

Fashion Values Society

A Landscape Review



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We need to pave new ways for fashion to value society more – ways to support fulfilling and flourishing relationships between ourselves and the material culture that we wear, ways grounded in values of care, empathy, equality, collaboration and creativity.

Foreword

Fashion Values is a knowledge exchange programme ideated and developed by [Centre for Sustainable Fashion](#), UAL, in partnership with [Kering](#), [Vogue Business](#) and [IBM](#). It aims to enable the next generation of fashion designers, strategists, and communicators to create sustainably; to empower imagination, innovation and consciousness through sustainability leadership and powerful media narratives; and to make education and learning globally informed, interdisciplinary, and accessible through cross-cultural relevance and location-specific application.

Following Fashion Values Nature in 2021, Fashion Values Society is the focus for the second year of the programme.

In acknowledging the complexity of climate and social justice, Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) has developed a framework for fashion design for sustainability¹. The framework includes four agendas (society, cultures, environment, and economy) which act as lenses or ways in which to understand a perspective on fashion, recognising the need to focus on distinct areas whilst considering their interconnectedness.

Using this framework, CSF has conducted research to review a range of perspectives and activities relating to fashion and social sustainability. Desk research and semi-structured interviews were held with experts in the fields of fashion, activism, social justice, sustainability, and intersectionality to gather working knowledge and practice. The qualitative data collected has been thematically analysed in order to map out the current state of the art of fashion practice aimed at creating positive social change, and to understand related challenges and possibilities.



Introduction

The future of the global fashion industry is dependent on sustainability strategies to foster social change. Within the context of this research, social sustainability refers to the ability of a community to interact and collaborate in ways that create and exemplify social cohesion; it considers places, communities and organisations, both formal and informal, and their resources, opportunities; and it involves agency of diverse participants². In defining social change as the alteration of social structures (characterised by a transformation of cultural symbols, rules or behaviours, social organisations, or value systems) this research points towards the need for a just transition.

But what do we mean by a just transition?

A vision-led and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative one, based on co-existence and interdependence of a healthy economy, clean environment and social justice. In this, we seek to contribute to the realizing of **a fundamental shift from a fashion system that is socially unjust and negligent to both society and nature, to one that is grounded on values of care, empathy, equality, collaboration, and creativity.**

We invite you to join us in re-imagining the impact of the fashion industry **on people and the planet.** We're bringing together voices from the people driving change, and hosting an annual programme of **education, events and an award** that dives deep into topics related to fashion sustainability.

In 2022, our focus is on Fashion and Society.

