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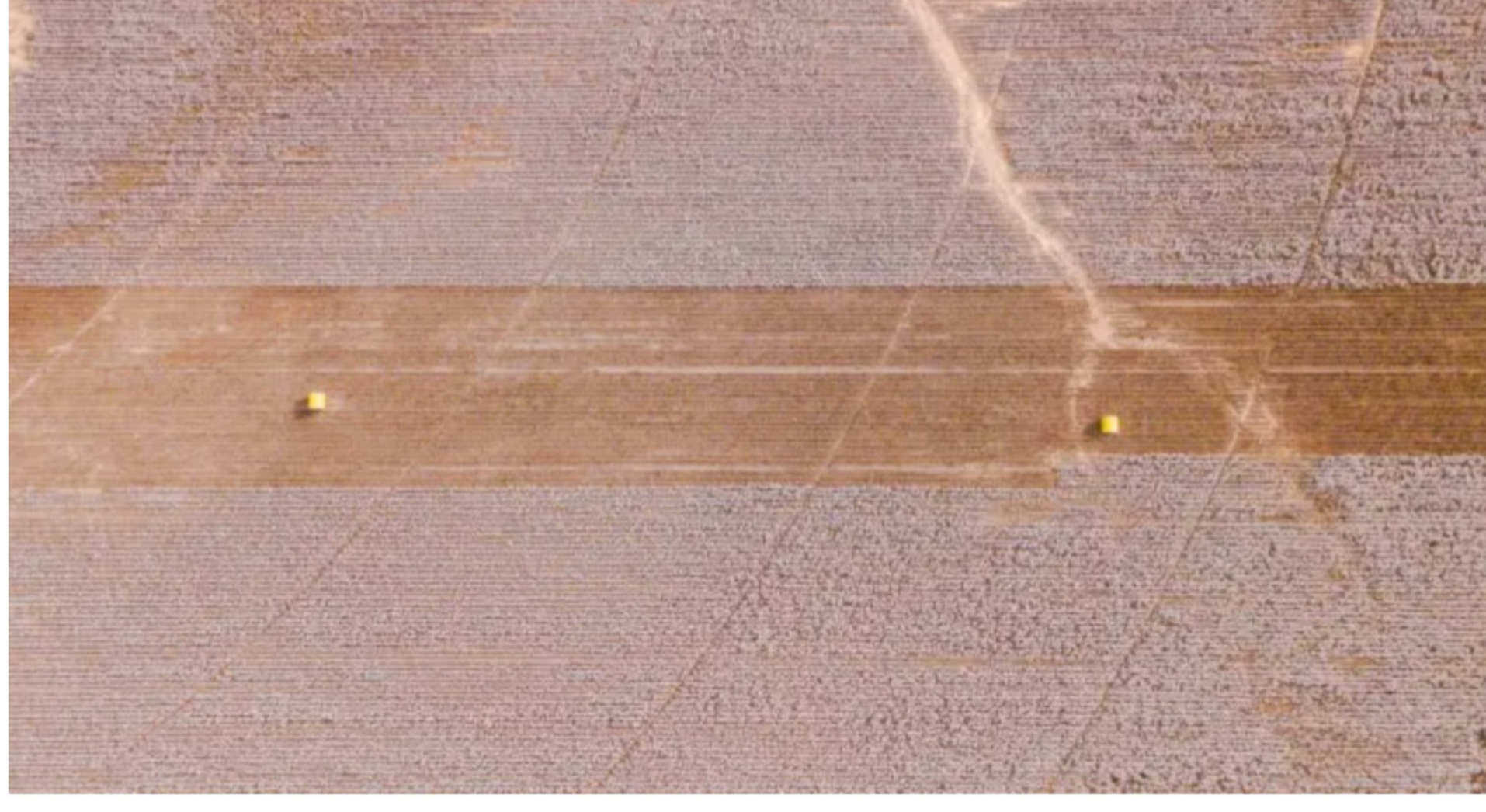


Human rights, transparency and accountability in fashion: A conversation on Uyghur forced labour

By Flavia Loscialpo and Eleonora Mongelli
2 YEARS AGO

This is a guest blog post by Eleonora Mongelli, Vice President of the Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU) and host of the podcast *Made in Slavery*, and Flavia Loscialpo, a fashion academic and Senior Research Fellow at Solent University.

