What’s Wrong With Sweatshop Labour: A Feminist Analysis

Abstract: In this paper I develop a feminist analysis of sweatshop labour and argue that sweatshop labour should be understood as a form of structural exploitation that is continuously reproduced. Sweatshop labour is enabled and sustained by specific structural conditions, in particular by the relational vulnerabilities which workers experience in virtue of their position within global relations of production and in virtue of their gender. In sweatshop relations, these relational vulnerabilities are used as a possibility for profit. My argument proceeds in three steps: first I develop an account of structural, reproductive exploitation. Second, I show that this account is useful to provide a normative, feminist analysis of sweatshop labour. Finally, I argue that sweatshop labour exploitation entails both a relational and a distributional wrong.

Keywords: Gender, Exploitation, Structural Vulnerability, Sweatshop Labour

Introduction

On May 24 in 1824, in a small town in Rhode Island, female textile workers took to the streets.¹ This was the beginning of the first factory strike in the United States, and the country’s first female led strike of any kind. The 1824 strike happened in reaction to a lowering of wages by 25 percent and a shortening of the meal breaks by an hour. The mill owners justified these measures by arguing that the young women already earned more than what was generally considered an appropriate wage for them. They believed that the women would passively accept these measures, yet they were wrong:

On Wednesday evening a tumultuous crowd filled the streets, led by the most unprincipled and disorderly part of the village, and made an excessive noise — they visited successively the houses of the manufacturers, shouting, exclaiming and using every imaginable term of abuse and insult. The window in the yellow mill was broken in. … The next day the manufacturers shut their gates and the mills have not run since.²

In December 2013, almost 200 years later and miles away in Cambodia, female garment workers shut down one of the most important sectors of the Cambodian econ-

¹ For a detailed description of how the strike unfolded see Joey La Neve Defrancecso (2018).
² This is a passage from Rhode Island Journal from 1824, quoted by Joey La Neve Defrancecso (2018).
omy for two weeks. Their complaints read similar to the ones brought forward by the workers in Rhode Island: ‘Our bosses make us work long hours, many times without a break and we barely make enough to survive’. Another garment worker explains

It hurts us to be paid so little. I have to do this and they sell one piece of clothing for more than I get paid in a month. We cannot eat nutritious food. We don’t have a good life, we live in pain for the rest of our life and die in pain.

In addition to the low wages and the pain associated with the life as a garment worker, there are long hours, unpaid overtime, insecure contracts, unsafe factories and abuse on the factory floor, which take a toll on the workers’ physical and psychological health. These working conditions in the garment factories have been summed up under the term sweatshop labour.

It is no accident that female workers then and now are at the forefront to voice their protest against sweatshop labour. Today, women make up about 80% of all sweatshop workers in the garment industry. From the first factory days on, women workers have earned lower wages, have been given worse positions and have faced gender-specific forms of discrimination, e.g. sexual harassment. Consequently, when they object to the working conditions in their factory, they do so in part as female workers.

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3 Theresa de Langis (2014) provides a good overview of how the strike unfolded.
4 Nun Varnak, garment factory worker in: Karishma Vaswani (2013)
5 Quote from a Guardian interview, Gethin Chamberlain (2012).
6 Historically the term sweatshop labour was used in a pejorative way to describe a system of subcontracting. See for instance: Charles Kingsley (1850). This pejorative meaning has been retained and the term is generally used to critique a specific type of labour relation.
7 Numbers are from the Clean Clothes Campaign (2015).
8 Across the garment industry, women earn less than their male co-workers, all else being equal. For instance, a study by the International Labour Organisation (2016) conducted in nine Asian countries finds that the gender pay gap is highest in Pakistan, where male workers in the garment industry earn around 48% more than female workers and India, where male workers earn around 40% more than female workers. These data are adjusted and control for a wide range of background variables, including age, marital status, education, experience, sub-national area, economic sector and occupation.
9 There are also a number of feminist analyses of sweatshop labour in the social sciences. See for instance: Jennifer Bair (2010), Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson (1981), Jane Collins (2009), Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly (1984) or Alessandra Mezzadri (2016). Yet, normative theorizing has so far paid insufficient attention to these empirical insights.
Yet, normative theorizing about sweatshop labour has so far insufficiently integrated feminist concerns. On the one hand normative evaluations of sweatshop labour have focused mainly on interactions at the micro-level, e.g. by asking whether workers enter sweatshops autonomously or whether specific transactions are fair. These micro-perspectives do not provide an analysis of the structural conditions that enable and sustain sweatshop labour. Normative analyses that take into account structural conditions, on the other hand, have focused primarily on the economic conditions that make workers vulnerable. Both perspectives, however, fail to take into account the way in which economic vulnerability intersects with gender-specific vulnerability in a way that makes workers exploitable.

With this paper I aim to close this gap in normative theories of sweatshop labour, by integrating a feminist concern into a structural analysis of sweatshop labour. I argue that we should think of sweatshop labour as a form of structural exploitation that is continuously reproduced. Sweatshop employers use the structurally embedded, relational vulnerabilities of sweatshop workers to benefit. Sweatshop labour is wrong on this account, as the vulnerability of the workers is turned into a condition for profit, at the same time that the workers’ wellbeing is not taken into account. This violates both relational- and distributional norms.

My argument in this paper is sweatshop specific. This means that I do not aim to develop a general theory of exploitation here. Instead I argue for an account of exploitation that can account for the way in which sweatshop labour is structurally embedded and for the crucial role of gender in sweatshop labour. While my account of structural exploitation is in principle able to capture other instances of exploitation, I do not make this argument here. My argument proceeds in three steps. First I develop a general theory of structural exploitation in global relations of production (2017, 2016) and Iris Young’s analysis of global labour relations (2011). My account shares McKeown’s and Young’s focus on the structural conditions, in particular on gender inequality. Yet, the vulnerability-based account of exploitation that I develop focuses more specifically on the particular relationality in sweatshop labour and how this turns into exploitation. In this sense I see my account as complementary to theirs.

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10 Important exemptions are Maeve McKeown’s account of structural exploitation in global relations of production (2017, 2016) and Iris Young’s analysis of global labour relations (2011). My account shares McKeown’s and Young’s focus on the structural conditions, in particular on gender inequality. Yet, the vulnerability-based account of exploitation that I develop focuses more specifically on the particular relationality in sweatshop labour and how this turns into exploitation. In this sense I see my account as complementary to theirs.