Research Background

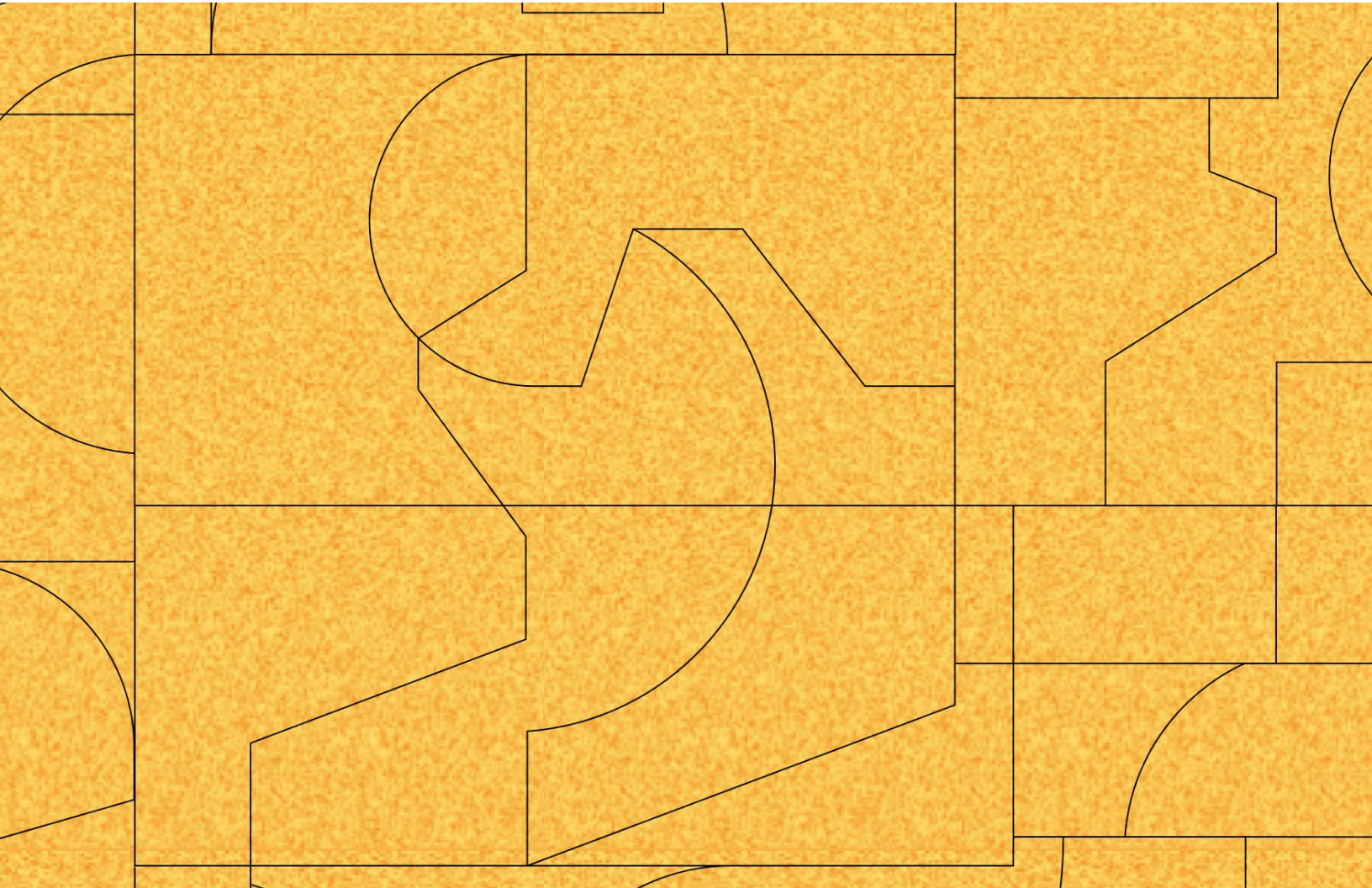
The Relationships between Fashion and Society

This research has foregrounded the inter-relationships between fashion and society as we engage with garments across their life cycle:

- The **design** and **making** of fashion are social and economic acts. Millions of people work in the fashion and textile industry globally; they are involved in the cultivation of crops or rearing of animals, in the transformation of raw materials into textiles, in turning a design idea into an item of clothing or repairing clothes when they are damaged.
- **Buying** clothes is also a social act. Many of us go shopping or share links to clothes we like with friends or show purchases to others in person or via social media. We might swap our clothes with friends in person or through online platforms. Such services, like community clothing exchanges, enable us to increase our social interactions.
- **Wearing** and **engaging** with clothes are also social acts; clothes are more meaningful than just things we wear. Throughout history, fashion has been used as a form of self-expression, to reflect and communicate individual characteristics (such as age, gender, ethnicity) as well as socio-economic class, cultural belonging or identity. Interestingly, fashion is a kind of ‘masquerade’, as it can contribute to some form of social mobility. In fact, through the clothes we wear, we can redefine our social class, trick people and move across society in ways that other systems or status symbols don’t allow.

Contemporary forms of fashion media also reflect societal values; for instance, diversity, inclusion and representation (or the lack thereof). Wearing clothes can incite emotions of joy, care and safety – but also anxiety. From an intersectional perspective, it is important to acknowledge that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression, and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people: gender, race, religion, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, and so on.