This conversation between Eleonora and Flavia provides a commentary on the following issues in relation to the Uyghur crisis: human rights and the social impact of the global fashion industry, forced labour, transparency in the fashion supply chain and corporate responsibility. To find out more about the fashion industry's relationship with forced labour in the Uyghur region, please read [this statement](#).



“The use of forced labour under a state-sponsored labour transfer scheme is tainting the global supply chain.”

FL: Xinjiang and the conditions of the Uyghur people are now at the heart of political debate. As an advocate for human rights, you have recently created the podcast *Made in Slavery*, which combines important testimonies with international investigations. The podcast raises awareness about the repression of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang, and the forced labour that allows many international brands to make profit. What did these investigations and testimonies reveal?

EM: Over the past four years, several NGOs, academic researchers and investigative journalists have collected evidence, which shows the increasing repression of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in China. More specifically, in 2017 China's government started a social re-engineering campaign against these minorities, which involves the use of forced labour under a state-sponsored labour transfer scheme that is tainting the global supply chain.

As exposed by 'Uyghurs for Sale' (2020), a report published by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, between 2017 and 2019 more than 80,000 Uyghurs, the largest Muslim minority in China, have been transferred from their native Xinjiang, to work in factories across China. Some of them are being directly sent to the factories from detention camps, where many Uyghurs are arbitrarily detained. These Uyghurs are forced to work in factories that are part of the supply chains of at least 82 global brands within technology, clothing and automotive sectors. Moreover, an investigation report, by the academic researcher Adrian Zenz (2020), estimates that more than half a million Uyghurs are forced to work in Chinese cotton fields. This means that the number of brands directly and indirectly involved in such crimes is dramatically higher.

My podcast, *Made in Slavery*, discusses all these issues, focusing in particular on the necessity to adopt new effective due diligence rules which would prevent these crimes, avoid foreign companies' complicity in them, and secure justice for the victims.

“We cannot leave it to the companies the choice to care about human rights and sustainability.”

FL: The situation is developing fast, with China boycotting some international brands that have explicitly taken a stance in favour of Uyghurs. In *Made in Slavery* you mention 82 international brands that work with factories relying on Uyghurs' forced labour. How are brands – especially fashion brands – reacting now that further details are emerging, and the situation of Uyghurs is brought to the public attention?

EM: At first, when 'Uyghurs for Sale' (2020) was released and the brands listed in the report were informed about forced labour used in their supply chains, very few of them replied. Only later, when such abuses started getting considerable media attention, more brands have publicly expressed concerns. This shows how companies' attitude towards human rights strictly depends on media attention and consequently on consumers' behaviour.

However, voicing concerns about China's policies comes with big costs. Following the stance taken by several brands against human rights abuses in Xinjiang, China's government has begun an aggressive boycott campaign, forcing these brands to choose between supporting human rights and protecting their profits from the Chinese market. China is the world's second-largest economy, representing an incredibly profitable market for foreign companies. While some brands have bravely stood firm on their position, others have removed from their websites any criticism of and reference to the Uyghur crisis.

For precisely this reason, we cannot leave it to the companies the choice to care about human rights and sustainability. Without legislation with extraterritorial effects, many companies will inevitably choose profit over workers' rights, and those acting responsibly will be at a severe competitive disadvantage.

“If there is no traceability and transparency in the supply chains, brands cannot be aware of the effect of their business practices.”