12 See for instance Michael Neu (2017) or (Mayer 2007).

13 Different authors have also pointed to the importance of race in positioning sweatshop workers in specific ways, e.g. McKeown (2017). According to McKeown, colonialism and processes of racist subjugation have made available a global reserve army of cheap labour in the Global South from which sweatshop employers can draw.
op an account of structural exploitation. Second, I show how this account can be used to provide a normative, feminist analysis of sweatshop labour. Finally, I outline what is wrong with sweatshop labour on this account.

**A Vulnerability-Based Account of Structural Exploitation**

Before I outline the necessary and sufficient conditions of structural exploitation it is important to make one preliminary remark. I take exploitation to be a moral notion. Consequently, to say that something is exploitation is to say that it entails a moral wrong.

On my account, there are two necessary conditions for structural exploitation that are jointly sufficient. One party, A exploits another party, B iff

1. B is relationally vulnerable to A in virtue of her social position
2. A uses B’s relational vulnerability in a way that benefits A more and B less compared to a situation where B is not relationally vulnerable to A

In what follows I spell out these conditions and show why exploitation, so understood, allows for a plausible and comprehensive analysis of sweatshop labour.

**B Is Relationally Vulnerable to A in Virtue of Her Social Position**

**General vulnerability**

To make sense of the claim that B is relationally vulnerable to A in virtue of her social position, it is in a first step necessary to spell out what it means for B to be vulnerable in general. On my understanding B is vulnerable if the following conditions apply:

i. There is a threat to B’s wellbeing

ii. B lacks or cannot exercise the capacity to protect herself against the threat

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14 This account is structurally similar to Nicholas Vrousalis’ (2013) vulnerability-based account of exploitation. My account differs from his in two aspects: (1) my notion of vulnerability is broader in that it includes non-economic vulnerabilities; (2) on my account any act of benefitting from a relational vulnerability is an act of exploitation, whereas on his account only acts of benefitting that are in some sense disrespectful or that subordinate the other party are.

15 Some argue that exploitation should be understood as a technical term, e.g. Allen Wood (1995). For a critique of this view see Nancy Holmstrom (1977). I am not interested in entering this debate. While there might be a sense in which the concept of exploitation can be used in a mere technical way, I do not aim to engage in conceptual analysis here. Instead my focus lies on the morality of an interaction where one party takes advantage of another’s vulnerability to benefit. There are reasons to think that the concept of exploitation is a good tool to capture this. But nothing hinges on calling it exploitation.

16 A and B can be individuals or group agents.
i. There is a threat to B’s wellbeing

In the most general sense, someone is vulnerable if she is in some way susceptible to harm or injury (Goodin 1986, 110). As such, the notion of vulnerability entails a reference to something that affects the agent in an important sense. It is counter-intuitive to think that someone is vulnerable if something of no importance to her is threatened. Imagine someone tells me that she will eat one of my blueberries should I not comply with her demands. Given that it does not matter to me in any significant way whether I have one blueberry more or less, I am not vulnerable to her. The notion of vulnerability therefore should entail some reference to the way in which the agent’s wellbeing will be affected if the threat materializes.

While I think some reference to wellbeing (or a similar matrix) is a necessary component of the notion of vulnerability, I here remain agnostic with regards to how different theories of wellbeing spell out this notion. This is for the following reason: the interests affected in sweatshop labour relations are basic interests. They include in particular food, shelter, medical care and clothing. While different theories of wellbeing disagree on a number of aspects, they all include at least these interests in their notion of wellbeing. To say that someone is vulnerable, therefore, is to say that her wellbeing is threatened where this entails at least a reference to these basic interests. I do not, however, argue that the notion of vulnerability cannot be more capacious than this. It is plausible to assume that wellbeing includes more than just the satisfaction of basic interests. Membership in a community, access to education or opportunities for meaningful work are all goods that can plausibly be considered to be important for an agent’s wellbeing. At this point, however, I will not develop a comprehensive notion of vulnerability. Since my analysis is sweatshop specific, it is sufficient to show that an agent is vulnerable if her basic interests are affected and that this is the case in sweatshop labour relations.

Now, the mere fact that B’s wellbeing can be affected does not make her vulnerable. A further condition for vulnerability is that her wellbeing is threatened. In that sense

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17 The main theories of wellbeing I refer to are hedonist theories, desire theories and objective list theories.
18 For instance, Sally Haslanger (2009, 99) has differentiated between essential goods which an agent needs to live a minimally decent life, basic goods, which an agent needs to live a good or meaningful life and luxury goods which allow the agent to live a flourishing life. Depending on one’s preferred theory of wellbeing different goods can be integrated into the notion of vulnerability and consequently the notion can be more or less capacious.
being vulnerable means being at risk of rather than being doomed to being affected in one’s wellbeing. As Robert Goodin (1986, 112) notes, it would be too weak to speak of vulnerability if the harm was unavoidable. The difference between being vulnerable and being doomed is that there is a threat, which could somehow be fended off. This threat can be natural, e.g. a hurricane threatens to destroy people’s houses; or it can be social, e.g. a landlord threatens to evict her tenants. Independent of the nature of the threat, it is important to note that a vulnerable agent is not herself in a position to protect herself against the threat. To the extent that B is in a position to reliably fend off the threat, she is not vulnerable. This brings me to the second condition.

ii. B cannot exercise the capacity to protect herself against the threat

There are different ways in which B might be unable to protect herself against a threat. B might lack the capacity to protect herself altogether, e.g. in cases where she suffers from a specific disease. To say that B is vulnerable in virtue of her social position means, however, that B’s inability to protect herself is a function of a structural constraint. The constraint is structural in cases where the lack of a capacity or the inability to exercise a capacity is structurally embedded. In that sense, the vulnerability comes about as a result of the ways in which different individuals go about their daily lives thereby following rules, norms and expectations which in turn find their expression in the social institutions and practices of society (Young 1990, 41). These norms, rules and institutions both enable and constrain actors, as they determine the range of options available to them and thereby position them in specific ways. As a result of these structural processes, some people are prevented from developing and exercising the very capacities they need to protect themselves against threats to their wellbeing. One crucial aspect about structural constraints is that they do not affect agents in merely accidental ways. Structural constraints work on agents in virtue of

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19 I here agree with Goodin (1986, 191) who claims that “some of the most important dependencies and vulnerabilities seem to be almost wholly social in character.” Even the lack of certain capacities that prima facie seems to be non-social often turn out to be a function of a social relation.