The Impacts of Fashion on Society

The fashion sector produces a range of impacts on different sections of society, from the **exploitation** of producers to the expression and **representation** of wearers to the **power** and agency of wider organisations.

Large sections of the fashion industry contribute to the depletion of human and natural resources. The current fashion industry causes negative impacts on society, such as abuse of labour rights, compromise of the health of workers in a fast **production** system, global south communities that deal with the waste from global north, and anxiety related to over-consumption. Additionally, non-inclusive fashion products (as well as non-inclusive fashion imagery, media and communications or technology) limit options suitable for wearers, as well as limiting exposure to diverse perspectives on what are considered fashion norms and ideals of attractiveness.

In terms of fashion production, fashion employs 75 million people globally. Three quarters of these are women³. Over 50% of workers in fashion are not paid the minimum wage, and even then, minimum wages are generally half of what can be considered a living wage in most manufacturing countries⁴. Although women make up an overwhelming majority of the workforce, they are particularly vulnerable to low wages. For example, in Pakistan 87% of women garment workers are paid less than a minimum wage, versus 27% of men garment workers⁵.

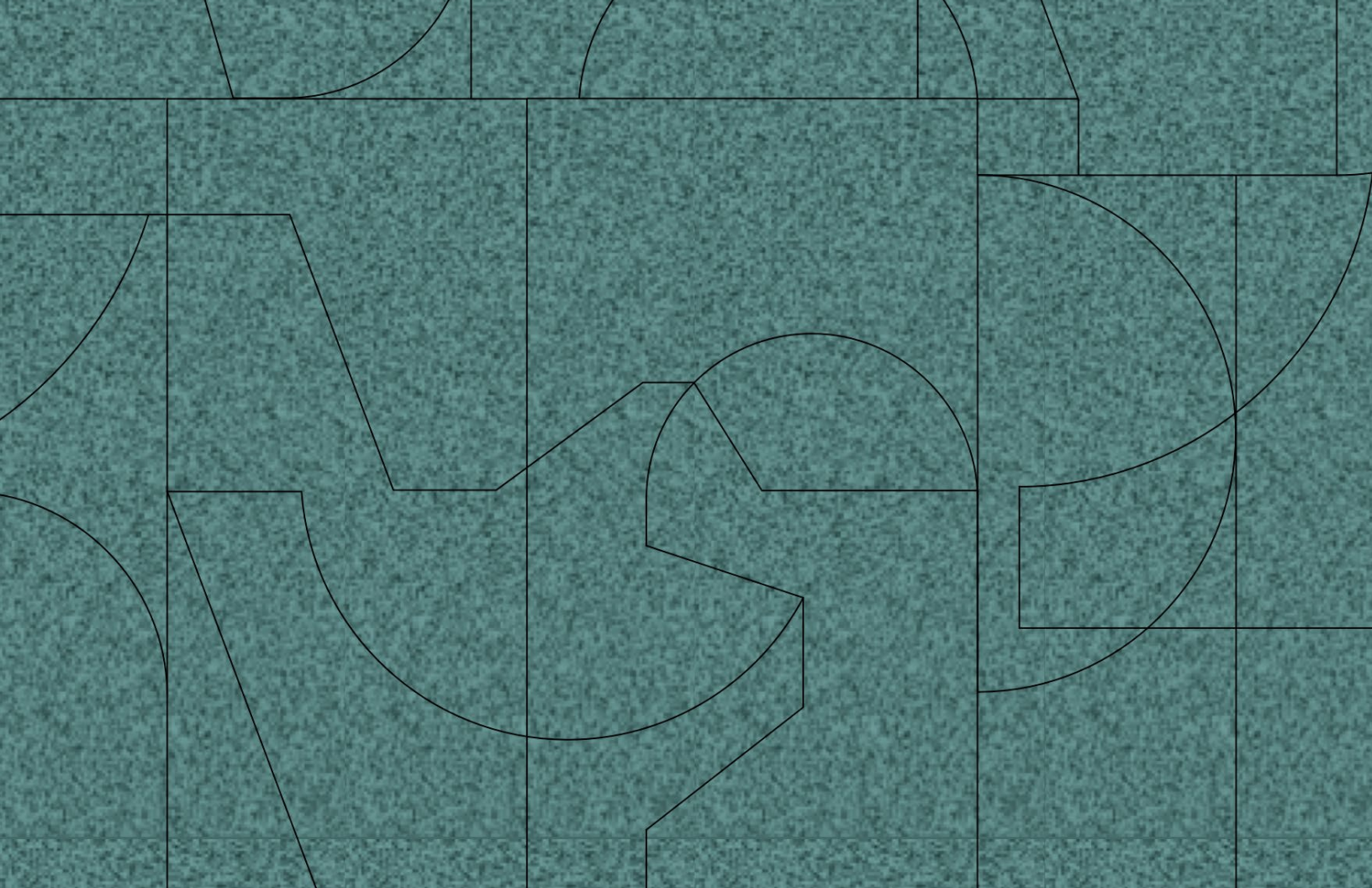
The global ready-to-wear fashion industry has had a history of exploitation of workers in sweatshops. Unfortunately, this is still the case today, including human trafficking, modern slavery and forced labour. The United Nation's International Labour Organisation estimates around 21 million people are involved in forced labour at any given time⁶. Trade unions and human rights defenders aim to improve working conditions, but face threats, abuse, killings. Whilst the California Transparency in Supply Chain Act was established in 2010 and the UK government passed the Modern Slavery Act in 2015, there is still a long way to go before slavery is truly abolished from fashion.