FL: It is also thanks to Uyghur women who have escaped the 'vocational education centres' that we now have an insight into life in the centres, and the overall process of cultural assimilation perpetrated at the expense of Uyghurs. From the interviews you conducted with these Uyghur women, a pact between women, a sort of feminist solidarity, unequivocally emerges. Can you tell me about the role of women in your research and their experiences in the centres?

EM: An important part of my podcast is dedicated to the role of Uyghur women as they are the first victims of this brutal repression and at the same time the first fighters for Uyghur freedom.

I had the chance to chat with one of these brave women, Gulbahar Jalilova, a Uyghur from Kazakhstan who spent fifteen months in one of China's detention camps and decided to speak up, despite threats from Chinese authorities. She told me her story, which is also the story of hundreds of thousands of women imprisoned in those camps. A story of a cruel plan, which involves tortures, internment, rape, indoctrination, forced sterilisation, high-tech surveillance and forced labour.

If we are now aware of what is happening to these people, with the complicity of the global industry, it is only thanks to the courage of Uyghur women who, besides sharing their experiences publicly, have also used their professions and art to create a movement of nonviolent resistance. Now it is up to us to do our part and make these powerful stories known.

“Shady and fragmented global supply chains make it impossible for consumers to avoid goods linked to slave labour.”

FL: China is one of the world's leading producers of cotton and the largest importer and consumer of cotton globally, with the majority of China's cotton being produced in Xinjiang, which also explains the strategic importance of this region. Recent studies about sustainable and regenerative cotton farming in China unsurprisingly focus mainly on environmental issues, without touching on the social impact of production practices and the global fashion industry. Human rights and the rights of nature, instead, are interdependent. What can be done, at the corporate and institutional level, to promote transparency and accountability in terms of environmental, social and racial justice?

EM: Transparency is the main issue and we should push our institutions to adopt new legislation in that sense. Shady and fragmented global supply chains make it impossible for companies as well as for consumers to avoid goods linked to slave labour. Considering the scale of the issue and the prevalence of Xinjiang cotton in the market, it is up to the brands, which operate there, to provide evidence that their supply chains and manufacturing do not use forced labour.

However, this is not possible as restricted access to the region and government controls make any independent examination extremely difficult. In fact, so far none of those brands have been able to prove that they are not linked to forced labour. In parallel, many brands, which operate in Xinjiang, are advertising environmentally friendly practices. However, if there is no traceability and transparency in the supply chains, brands cannot be aware of the effect of their business practices on human rights and neither on the environment.

Transparency and accountability are closely linked, and if we really want to make progress in terms of business due diligence we should not be afraid to reshape our industries.

“If global business has no borders, why are laws still national?”

FL: Within *Made in Slavery*, you discuss how legal discrepancies between countries create loopholes that allow the proliferation of unethical practices, such as forced labour. A crucial question hence emerges, that is, if global business has no borders, why are laws still national? This contradictory situation reminds me of the paradox addressed by Stuart Hall (2005 [1993]), who argues that at the heart of modernity there is a tension between the tendency of capitalism to strengthen the nation-state and national cultures versus its own transnational imperatives. Considering the current situation, do you see some effort, at an institutional level, to create communal laws that would protect people and encourage transparency in the supply chain?

EM: If we want global business to ensure good quality work, as well as fair and sustainable products we need transnational mandatory standards. In this sense, the EU has taken a step forward recently. In fact, on 10 March 2021, for the first time, the European Parliament adopted, with a large majority, a resolution calling on the European Commission to draft a new legislation on corporate due diligence and accountability for human rights and environmental issues.

This directive has come after a long advocacy campaign led by some MEPs together with civil society and, if implemented, will certainly have a great impact on corporate accountability across Europe. I am sure that many things are changing in the right direction. Today, consumers have higher standards and they want to be informed sure that they buy. They no longer accept being involved in crimes like Uyghur forced labour or in environmental destruction when they buy products in their own country.