20 Young (1990, 38) refers to this as a form of oppression. Understood in this way, the vulnerability relations that exercise me here are prima facie morally problematic. In this sense, they are different from other types of vulnerability relations, e.g. such as parent-child relations that might constitute morally valuable relations.
their social position within a structure. The social position that agents occupy structures the options available to them. For instance, whether someone is a worker or owns capital will significantly affect the options available to her to protect her well-being.

Importantly, the notion of general vulnerability still captures too much for an account of exploitation. On an abstract level, all human beings are generally vulnerable: we are not self-sufficient beings, but depend on each other for the fulfilment of our important interests. The type of vulnerability that matters for exploitation, however, is more specific. There needs to be an agent in a position to take advantage of the vulnerability and hence to exploit. Therefore, it is important to say more about the type of relation that positions agents in ways where they are able to exploit and become exploitable respectively. We need a notion of vulnerability that captures this relation. I will turn to outline such a relation in what follows and argue that in addition to being generally vulnerable, B also needs to be asymmetrically dependent on A for the protection of her wellbeing. This brings A in a position where she can take advantage of B. I will call this relational vulnerability.

**Relational, structural vulnerability**

On my account, B is relationally vulnerable to A iff

i. A is in a social position to protect B’s wellbeing from a threat
ii. B depends on A for the protection of her wellbeing
iii. A does not depend on B for the protection of her wellbeing

I will spell out the above conditions in more detail and explain how this type of vulnerability makes B exploitable.

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21 Different authors have spelled this out with reference to membership in a social group. See for instance: Haslanger (2004, 107–11) or Young (1990, 42–48). I am sympathetic to spelling out social position in this way, but I do not aim to enter the discussion of what constitutes a social group here. I therefore use the broader term of social position.

22 My notion of relational vulnerability is similar to the notion of relational vulnerability that Vrousalis (2013, 133) develops in his account of exploitation. My notion of vulnerability is, however, broader than Vrousalis’ insofar as it allows for an inclusion of gender-specific vulnerabilities. My understanding of relational vulnerability is also structurally similar to the notion of domination, c.f. Philip Pettit (1997, 52) or Frank Lovett (2010, 120). If B is vulnerable to A, then A has the capacity to arbitrarily interfere with B’s choices. I am, however, less interested in how A can limit B’s freedom. Instead I want to analyse how B’s relational vulnerability gives A the power to determine the terms of the contract.
To move from general to relational vulnerability means in the first place, to identify agents whom B is vulnerable to. These are agents who are in a social position to protect B against a threat to her wellbeing in cases where B cannot do so herself. In the most general sense this means that A has the capacity to do so in virtue of the social position she occupies. A can use that capacity by enabling B to access and to exercise her own capacities, or by providing B with the means that B needs. For instance, if A is a capitalist and B is a worker who needs to sell her labour to sustain herself, then, in virtue of her position as a capitalist, A can provide B with the means that B needs, namely waged labour. While it is a necessary condition for relational vulnerability that A is in a position to protect B from the threat, it needs to be complemented with further conditions. For A might be one among many agents so positioned, and consequently, B could turn to different agents and would consequently not have to rely on A. Therefore, there needs to be a second condition, namely that B depends on A for the protection of her interest.

ii. B depends on A for the protection of her wellbeing

To say that B is relationally vulnerable to A in virtue of her social position, is to say that the structural constraints she faces make her dependent on A for the protection of her wellbeing. This does not mean that A does not face any structural constraints herself. But it means that the constraints affect A differently to B in a way that makes B dependent on A. There are different degrees to which B might depend on A. First, A might be in a monopoly position. If A is the only agent who is in a position to protect B’s wellbeing, B’s dependence on A is very high. Consider the following example. B is a worker and A is a capitalist. B needs paid work to sustain herself, and A happens to be the only employer that can offer B work. A is hence in a position to determine the terms of the contract. Given B’s lack of better alternatives, she cannot reasonably refuse the offer that A makes. Contrary to that, if there were many employment options for B, B would not have to rely on A for paid work and would consequently not be dependant on A.

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23 Goodin (1986, 112) argues that vulnerability is always relational. Accordingly, “one is always vulnerable to particular agents with regard to particular threats”. I am not committed to the claim that vulnerability is necessarily relational in this sense and that someone counts as vulnerable only if there is an agent who can do something about it. I here make the weaker claim that for an analysis of exploitation only relational vulnerability matters.
There are, however, two scenarios in which even a greater number of agents with the ability to protect B’s important interest would not eliminate B’s dependence on A. First, other agents might be unwilling to do something about B’s vulnerability or unaware of B’s need for help. Second, A might be one of many agents, all of whom offer similar terms to those offered by A. Go back to the capitalist and the worker. Now assume that A is not the only agent who offers B work. B can also turn to C, D, or E (who are capitalists like A) and work for them. All of them, however, offer similar terms to those offered by A. While B now has different options, none of them is better than what A offers. In some cases, the fact that different agents offer the same terms can result from collusion. Yet, often there is no collusion and the terms simply result from structural constraints. In the capitalist example, B has the choice between working for capitalist A or for capitalist C, D, or E, yet she does not have the choice not to work for any capitalist at all. She lacks alternative options to protect herself against the threat of being unable to sustain herself. B cannot, for instance, decide that instead of working for A, C, or D, she will simply grow her own food on A’s land. In so doing, B would violate capitalist property rights and A could enforce these rights against B. Yet, while B needs to work for a capitalist, she is not bound to work for a particular capitalist. Different capitalists have no power to individually determine whom B will work for and on which terms. But the structure of capitalism prevents B from not working for any of them. This in turn affects what terms B might be able to secure within this structure. Now, if A and B interact within a given structure, this means that both their actions are constrained in certain ways. However, within this structure, agents hold different social positions that allow them unequal room to manoeuvre, as I will now turn to argue. This makes it the case that B relies more on A to secure her wellbeing than A does on B.

**iii. A does not depend on B for the protection of her wellbeing**

The third condition for relational vulnerability is that A does not rely on B (or does not solely rely on B) to protect her wellbeing. Why does that matter? Imagine the following case: assume that A owns machines and B is a worker. Further assume that B

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24 If the degree of collusion crosses a certain threshold, A can be understood as a group agent.

25 Alex Gourevitch (2013, 6) calls this a form of structural domination. While B might be free to choose not to work for a particular capitalist, she is not free not to work for a capitalist at all.
depends on A, since she has no other options to sustain herself. Now assume that B is the only worker who could work for A and that A needs B to work her machines or else she cannot sustain herself (imagine that A does not have the skills to work the machines herself). In this case both A and B are dependent on each other for the protection of their respective wellbeing (and I stipulate that they depend on each other to equal degrees). In this case B is not relationally vulnerable to A. Both parties face equally high costs for exiting the relation and are therefore equally interested in keeping it going.