Due to extremely low wages for garment workers in developing countries, the growth of fast fashion, and the increased competition among fashion brands,

clothing can now be purchased at such low prices that it is often viewed as disposable. In fact, in the time between 2002 and 2014, clothing production worldwide has doubled. The average British or European person now buys 60% more items of clothing and keeps them for about half as long as they did 15 years ago⁷.

These fast **consumption** trends result in the parallel emergence of a 'fast landfill'. For instance, mountains of discarded cheap clothes from the West are dumped in Chile and eroding the Atacama Desert, as well as the local economy. Another example of such a phenomenon is the second-hand Kantamanto Market in Ghana, which is the result of a sort of 'waste colonialism' where communities in the Global South are facing the impacts of fast fashion trends in the Global North.

2013's collapse of the Rana Plaza building, home to several apparel factories in Bangladesh, brought the world's attention to the unsafe factory conditions and corruption within the Bangladeshi government and highlights the need for social change in the fashion industry. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has given us an indication of the vulnerability of different workers in the fashion industry, including mass layoffs for garment workers, cancelled or unpaid orders, furloughed Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) teams, as well as challenges for new graduates to get jobs.



Values, Actions and Strategies to enable Social Change

Fashion is both a reflection of and a catalyst for social change. Social justice in fashion considers fair distribution of resources, the elimination of institutionalised domination and oppression, and the consequences of fashion decisions on other people and other places – including those yet to be born.

Fashion brands throughout the world have made tremendous strides in contributing to a more sustainable and socially responsible fashion industry. Ethical fashion brands (e.g. Nu Wardrobe, Story MFG, Slow Factory, Revival London and Friends of Light) challenge traditional industry practices, choose to value human rights and environmental stewardship as equal to financial gain, and build alliances to foster social change.

Fashion social enterprises (e.g. Nest, Birdsong, Behind Bras) combine commercial business objectives and activities with social ones. For instance, they contribute to alleviating poverty and empowering artisans, tackling the issue of women’s abuse in fashion production, and supporting women in prison into meaningful employment.

