I could eat a grilled cheese sandwich for three meals a day and my snacks in between. Occasionally when pondering its delectable taste, I’ve stopped to consider the many hands who’ve helped make it: the bread was produced with the help of skilled factory workers, the cheese was crafted by dedicated cheesemakers, and the frying pan was manufactured and delivered to the store through the help of even more people. It’s hard to find anything we use on a daily basis that doesn’t require the input of others in some way. The global community works wonders in getting everyone what they need and want through joining together the work of people from the world over. But does it, really? Is it possible that our global community is comprised of as much parasitism as mutualism, if not more? Although our world has become deeply interconnected, the division faced by those who are most exploited by the global community is worse than ever before.

The earliest forms of communities can be found in the first ecosystems formed as life evolved billions of years ago. From then to now, all components of natural ecosystems are essential to each other’s survival. And humans, too, follow this pattern. People in different communities perform different critical roles. From doctors to teachers to farm workers, all are paramount to the wellbeing and growth of a community. The vital members of one’s community used to be one’s neighbors, but communities have expanded with globalization. We can now see a doctor from the other side of the world via a Zoom call, go to a university on another continent, and eat the produce of farms from around the globe. However, the same processes that brought about this globalization have also created mass consumerism; together the two forces have led to human exploitation in the form of sweatshops and child labor, which arose to meet people’s growing demands of their new worldwide community.

As the group of people that individuals rely on has grown larger and larger, our collective acknowledgement of them has diminished. People used to buy shoes directly from their shoemaker in a personal interaction starting with “please” and ending with “thank you.” When consumers started buying from faceless brands, the labor that went into production was rendered totally invisible, to the point of almost giving the illusion that goods just materialize out of thin air. As such,
companies justified meeting their supply demands in the most expedient ways possible. Not only are the laborers never recognized, but they might also be on the other side of the planet. The distance between consumers and laborers is larger than ever before, and so it is unsurprising that corporations get away with unethical practices. Huge brands such as Nike make sure to amplify their voices on prominent social justice issues such as LGBTQIA+ with their BETRUE collection, but their ethical action balks when it comes to the unknown workers that toil away in their sweatshops. Furthermore, GAP, H&M, and Zara are just some examples of major clothing companies which have been found to employ child labor under harsh conditions, including shifts up to 14 hours long. Again, the absence of these workers in the mass consciousness allows corporations to continue exploiting them.

Globalization has taken hold of the world and is not going away anytime soon. But this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Humans have been able to accomplish more than ever before as a result of the world’s newfound interconnectedness, and our future relies on our ability to foster cooperation and unite efforts. That which is causing the suffering could also provide the remedy. The key is to spread awareness through personalizing the victims, for example with testimonials and videos and photographs that show their humanity. As individuals, we can support companies that are known to have ethical practices and educate ourselves on which brands to avoid, in addition to advocating for workers’ rights.

If you’re ever considering buying bread or cheese from potentially unethical companies, make sure you at least acknowledge the unknown workers who hungrily suffered to produce your grilled cheese sandwich; although you may never get to tell them directly, you can still recognize their efforts and their humanity with two simple words they’ve likely never been told: “thank you.”