Now, one could argue that in this case A and B are mutually vulnerable to each other and therefore this still counts as a case of relational vulnerability. While nothing hinges on calling it *relational vulnerability*, it is important to keep in mind at this point that I develop the concept of relational vulnerability to provide an understanding of why one party is in a position where she can exploit the other. If A and B are genuinely mutually vulnerable, neither will be in a position to take advantage of the other. This is not to say that if B is relationally vulnerable to A in one dimension, she is also necessarily relationally vulnerable in another. In thinking about relational vulnerabilities, we also need to take into account how different vulnerabilities intersect. There will be cases where A is in a position to take advantage of B in one situation, and B is in position to take advantage of A in another. Yet, the crucial point is that in situations where A and B really are mutually vulnerable, these vulnerabilities cancel each other out in a way that neither party is able to take advantage of the other. I will now explain in which cases A is in a position where she does not depend on B. This is the case when A has options available to her that will satisfy her important interest for which she does not need B. This gives her greater room to manoeuvre.

If the vulnerability relations is structurally sustained, this means that A and B are socially positioned in ways that affect their option sets in different ways. That means,

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26 In that sense, one might think that there can be cases of mutual exploitation. For instance, a child might take advantage of her mother’s love for her by asking her for a lot of money. The mother, on the other hand, might take advantage of her child’s economical dependence by making her do the chores. That there are cases of mutual exploitations is consistent with there still being an asymmetrical vulnerability relation within different dimensions and at different points in time.

27 Tommie Shelby (2002, 393) develops an account of exploitation that includes the possibility that the exploiter A is forced to exploit B. Yet, he argues that there needs to be an asymmetry of power between A and B for A to be able to take advantage of B in a way that constitutes exploitation.
A and B interact within structures that constrain their actions to different degrees.\textsuperscript{28} If B is relationally vulnerable and A holds relational power over B, the constraints work differently for her than they do for B. In her discussion of gender oppression, Marilyn Frye (2000, 14) argues that structural constraints affect actors in different ways. The constraints work in the favour of some and to the disadvantage of others. Accordingly,

...barriers have different meanings to those on opposite sides of them, even though they are barriers to both. (...) A set of social and economic barriers and forces separating two groups may be felt, even painfully, by members of both groups and yet may mean confinement to one and liberty and enlargement of opportunity to the other.\textsuperscript{29}

We can therefore think of the relation between a vulnerable and a powerful party as marking two sides of the same coin. Structural constraints that sustain one party’s position of power, often sustain another party’s position of vulnerability. For instance, the enforcement of private property gives capitalists the possibility to accumulate capital while it works to the disadvantage of those who do not own property. Constraints affect people in virtue of their social position and they affect them differently depending on where that position is located within a structure.\textsuperscript{30} Importantly, not all actors who occupy a similar social position are affected in exactly the same way. Constraints work, as Jeffrey Reiman (1987, 12) points out, in a more or less statistical way. They affect actors “by imposing an array of fates on some group while leaving it open how particular individuals in that group get sorted, or sort them-

\textsuperscript{28} Clarissa Hayward (2000, 3) develops a conception of power that understands power “as a network of boundaries that delimit, for all, the field of what is socially possible”. She thereby moves away from a dichotomy between powerful and powerless, I believe Hayward is right to emphasise how structural constraints work on all actors affected by a structure, though they might work differently depending on different agents’ respective positions within a social structure.

\textsuperscript{29} Frye uses a bird-cage analogy to analyse women’s oppression. Accordingly, we should understand oppression as a set of wires that constitute a cage that keeps oppressed people in. While each of the wires individually looks like it can be overcome, we need to look at the whole cage to see the network of systematically related barriers.

\textsuperscript{30} According to Haslanger (2016: 127), “structures socially constrain our behaviour by making certain kinds of things available (or not), by providing templates of interaction that favour (or discourage) certain forms of coordination with respect to a resource and by canalizing our attitudes accordingly”. Depending on how these different factors play out, the constraints provide different agents with more or less room to manoeuvre.
selves, into those fates.”31 In that sense, all members of a specific group have a certain set of options available to them. Yet, the concrete options and how actors can choose from them vary. A has greater room to manoeuvre if the constraints leave her enough options available that will protect her wellbeing without having to rely on B.

A’s greater room to manoeuvre is also affected by the degree to which A is in a position to change the constraints in her favour. Some actors within a structure are positioned in a way that allows them to substantially affect the rules of the game, take for instance powerful lobbyists. Therefore, to satisfy the third condition, the constraints either need to work in A’s favour (and/or not in her disfavour) and/or A is in a position to change them in a way that they do. Again, it is important to point out that this does not mean that B will never be in a position to change the terms in her favour, e.g. a successful strike might bring workers in a position where they can bring about better working conditions. Yet, there is an asymmetry with regards to how reliable and robust A’s and B’s respective capacity is to affect the terms.

In sum: B is relationally vulnerable to A in virtue of her social position if the following three conditions hold: 1) A is in a social position to protect B’s wellbeing from a threat (where wellbeing includes at least basic needs); 2) B depends on A for this protection; 3) A does not equally depend on B for protection. I assume that the antonym of relational vulnerability, understood as a type of asymmetrical dependence, is relational power. Consequently, if B is relationally vulnerable to A, then A holds relational power over B. A can be more or less powerful vis-à-vis B, depending on the degree to which the individual conditions are fulfilled. This in turn affects the degree to which A can set the terms of the exchange.

31 While Reiman is concerned with structural force, I believe that the idea of the statistical effects of structural force on individuals is equally applicable to the notion of vulnerability. Importantly, Reiman is primarily concerned with the way in which the vulnerable are affected by the constraints that structures place on them. In my understanding of the vulnerability relations, both the powerful and the vulnerable are constrained, albeit in different ways.
A Uses B’s Relational Vulnerability to Benefit in a Specific Way

To say that A uses B’s relational vulnerability is to say that B, in some relevant sense, reacts to A’s power over B by doing what A wants her to do.\(^3^2\) Contrary to situations where A uses force to get B to do what A wants, relational vulnerability entails that there is some degree of choice available to the vulnerable agent.\(^3^3\) While these choices might be extremely unattractive, the agent is still in a position to actively do one thing or another. This means that the agent is actively engaged in the interaction.\(^3^4\)

Now, for exploitation it is not sufficient that A uses B’s relational vulnerability. Assume that a parent makes use of the relational vulnerability of her child by telling the child: if you do not do your homework, I will not speak to you for the next days. While there seems to be something wrong with a parent threatening her child in this way, this wrong is not best captured with the concept of exploitation. Instead, we can easily describe this as an abuse of power, where A gets B to do what A wants in virtue of her position of relational power. Exploitation requires something on top of this. And this something, as I will now turn to argue, is that A benefits in a specific way from using B’s relational vulnerability. Benefit as a necessary condition of exploitation keeps exploitation conceptually distinct from wrongful use of power.\(^3^5\) It adds a normative concern to concerns about power abuse, which can be captured by an account of exploitation.

