

WE MUST CO-CREATE TO DECOLONISE FASHION

By Dr Francesco Mazzarella

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Current sustainability initiatives are failing to decolonise the fashion and textiles industries. How can co-creation pave the way for holistic betterment?



'Reality, Reciprocity, Resilience' project. Photography by JC Candanedo, UK

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The mainstream fashion industry is proving unsustainable in terms of cultural heritage, social equity, autonomous livelihoods, and environmental stewardship. Improvements in these areas are unravelling at a slow pace and new research is urgently needed in order to build an equitable and sustainable future for the sector. While the industry is currently being guided by three core pillars of sustainability – environmental, economic and social – there is a clear need to add a cultural dimension as an essential component of a sustainability agenda.

Historically, the textile heritage of marginalised groups has often been the object of abusive cultural appropriation practices undertaken by fashion brands – or has been systematically obscured. With a harrowing 89.3mn people worldwide having been forcibly displaced at the end of 2021, the fashion industry must re-address the needs and aspirations of migrant communities and find ways to honour their diverse cultures (source: [UNHCR](#)).

While mainstream UK fashion players – from **M&S** to **Asos** – have pledged to create jobs for Ukrainian refugees, many brands are failing to embrace the culturally-informed design skills that such employees could offer. By adopting a more holistic approach to sustainability, there is an opportunity to widen the fashion system by including artisanal practice carried out by refugees and asylum seekers who, despite their traumatic journeys, retain their culture, customs and faiths, as well as a variety of invaluable craft heritage skills.

Furthermore, to avoid the current situation where Eurocentric designers are parachuted into disadvantaged communities with the assumption that they can bring their own knowledge and expertise to solve their problems, there is a need to decolonise such dominant approaches. This means dismantling colonial systems of oppression and exploitation, empowering a multiplicity of voices and agencies, and leveraging the values of diversity and sustainability.



'Reality, Reciprocity, Resilience' project. Photography by JC Candanedo, UK

Motivated by this harmful reality, **Dr Francesco Mazzarella**, senior lecturer at **London College of Fashion** (LCF), is embarking on a research project that aims to develop a framework for decolonised design practice. Called **Decolonising Fashion and Textiles**, the project will collect oral histories in relation to the cultural heritage of refugees based in East London. The project team and participants will then co-create culturally-grounded fashion and textile artefacts, while a social enterprise model will be outlined with the aim of enhancing the resilience of the refugees.

Moreover, Professor **Lucy Orta**, chair of art and the environment at **University of the Arts London (UAL)**, is leading a community art project that explores personal and family migration stories through textile crafts. Titled **Traces: Stories of Migration**, the project explores the migrant history of the rag trade within East London communities. Focussing on intergenerational, personal, and family migration histories, it recognises the creative value of diversity through each person's lived experience. These concepts are translated into textile artworks capturing the participants' unique identities and histories.

‘We must dismantle colonial systems of oppression and exploitation by empowering a multiplicity of voices and agencies...’

— *Dr Francesco Mazzarella*

At an international level, **Zaatari Action** is an exemplary project engaging refugees through fashion activism. Led by **Helen Storey**, professor of Fashion Science at LCF, the project aims to co-create knowledge that can heal communities, while researching ways that refugees' lives can be improved through fashion. Zaatari Action evolves from **Dress for Our Time**, a project that transformed a de-commissioned UNHCR refugee tent into a fashion artefact aimed at engaging the public with the connection between the refugee crisis and climate change. Originating in Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, the project led to the co-creation of 15 projects with those living in Zaatari, addressing educational, livelihood, and enterprise creation opportunities, with a clear focus on women and young girls at the camp.

These projects point towards a more embedded, situated, and reciprocal approach to design, in a way that rebalances power dynamics, diversifies and widens the fashion system, and fosters cultural sustainability. By giving voice and agency to migrants and refugees, new lessons of community resilience can be drawn from people's lived experiences. Especially in the face of our collective uncertain future, we need to shape a more inclusive and resilient fashion system, one that supports more fulfilling and flourishing relationships between ourselves and with the beautiful material culture that we wear.

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Further reading