Some fashion companies have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) professionals or departments working on initiatives that contribute to sustainable development or enhance human rights, philanthropic and environmental responsibility. Moreover, an increasing number of movements (like Fashion Revolution and XR Fashion) and designers (e.g. Katharine Hamnett, Vivienne Westwood, Sarah Corbett, Otto von Busch, Helen Storey, Bethany Williams and Laila Tyabji) play an activist role, challenging the status quo and creating counter-narratives towards sustainability in and through fashion.



Fashion & Society Enablers

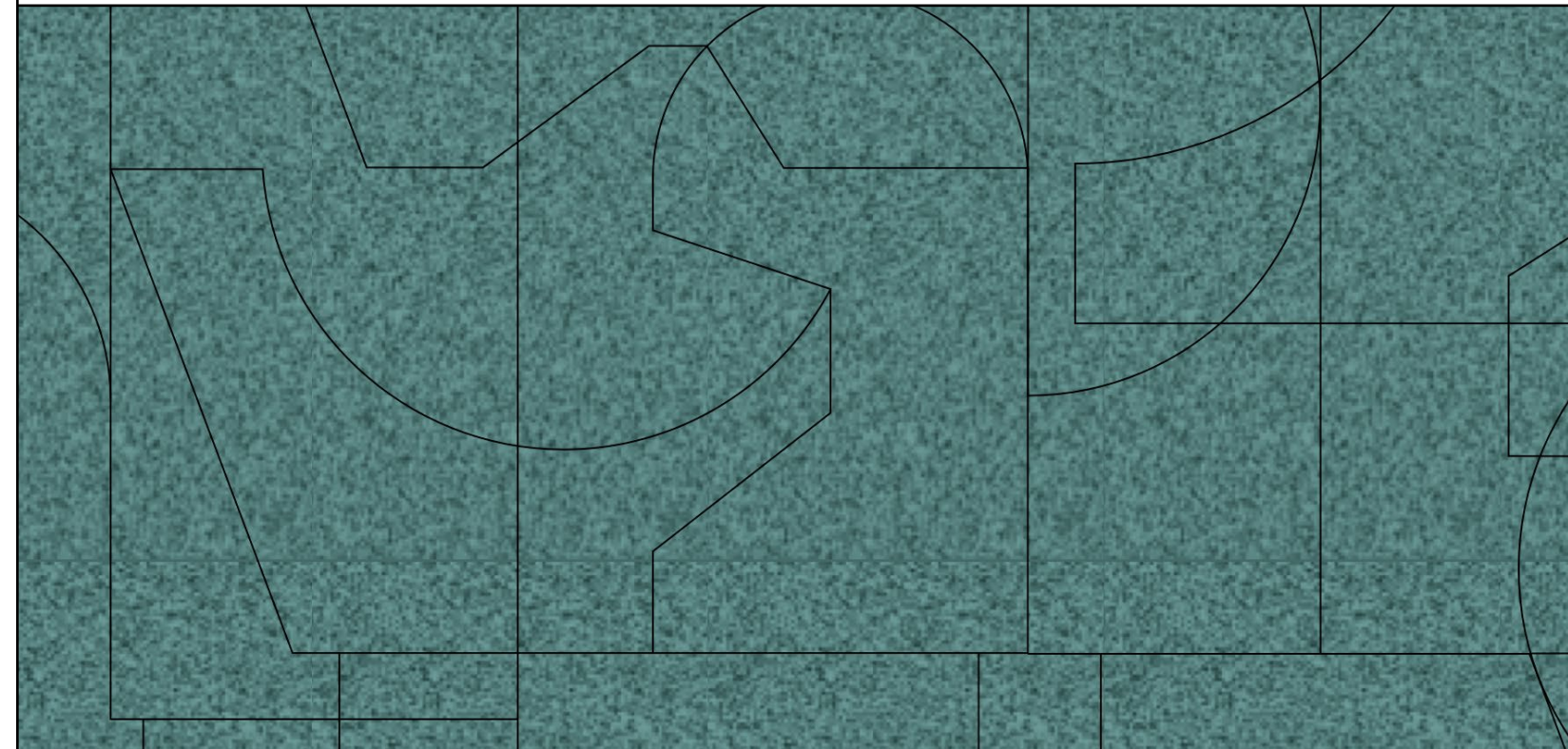
Findings from this research suggest a range of factors that can address societal issues, create new relationships and contribute to social justice:

