work with FTUSA, everything happened quite quickly, and it was a matter of months before we had a program in place. We were able to launch 10 styles in June 2014.

What happened next?

We weren't sure what to expect, but early on we realized the benefits extended way beyond just paying premiums directly to workers. It opened up constructive dialogue between workers and management, and engaged workers directly in making collective decisions about how to use premiums.

Sometimes the factory owners would ask, "Why don't you just pay us more, and we'll pay workers more?" But having a third party like FTUSA monitoring the program was important. We can't just say to our customers, "We're doing the right thing," and expect them to blindly trust us.

How did workers use the Fair Trade premiums?

For me, that was when the program really came alive. We have seen the premiums used in a variety of ways, from water filters in every worker's home to a cash bonus at the end of the year. But what was surprising was that it wasn't always an obvious benefit that served the majority.

For example, in Sri Lanka, the workers voted on a day care center, which serves the mothers and fathers who work in the factory. While not every worker will benefit from this directly, as a whole, the workforce felt it was worthwhile to have a program that helped parents maintain their jobs, which, in the end, benefits everyone at the factory. The way the premiums are used takes on the character of the people participating in the program.

What would you say to someone who doesn't know anything about Fair Trade?

The people who make our clothing deserve to be seen and recognized. Fair Trade is one way to achieve that goal. It's so much more than just paying premiums to workers. It positively affects workers' lives, but also affects factories, brands and customers who get to make informed choices. It's about a journey together to change the way we think about our clothing and the people behind it.