I propose that A exploits B if she uses B’s relational vulnerability to gain a benefit in a way that benefits A more and B less, compared to a counterfactual situation where B

\(^{32}\) According to Vrousalis (2013, 138), to say that A has power over B is to say that “A is able to get B to \(\phi\) for reason S and B would not have \(\phi\)-ed for S if A had not done (or failed to do) whatever he did (or failed to do) that bears on B’s decision to \(\phi\).” This also applies to cases where B’s relational vulnerability is grounded in her emotional dependence on A. B might for instance be deeply in love with A or admire A in a way that she would do anything A says.

\(^{33}\) The line between relational vulnerability and outright force is not always clear-cut. The choice between ‘your money or your life’ does involve some choice, but it is so unattractive that one can hardly speak of choice at all. Some forms of vulnerability might entail a similar choice structure.

\(^{34}\) This is also different in cases where the agent is unconscious or when she is sleeping.

\(^{35}\) In cases where A seeks to benefit but fails to secure the benefit, I believe that it is more adequate to say that A attempts to exploit but fails to do so. This is not a clear-cut condition. If A is a capitalist and exploits her workers but all her money gets stolen a few days later, I believe it is plausible to say that at t1 A has in fact exploited her workers, even though at t2 she has failed to protect the benefit.
is not relationally vulnerable to A. As such, B’s relational vulnerability to A becomes a condition for the type of benefit that A can secure. Differently put, B’s relational vulnerability leads her to accept terms, which she would not have accepted but for her relational vulnerability; and these terms benefit A and B disproportionally compared to a baseline of no-relational vulnerability. If A uses B’s relational vulnerability in this way to benefit, she takes advantage of B’s relational vulnerability. To further clarify this, this form of advantage taking needs to be differentiated from taking advantage of someone who is vulnerable. Imagine I am slipstreaming on a cycling trip and it so happens that the person in whose slipstream I cycle has a disease that makes her vulnerable, e.g. a hearing impairment. Let us stipulate, however, that while the hearing impairment makes her vulnerable in other aspects of her life, e.g. she needs hearing aides to participate in conversations, it does not limit her ability to cycle in any way. While the person is vulnerable, my advantage taking is not explained by her vulnerability. I could cycle in her slipstream, even if the person did not have this impairment.

I have clarified what it means for A to use B’s relational vulnerability to benefit in a way that constitutes exploitation. If A uses B’s relational vulnerability to benefit, and A would have benefitted less and B would have benefitted more in a counterfactual situation without relational vulnerability, then A exploits B. This unequal distribution reflects and materializes A’s relational power over B. I now want to consider one objection to this view.

**Objection to my view**

Richard Arneson (2016, 10) has critiqued vulnerability-based accounts of exploitation on the grounds that taking advantage of vulnerability is not sufficient for exploitation. We can think of advantage taking of a vulnerability that is morally innocent, 

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36 I here remain agnostic with regards to the type of benefit that A secures. The benefit of exploitation has so far mainly been spelled out in economic terms, specifically in terms of its commodity value. Yet, it is not necessary to restrict the notion of exploitation to commodity exploitation. Feminist thinkers as well as critical race theorists have long pointed out that exploitation can bring about different forms of benefit, among them status enhancement or emotional support. For discussion of this form of exploitation see: Ann Ferguson (1989); Federica Gregoratto (2017); Mirjam Müller (2018) or Iris Young (1990: 50-51).

37 A.J. Julius (2013, 362) develops a definition of power according to which A has power over B if she gets B to do x for reason S, and B would not have done x had A not done (or failed to do) what she did. Similarly, Vrousalis (2018) calls this a ‘power-dependent’ fact. Accordingly, A has power over B if she gets B to do something, and B only does it for power-dependent reasons.
e.g. when a surgeon operates on a dying patient and makes a decent living of this.\textsuperscript{38} In the following, I will show that Arneson conflates two types of vulnerability, \textit{general} vulnerability and \textit{relational} vulnerability. His objection to vulnerability-based accounts only affects vulnerability-based accounts that rely on a notion of general vulnerability. But I show that this critique does not affect my account.

On my account, the surgeon does not take advantage of the patient’s \textit{relational vulnerability at all}, as the patient’s vulnerability does not explain the surgeon’s benefit in the relevant sense. Imagine the following case. There is a town with many surgeons who are equally well positioned to perform surgeries. Now assume that I desperately need surgery, as my appendix is about to break. Let us further assume that I try to go to different surgeons, but all of them are either too busy or unwilling to operate. There is only one who will operate and, not knowing that she is in a monopoly position, she charges me the same price she would have charged had there been competition.\textsuperscript{39} Now, imagine that the surgeon is made aware of her monopoly position and as a result raises the prices. In that case, the surgeon takes advantage of my relational vulnerability and hence exploits. There are then two scenarios:

\textit{Scenario 1 (S1)}: The surgeon is aware of her monopoly position, but charges the price (P1) she would have charged had she not been in this position

\textit{Scenario 2 (S2)}: The surgeon is aware of her monopoly position and charges a higher price (P2) as the result of it.

The surgeon only takes advantage of my \textit{relational vulnerability} in S2. P2 is explained by my relational vulnerability, while P1 is not, as the surgeon would have charged the same price had I not been relationally vulnerable to her. In Arneson’s understanding, whenever the surgeon takes advantage of her position as a surgeon and therefore of her capacity to perform surgeries, she is also taking advantage of my \textit{relational vulnerability}. But this is false. The surgeon only takes advantage of the gen-

\textsuperscript{38} While Arneson’s example is not an example of an act of taking advantage of a relational vulnerability which the agent experiences in virtue of her social position, his point and my objection to it apply also to the case of structural vulnerabilities.