- **Decentralising and decolonising** fashion, by empowering a multiplicity of voices and agencies, and by dismantling colonial systems of oppression and exploitation. Small and local, yet open and connected, supporting each other and collectively contributing to fashion sustainability (e.g. [Öshadi](#), an Indian brand turned [Fibreshed](#), as well as the work of the [Research Collective for Decoloniality & Fashion](#)).
- **Universal or inclusive design**, which develops inclusive and equitable products, meeting the needs of all the people who wish to use them (such as the work of [The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design](#), [Tommy Hilfiger's Adaptive line](#), [ASOS' gender fluid brand Collusion](#), or [Jumpsu.it](#), an ungendered, multi-use, mono-garment for everyday wear).
- **Slow fashion** disrupts consumers' dependence on buying new things to feel good about themselves and instead promotes more fulfilling clothing that can be worn for a longer period of time, encourages buying only what one needs and repairing damaged clothes (e.g. [Patagonia's Worn Wear](#) programme, [Nudie Jeans's](#) offer of repair services for their products, or a range of mending apps, such as [Sojo](#), [The Seam](#) and [Repair Rebels](#)).
- **Diverse and inclusive fashion media** and communication, promoting broader perspectives on fashion, and representing the voices, stories and narratives of multiple identities – such as age, ethnicity, physical ability, gender, class, culture, sexuality and lived experience (see [British Vogue's](#) cover of the February 2022 issue, or [Marks & Spencer's](#) 'Principles of Responsible Marketing' based on diversity and inclusion).
- Using **digital production** (e.g. [ATACAC](#) – a socially engaged small factory using 3D modelling), mobile technology to allow workers to make complaints (e.g. [Labour Solutions](#)) and blockchain to improve transparency within supply chains (e.g. [TradeLens](#), a digital platform built by IBM).

- **Networks, collaborations and business partnerships** to improve workplace conditions and the lives of garment workers or implement social compliance programmes (see the [Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety](#), the [Emergency Designers Network](#), the [Global Grassroots Justice Alliance](#), the [Kahu Collective](#), as well as the [Small but Perfectly Formed](#) programme).
- **Diversity programmes** for internal as well as supplier diversity (e.g. Tommy Hilfiger's [Fashion Frontier Challenge](#) supporting especially black, indigenous and people of colour entrepreneurs and the [WE Women by Inditex](#) initiative aimed at integrating gender equality into supplier management systems).
- **Activism and advocacy** for change and policies around labour rights, equality, diversity, inclusion, social justice or decent livelihoods (e.g. the [Modern](#)

[Slavery Act](#) 2015 in the UK, the policy campaign led by the [Garment Worker Centre](#) in Los Angeles fighting against the 'piece rate'; and the work of trade unions, NGOs and human rights defenders such as [Fashion Revolution](#), [Fashion Roundtable](#) and the [Clean Clothes Campaign](#).

- **Education** to prime the next generation of designers to play an activist role and develop new mindsets and skills (including compassion, empathy and inclusion), enabling the right change in society and the environment while undertaking a process of change in oneself. In this regard, it is also important to train the trainers, providing tutors with suitable resources and new tools (e.g. [The Sustainable Fashion Glossary](#), [Fashion Values: Society](#) on Futurelearn, or the [FashionSEEDS](#) platform).



