

Clothing of Calamity

Throughout Africa, the primary source of textile goods (especially clothing) is secondhand imports from the United States and other Western countries. Rwanda, and some other African nations, have decided to ban imported secondhand clothing. There are two primary reasons for this: (1) they want to protect their own developing textile industries and (2) they argue that the pervasiveness of secondhand clothing compromises the dignity of the Rwandan people.¹ Because Rwandans can buy imported secondhand clothes for so cheap, or even receive them for free, it has been impossible for the Rwandan textile industry to flourish. In fact, the importing of secondhand clothes is often cited as the reason that textile industries in East Africa collapsed in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, Ghana lost 80% of its textile-related jobs between 1975 and 2000 while Kenya had 500,000 textile industry jobs in the 1970s, it now has only 20,000.² A flourishing textile industry is an important part of economic development because it would create jobs and a revenue stream that Rwanda's economy badly needs.

In addition, the Rwandan government argues that the Rwandan people's reliance on secondhand clothing compromises their dignity. Throughout East Africa there are names for used clothing from Western countries. For example, in Kenya, people call them "clothes of dead white people" and in Mozambique they call them the "clothing of calamity." Clare Akamanzi, the CEO of Rwanda Development Board argues that the Rwandan government is looking out for its people. She says, "our citizens deserve better than becoming the recipients of discarded clothes from the western world. This is about the dignity of our people."³ In addition, there is a worry that the dignity of the country itself (not just the people who wear secondhand clothing) is compromised because of its dependency on Western countries.

In 2017 Rwanda raised import taxes on second hand clothing to such a high level that it functionally created a ban. The tax went from \$0.20 per kilo to \$2.50 per kilo and eventually to \$4 per kilo. But the United States relies heavily on Rwanda and other East African countries as a place to offload its overabundance of used clothing. As such the United States threatened to remove Rwanda from a preferential trade deal, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act. This trade deal was originally created to help lift countries in sub-Saharan African out of poverty. However, the trade deal was also beneficial to the United States and the White House had the legal right to end the deal if it ended up no longer being beneficial. Rwandan leaders, though, argued that this was a form of coercion and that they were being punished for looking out for their own people. To be clear, there are important questions here about morality that are distinct from political rights. For example, there is no question that the United States did have the legal right to leave a trade agreement that no longer benefitted them, but that is a different question from whether the United States should do this, especially given the fact that they have dramatically more political and economic power than Rwanda.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of obligations do nations have to each other? Are these obligations affected by things like economic, political, or military power?
2. Are countries obligated to create trade policies (and other kinds of policies) that are fair, or is it morally permissible for countries to seek whatever advantage they can?
3. Does the United States, because of its unique military and economic resources, have special responsibilities to poorer nations?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/12/world/africa/east-africa-rwanda-used-clothing.html>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/politics-hand-clothes-debate-dignity-181005075525265.html>

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