\textsuperscript{39} At this point my account looks very similar to Alan Wertheimer’s (1999) account of exploitation: He argues that exploitation consists in the deviation from a hypothetical fair market price, where a hypothetical fair market price is the price that would be paid under perfect competition and information. Importantly, nothing in my account hinges on the competitive market price being the only, or indeed the relevant, baseline for non-exploitative relations. While the lack of competition can be one factor that makes someone relationally vulnerable, my account is not limited to competitive markets.
eral vulnerability that I experience in virtue of the threat the appendicitis presents, and in virtue of my inability to protect myself against it without help. She does not, however, take advantage of my relational vulnerability to her. She neither makes use of my dependence on her, nor of her greater room to manoeuvre to determine the terms as she pleases. Therefore, to say that A exploits B if A takes advantage of B’s relational vulnerability does not, as Arneson claims, over-generate charges of exploitation. Arneson’s argument only shows that taking advantage of a general vulnerability is not sufficient for exploitation.

In sum: A exploits B if the following three conditions are fulfilled: (1) B is relationally vulnerable to A in virtue of her social position, (2) A uses B’s relational vulnerability, and (3) A benefits more from using B’s relational vulnerability and B benefits less compared to the benefit both could have gotten had B not been relationally vulnerable to A. There are hence two elements that my account of exploitation relies on: a specific vulnerability relation, and an interaction, which brings about a distribution that reflects this vulnerability relation. I will now turn to show why exploitation so understood is a good tool to provide a normative, feminist analysis of sweatshop labour.

**Sweatshop Labour Exploitation**

In the following, I will start by outlining the relevant vulnerability relation between sweatshop employers and sweatshop workers. I then move on to show how sweatshop employers take advantage of sweatshop workers, such that it constitutes exploitation. Finally, I draw attention to the specific reproductive aspect of sweatshop labour exploitation.

**Relational vulnerabilities in sweatshop labour**

The most obvious relational vulnerability that comes to mind when talking about sweatshop labour is the *economic vulnerability* of sweatshop workers. The workers’ economic vulnerability can be understood in the classic Marxist sense. Private ownership in the means of production gives capitalists “the power to subjugate the labour of others [the workers]” (Engels and Marx [1848] 2015). Accordingly,
“the ‘free worker’, (...) makes a voluntary agreement, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity for labour, in return for the price of his customary means of subsistence, to sell his birthright for a mess of pottage” (Marx [1867] 1992, 382).

This economic vulnerability is sustained by the workers’ lack of acceptable alternatives. Sweatshops tend to be set up in regions that lack social security programs, which would protect the workers from the worst forms of unemployment. At the same time, peasants are increasingly forced to give up their land and hence their means of subsistence. This, combined with the general lack of decent jobs, means that the workers rely on sweatshop employers to provide them with waged labour to sustain themselves. While workers have alternatives to sweatshop labour, e.g. they could work for local employers, these alternatives tend to be worse than sweatshop labour. Sweatshop labour hence often presents the best available option for the workers to protect their basic needs and therefore their wellbeing. Sweatshop employers in turn have greater room to manoeuvre. While they are also constrained in virtue of their social position as capitalists, the constraints work in their favour. One of capital’s strategic advantages over labour is the ease with which it can cross borders and as a result can threaten workers to move production elsewhere should labour become too expensive. Labour mobility across borders, however, is regulated by various barriers, in particular by visa politics and occupational licensing. In addition, sweatshop employers often tend to have a high lobbying power and are thereby in a position to affect the rules of the game, e.g. by pressing for weak labour protection laws. This makes sweatshop workers relationally vulnerable to sweatshop employers.

But sweatshop workers are not only economically vulnerable. About 80% of the sweatshop workers are women. Female workers are vulnerable not only in virtue of their position as workers, but specifically in virtue of their position as female workers. Gender inequality plays out differently in different regional contexts of sweatshop

40 For a detailed analysis of how sweatshop wages compare to wages paid in alternative employment see Benjamin Powell (2014, 56–57). Powell shows that wages in sweatshops across different countries are consistently higher than wages paid in alternative employment, in particular wages paid in agriculture.
41 For discussion of the changing nature of the employer-employee relation see Jeroen Merk (2009, 603).
42 Ozay Mehmet et al. (2013, 18) discuss the systematic asymmetry between labour and capital in globalized markets and advocate for a stricter rule-based regulation of the global labour market.
labour. Generally, however, it means that women have a fewer options protecting their wellbeing than men. This access is blocked both by material conditions and specific gender roles.

The material constraints include among other things legal rights that discriminate against women. They also include the lack of welfare state measures that are particularly important for women. For instance cutbacks related to childcare services or care for the elderly disproportionately affect women due to their primary caring responsibilities. As Alison Jaggar (2001, 306) has argued, as a result of reductions in social services women have to absorb these reductions with their own unpaid labour. One of the effects of this are higher school drop-out rates of girls, who take on caring tasks from an early age. They thereby forgo better education opportunities, which in turn leads to fewer employment opportunities later on.

But women also face non-material constraints as a result of specific gender roles. These roles tend to associate women’s primary identity with being mothers and housewives while they ascribe men the role of a breadwinner and worker. This means that women are not seen as fit for certain types of male-dominated industries, which places constraints on women to enter these jobs. This is one reason why women are drawn in particular to the sweatshops in the garment industry. Working in the garment industry is a type of labour that is considered appropriate for women, as it involves tasks that are typically associated with female labour, including sewing and knitting (Elson and Pearson, 1981: 93). Importantly, these gender roles do not only work as external constraints on women. Women also internalize them and consequently often times do not perceive of alternative employment options as a viable alternative. The lack of alternative options (as a result of both material and immaterial constraints) lowers the bargaining power of female workers. In that sense, sweatshop labour is a double-edged sword for women: on the one hand, it allows them to some extent to break free from patriarchal family structures and to gain some degree of independence. On the other hand, gender roles and stereotypes are reinforced on the factory floors – I will come back to this point in the section on reproductive exploitation. This places structural and epistemic constraints on women’s capacity to find decent work outside of the garment industry.
Female workers are relationally vulnerable to sweatshop employers, as the latter are in a position to provide them with some good that allows them to protect their well-being, namely access to work and a degree of independence from traditional patriarchal structures. In addition, sweatshop employers can make use of their room to manoeuvre qua capitalists (as noted above) and the employment of gender-stereotypes to discipline female workers.