“Everyone can have a role in this revolution.”

FL: Your work explores several areas that require much work and communal efforts, such as the current lack of international laws preventing forced labour, corporate responsibility and duty of care. For what concerns us – the citizen and consumers – what do you think we can do to make a positive contribution to this situation?

EM: Everyone can have a role in this revolution. Being informed and getting involved are the first things to do in order to capture the attention of relevant institutions. If we have taken some steps forward in the last few months, it was essentially thanks to communal efforts which have involved NGOs, academic researchers, politicians, journalists and consumers.

In this sense, cross cooperation among countries is crucial, and an example is given by the public campaign promoted by [End Uyghur Forced Labour Coalition](#). This is formed by over 180 global human rights groups and trade unions, which is calling on leading clothing brands and retailers "to ensure that they are not supporting or benefiting from the pervasive and extensive forced labour of the Uyghur population and other Turkic and Muslim-majority peoples, perpetrated by the Chinese government". FIDU as well as Fashion Revolution and many other organisations have already endorsed its call to action, and we hope that others will join us to take action.

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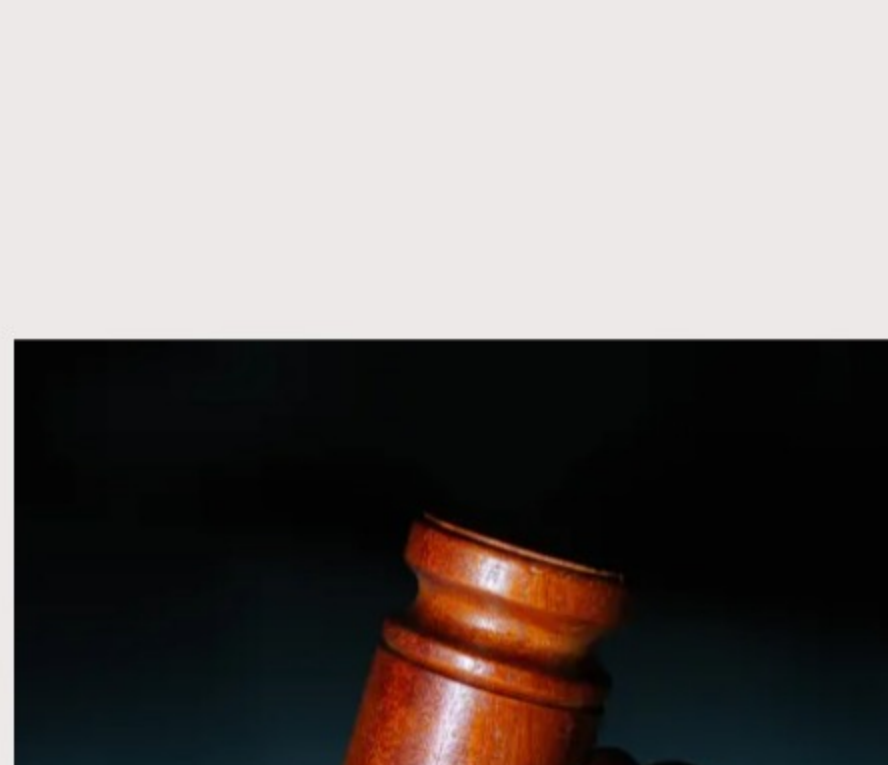
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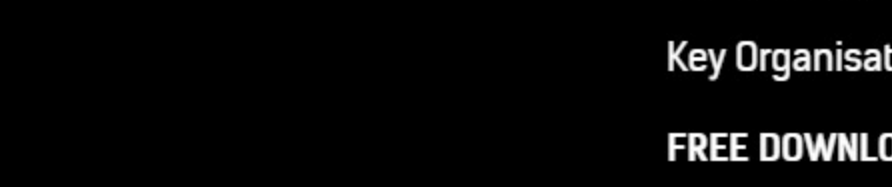
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