Fashion & Society Challenges

Findings from this research suggest that the fashion sector's key challenges in activating positive social change at scale include:

- Dominance of a **growth paradigm** and capitalist system of mass production (in unsafe working conditions) along global supply chains, ingrained in extraction and exploitation of resources, large scale manufacturing – at fast speed – of products of cheap quality.
- Lack of effective **policies & regulations**, and of mandatory traceability and transparency throughout supply chains.
- Predominance of **top-down visions**, as well as lack of agency and imagination of a more sustainable future for large parts of society, who often feel overwhelmed by complex sustainability challenges.
- Limitations in the **fashion education** system, such as tutors' limited knowledge and experience in fashion for social change, and lack of suitable resources and tools or limited adoption of those available;
- **High costs** associated with changing the system, which prevents many companies from adopting new, more sustainable practices. Moreover, paying garment workers a fair living wage often results in ethical fashion products having higher prices and becoming unaffordable for some consumers, or at least being perceived as such;
- Adoption of pyramidal and **hierarchical business structures** within brands and organisations, instead of distributing power more equally throughout the fashion value chain.
- Challenges in **community organising**, such as difficulties in negotiating between personal values and visions shared with other stakeholders, building trust relationships and dealing with ethical issues (especially when working with vulnerable communities).
- Different **timescales of social change**, as well as difficulties in capturing small grassroots initiatives and assessing social impacts; this requires suitable evaluation methods.
- Pervasive **greenwashing**, generalisation of messages, lack of criticality and transparency in disclosing the detrimental impacts of fashion, as well as lack of appropriate and accurate language to describe emerging fashion-led initiatives that value society.





Conclusions

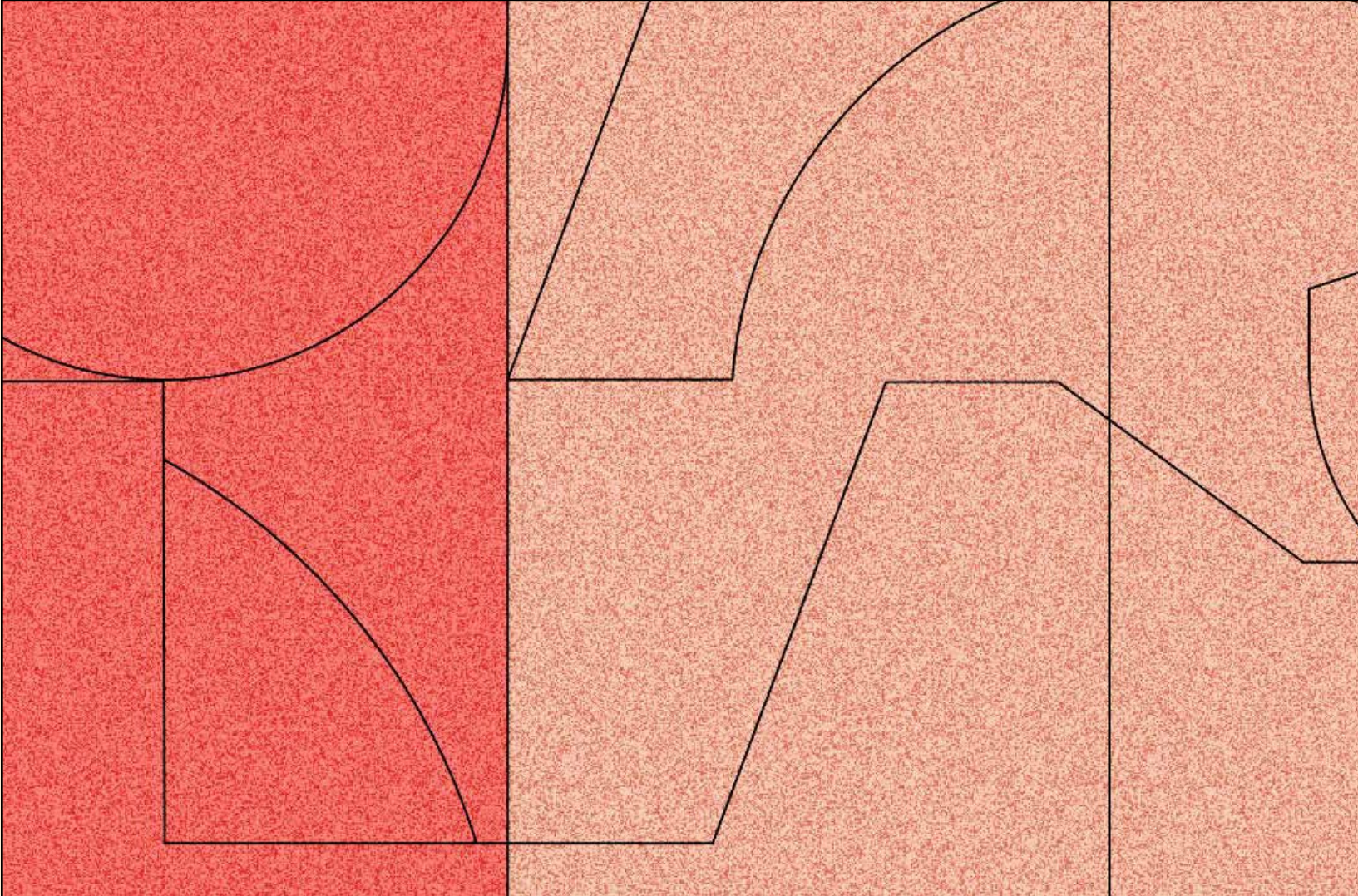
The global fashion industry has a long history of exploitation of human and natural resources. Because of systemic and institutionalised inequalities within all fashion sectors, historically marginalised groups have not had equitable opportunities to succeed in the industry. In the face of the climate emergency and the growing quest for social justice, companies that design, produce, and market fashion products need to re-think their supply chain to foster social change. Within this context, fashion designers are expanding their role, embracing activism, collaborating with others across disciplines, and working in response to a different set of priorities (such as addressing social issues and creating positive change). Alongside this expansion, ethical fashion brands, social enterprises, and businesses' CSR departments are implementing numerous strategies for creating more diverse, equitable, and inclusive working practices, product lines and imagery.