Consequently, while the sweatshop workforce is vulnerable primarily in virtue of its position as workers, how that position plays out depends on the way in which economic vulnerability intersects with other vulnerabilities, in particular gender-based vulnerability.43

**How sweatshop employers exploit**

I described different ways in which sweatshop workers are relationally vulnerable to sweatshop employers. Sweatshop employers use the relational vulnerability of the workers to gain a benefit that benefits them more and sweatshop workers less compared to a counterfactual world in which these relational vulnerabilities do not exist. The benefit that sweatshop employers gain from sweatshop labour is mainly economic. Labour costs in the garment industry represent only a fraction of the cost of the finished product, ranging from 1-3% (Burns, Heintz, and Pollin 2004). While sweatshop wages tend to be higher than wages in alternative local employment, they nonetheless often fall short of a wage sufficient to pay for a decent living.44 For instance, in Bangladesh sweatshop workers earn about $70 per month, which is only a fraction of what the Asia Floor Foundation considers necessary for a decent living in Bangladesh, namely about $450 per month.45

Sweatshop employers on the other hand reap huge profits, e.g. a recent Oxfam study (2017, 2) on global inequality finds that a CEO of one of the 100 leading companies in the garment industry earns as much in a year as 10,000 people working in the gar-

43 This is not to say that gender is the only factor that intersects with economic vulnerability. Another important issue in this regard is the increasing employment of migrant workers in sweatshops. These workers often lack safe legal residence status and work permits. For instance, the garment industry in Turkey increasingly employs undocumented refugees from Syria who have crossed the borders since the outbreak of the war. Due to their insecure status, they constitute a particularly cheap source of labour. For more details on migrant labour in the garment industry see: SOMO (2016).
44 Numbers are from the International Labour Organisation (2015).
45 The Asia Floor Wage Alliance is a global coalition of trade unions and human rights and workers’ rights organisations that fights for a living wage for Asian garment workers.
ment factories in Bangladesh. In four days, a CEO from one of the top five global fashion brands earns as much as a Bangladeshi garment worker in her lifetime. So, what is the relevant counterfactual?

To think about a counterfactual world in which workers do not experience the relevant relational vulnerabilities, we can start with the workers own demands. Sweatshop workers already contest the rules of the game by objecting to the low wages and to how they are treated on the factory floors. I started this paper by talking about how female workers at different points of time have taken their protests to the streets. Strong unions and a well-organized labour force can limit relational vulnerabilities and at points, like the female workers in the opening paragraph showed, reverse the power relation altogether. The demands that workers make in these situations can provide some guidance with regards to what they would demand if they had a say. Before I move to outline what is wrong with sweatshop labour on this account, I want to draw attention to the way in which exploitation is reproduced in sweatshop labour.

**Reproductive exploitation**

Exploitation can take different forms, depending on the type of vulnerability relation inherent in it. In cases where the relational vulnerability is structurally sustained, as in the case of sweatshop labour, the exploitative relationship tends to be reproduced. How does it work?

According to Tommie Shelby (2002, 403), exploitative relations that are reproduced are a particularly important form of exploitation. They constitute “regularized exploitative social relationships”. A regularized exploitative social relationship is a social relationship between two parties A and B, in which, as a result of A’s advantage taking, A’s power advantage over B is maintained (or increased) and B remains in a condition of vulnerability. Thus, in a regularized exploitative social relationship, the conditions for exploitation, in particular A’s power over B, are reproduced. As a result, it is not only the case that A benefits from taking advantage of B’s relational vulnerability. Additionally, the benefit that A secures sustains A’s power.

If B’s vulnerability is structurally sustained, the set of options available to B is limited by norms, rules and institutions, and thereby impairs B’s capacity to protect her important interest. If A uses B’s relational vulnerability, she also uses the norms, rules
and institutions that constrain B in the first place. By making use of the constraints that make B vulnerable, A sustains and reproduces them in the process. In that sense, actors sustain and reproduce structures by following rules and norms and contributing to a set of institutions, often unknowingly or without the explicit intent to do so.

The distribution that exploitation brings about further serves to reproduce the material conditions of B’s vulnerability and A’s power. A worker who earns just enough to make a living will find it difficult to exercise her capacities to become independent from working for a capitalist, e.g. by saving up to start her own business, or by joining a union. At the same time capitalist accumulation increases the power of capitalists, e.g. by providing them with greater market shares. The way in which capitalism reproduces the workers’ vulnerability is astutely captured by Marx ([1867] 1992, 723):

> Capitalist production therefore reproduces in the course of its own process the separation between labour-power and the conditions of labour. It thereby reproduces and perpetuates the conditions under which the worker is exploited. It incessantly forces him to sell his labour power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labour power in order that he may enrich himself. It is no longer a mere accident that capitalist and worker confront each other in the market as buyer and seller. It is the alternating rhythm of the process itself which throws the worker back onto the market again and again as a seller of his labour power and continually transforms his own product into a means by which another man can purchase him. In reality, the worker belongs to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist.

Workers are, accordingly thrown “back onto the market again and again”; in other words, they are thrown back into a position of vulnerability. The benefit reproduces the power relation between capitalist and worker and allows the former to continue to exploit the latter. How does this look with regards to sweatshop labour?

When sweatshop employers exploit their workers it is not only the case that sweatshop employers economically benefit from sweatshop labour; the low wages, the insecure contracts and the long hours also tend to prevent workers from building the capacities to demand better terms or to creating better alternatives. Sweatshop employers’ lobbying activities for weak labour regulation further weaken labour by placing constraints on collective bargaining abilities. Crackdowns on unions and threats to fire workers who intend to join a union sustain labour’s weaker position

46 While this is generally the case for all structurally sustained vulnerabilities, this form of reproduction is particularly severe with regards to sweatshop labour, as it ensures that sweatshop workers are only in a position, and continue to be in a position, to secure a minimally decent life.
vis-à-vis capital, and thereby reproduce economic vulnerabilities. But, it is not only the economic vulnerabilities that are reproduced. Rather than destroying traditional gender relations, capitalism and patriarchy form a symbiotic relationship inside the sweatshops. Stereotypes that depict women as mothers and housewives are employed to justify paying women low wages. While this results in an economic benefit for sweatshop employers, it also serves to produce, reinforce and sustain gender roles. This ensures that gender inequality and the resulting gender specific vulnerability continues to serve sweatshop employers in the future. Now, what is wrong with sweatshop labour based on this analysis?