This research highlights a range of promising practices, commitments and understandings in relation to fashion and society that are being developed by fashion businesses and organisations. These include changes to the ways we design and make fashion – for example inclusive design approaches, slow fashion products, and the use of digital production, mobile technologies and blockchain to support the creation of positive social change within fair and transparent supply chains.. They also include changes to the ways we engage with fashion – like inclusive imagery, as well as repair services and a growing range of mending apps. Moreover, this study has highlighted the need to decentralise fashion and adopt a decolonised design approach, working collaboratively with farmers, artisans and indigenous communities. Some companies are implementing initiatives focused on diversity, equality

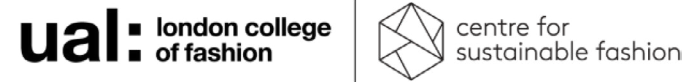
and inclusion within their workplaces and their suppliers, and an increasing number of organisations are engaging in advocacy for policy change. This research has also highlighted that while business partnerships and networks are vital to tackle complex social challenges, education also plays a crucial role in contributing to a mindset shift.

On the other hand, fashion's long-engrained hierarchies impede the shift to a socially just fashion system – including the dominance of a growth paradigm, the predominance of top-down visions, and pyramidal business structures. Other challenges identified include limitations in our current educational systems, difficulties in evaluating the social impact of changes we do make, limitations to community organising, and to the policies and regulations governing the fashion system.

We need to envision a more meaningful, inclusive, and resilient future of fashion that does more justice to society. We need to redefine the value systems by which we live and work and reconsider how we engage with each other and with nature. There is a timely opportunity for paving new ways for fashion to value society more, supporting fulfilling, flourishing relationships with ourselves and the beautiful material culture that we wear.



Imprint



This executive summary is authored by Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL with the aim to present a landscape review and a fact-based resource to support and educate the next generation of design, media and technology professionals through responding to a challenge brief calling for fashion products, services and systems that contribute to positive social change.

Authors

Dr Francesco Mazzarella & Professor Dilys Williams.

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