**What is Wrong With Sweatshop Labour?**

On my account, when one party exploits another, she uses her relational power to bring about a specific distribution, namely a distribution that reflects her power over the other party. The specific wrong of sweatshop labour exploitation consists in the following: sweatshop labour constitutes a structurally embedded relation where the vulnerabilities of the workers become a *condition* for the profits of sweatshop employers. At the same time, sweatshop employers are not bound to take the interests of the workers into account. This, I argue, is in conflict with two sets of moral reasons: reasons to ensure a specific type of relation (relational reasons) and reasons to secure a specific type of distribution (distributional reasons).

First, sweatshop labour exploitation constitutes a *relational wrong*, as it undermines the freedom and the equality of the workers. If sweatshop employers use their relational power over sweatshop workers to gain a benefit, thereby bringing the latter to do something that they would not have done for that reason, they undermine their freedom. The workers have no power-independent reasons to accept the specific

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47 For a detailed analysis of how gender is produced on the factory floors in the textile industry in Mexico see Leslie Salzinger (2003).
48 Andres Moles and Tom Parr (2018) have argued for a hybrid account of egalitarianism that distinguishes two sets of moral reasons pertaining to distributions and relations respectively. I here draw on their account to argue that exploitation is in conflict with both relational- and distributional reasons of equality.
49 Similarly, Vrousalis (2013, 151) argues that “exploitation constitutes procedural injury to status, and status injury is not reducible to distributive injury”. To say that the wrong of exploitation is fundamentally an injury to status is not to deny the very real material consequences of treating another as a moral inferior. The assumption that the interests of one party that is taken to be morally inferior matter less than those of another party, can result in neglecting or insufficiently protecting these interests.
terms that the sweatshop employers offer. At the same time, by bringing about a distribution of benefits, which reflects the employers’ relational power over the workers, but not the workers’ interests independent from their relational vulnerability, the two parties do not stand in a relation as moral equals.\textsuperscript{50} If the relational vulnerability of another party is used merely to serve the ends of the powerful party, this does not express adequate regard for the equal standing of the other party. This relation is continuously reproduced in the process of sweatshop labour.

Importantly, freedom and equality are values that participants in the practice of sweatshop labour already adhere to. Both proponents and critics of sweatshop labour assume that there is some sense in which the worker is free to choose to work in sweatshops.\textsuperscript{51} In this sense, sweatshop labour is different to forced labour insofar as the workers are (at least formally) free to enter and to leave the contract. At the same time sweatshop labour relations are guided by the assumption that commodities exchange at their value: sweatshop workers offer their labour power in exchange for wages; supply and demand meet at equilibrium. It is therefore plausible to say that sweatshop labour relations are at least to some extent governed by ideas of freedom and equality. These values are grounded in sweatshop labour relations themselves and thereby serve as a point of reference.\textsuperscript{52} Yet, as the relational vulnerability of the workers undermines their freedom and equality, sweatshop labour relations do not make good on this promise.\textsuperscript{53}

Sweatshop labour exploitation does not, however, only constitute a relational wrong. It also conflicts with reasons of distributional equality. The distribution that sweatshop labour brings about is not merely morally problematic because it expresses and in turn reproduces the power relation between sweatshop employers and sweatshop

\textsuperscript{50} A concern with the quality of a social relationship rather than the equal distribution of certain goods is central to accounts of social or relational equality. Proponents of this view include among others: Elizabeth Anderson (1999), Samuel Scheffler (2005), or Christian Schemmel (2011).

\textsuperscript{51} See for instance Matt Zwolinski (2007, 689) who argues that the workers’ choice is an exercise of their autonomy. While sweatshop critics point out the limited set of options available to the workers, there is still a sense in which they assume that the workers choose to work in sweatshops, see for instance Jeremy Snyder (2008, 390).

\textsuperscript{52} The values of freedom and equality can therefore be grounded immanently in the practice of sweatshop labour. While the question of the grounding of normativity goes far beyond the scope of this paper, I have sketched a possible way to respond to concerns about why we should think of sweatshop labour as a problem of freedom and equality in the first place.

\textsuperscript{53} As Marx ([1867] 1992) polemically notes: in entering the sphere of production, we leave the sphere of exchange where freedom, equality, property and Bentham rule.
workers. It also matters for independent moral reasons. The interests at stake in sweatshop labour concern the bare minimum necessary for a decent life: sweatshop workers struggle to subsist, to stay healthy, and to be able to take care of their families. While they benefit from sweatshop labour compared to a no-transaction baseline, the benefits they gain from sweatshop labour often still fall short of guaranteeing a sufficient level of wellbeing.

In sum, sweatshop labour exploitation constitutes a specific type of wrong where the vulnerability of one party is a condition for the benefit of another party. This violates both relational and distributional norms. A normative analysis of sweatshop labour as a form of exploitation in the above sense, locates the wrong at the intersection between the interactional and the structural level. The structurally embedded vulnerability relation places constraints on the workers’ development and exercise of the very capacities needed to protect their important interests. At the same time, these structural constraints enable and incentivise sweatshop employers to take advantage. While the advantage taking is structurally embedded, it is important that agents act within these structures, thereby sustaining and reproducing them. The wrong is therefore neither purely structural, nor purely interactional.

**Conclusion**

Sweatshop labour is a feminist issue. An analysis of sweatshop labour that does not take into account how gender-specific vulnerabilities enable and sustain sweatshop labour cannot provide a comprehensive critique of sweatshop labour. It sets up a false dichotomy between gender oppression and economic exploitation. This distinction obscures that sweatshop labour exploitation also works through gender. The relational economic- and gender-based vulnerabilities of sweatshop workers are a

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54 Snyder (2008, 396) calls this a form of “needs exploitation”. He argues that the basic needs of others make a claim on us. This claim takes the form of a general duty of beneficence towards those in need. Yet, when we enter in specific relationships with a person who falls short of attaining a decent minimum, the general duty of beneficence takes a more specific shape. In particular, it entails that employers do not press for advantage by disregarding the basic needs of their employees.

55 My approach here is broadly sufficiency, insofar as the distribution which sweatshop labour brings about is morally troubling because it does not allow workers to cross a certain threshold of wellbeing. I am not, however, thereby committed to reject a more demanding distributional standard, e.g. to understand the distributional wrong as a failure of reciprocity. Yet, my aim here is just to show that there are independent moral reasons to object to the distribution that do not derive from the reasons to object to the type of relation inherent in sweatshop labour.
condition for the profits of sweatshop employers, and they are continuously reproduced in the process. A normative critique of sweatshop labour that aims to be practically effective needs to be political. It needs to challenge the structures that bring some in a position where they can turn the vulnerabilities of others into profits; and it needs to challenge the very processes that keep these social positions in place.

References