



FIGHTING GLOBAL POVERTY

Fashioning the Future

Fixing the fashion industry for workers and climate



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Foreword

“ When these people start discussing green deals or carbonless economies, do they lose their minds? Don’t they know the truth about workers and what could happen to millions of people in the production countries? ”

– Kalpona Akter, Founder and Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS)

The world is in a state of crisis. Climate breakdown, unprecedented global inequality, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and global cost-of-living crisis, are ravaging the lives and lands of the world’s poorest and most marginalised communities. Increasingly frequent and intense climate disasters amplify and deepen these existing inequalities, with devastating consequences for millions of people.

Inequality, both within and between countries, has become deeply entrenched – the result of centuries of colonial plunder and dominance of a rigged economic system that has seen the wealth of rich elites grow exponentially at the expense of the majority. The gap between the richest and the poorest is stark: half of the global population share just 2% of global wealth, while the richest 10% own 76%.¹ Just 2,153 billionaires hoard more wealth than 60% of humanity.²

These are global challenges, demanding urgent transformation of our economies and societies, including polluting industries like fashion. Yet the opening words of this report from Kalpona Akter should challenge all global justice movements, especially those in the Global North, to recognise that it is the

voices of the people and communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis, that must shape the transition we are striving for.

The global fashion industry, or as we call it in this report, ‘big fashion’, is controlled predominantly by corporate elites in the Global North, and is part and parcel of an economic system designed to maximise profit for the few, at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of working people across the world. The clothes we wear, and the processes that produce them, therefore provide us with a window into the broader inter-connected crises of poverty, inequality, climate and ecological breakdown.

Radical alternatives such as degrowth movements offer different ways of envisioning industries like big fashion. Degrowth questions the relentless extraction of resources and exploitation of peoples in the pursuit of corporate profit, proposing that those most responsible for climate damage must reduce production and consume less. The idea is to prioritise moving to a socially just and ecologically sustainable society with social and environmental well-being replacing gross domestic product (GDP) as the indicators of prosperity.



An aerial view of the Rana Plaza building collapse which killed over 1,000 people in Dhaka, Bangladesh, April 2013.

This report honours those working in the supply chains of an industry notorious for exploitation and abuse, both of workers and of our planet's eco-systems. The report is not a blueprint for how to transform big fashion, but an insight into how the business model and economic system they operate in are inherently damaging. It situates the fashion industry as a key sector that must be urgently transformed because of its impact on the planet, and explores the extent to which corporate power and pursuit of profit has driven profound inequality, poverty, and worker exploitation. Crucially, this report explains why the transformation of sectors like fashion must be designed with and by workers and frontline communities, and not become another crisis they must endure.

In 2013 the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh killed over 1,100 people and

brought public attention to the devastating human cost behind the polished shopfronts and websites of both high end and high street fashion brands. Today, ten years on from Rana Plaza, big fashion is increasingly under scrutiny as a leading culprit of our ecological and climate crisis, as well as its continued exploitation of workers.

Big fashion is pushing our climate beyond critical warming levels. There is a lack of reliable data regarding fashion's ecological footprint – estimates of greenhouse gas emissions generated by the industry range wildly from 1.8% - 10%.³ This is an industry that runs on a lack of transparency – and places little value on the people and ecosystems that it exploits.

Fashion's social and environmental crimes have the same systemic causes yet frequently

solutions appear to present polarised choices between ‘workers’ or ‘planet’. Environmental movements call for consumption to be drastically reduced or ended for the sake of the planet. In return, economic justice and workers’ rights movements highlight the economic consequences and impact that millions of job losses would have on the fight against poverty and the right to a dignified life for many across the Global South.

While this polarised debate continues, corporate capitalism is free to greenwash its own survival narrative that will leave its power and profits fundamentally unchallenged, and our world blighted by poverty, inequality and spiralling climate violence.

Much of the sustainability narrative of the fashion sector to date has been focused simply on shifting away from the energy sources that fuel processes of garment manufacturing. Indeed, many garment-producing countries have sought to expand their own fossil fuel-based industries, not with the primary intention of meeting the needs of their citizens, but in order to produce ‘cheap energy’ for the industrial sectors. Yet, the fashion industry remains unaccountable for the environmental impact of this expansion.

The fashion industry drains water and other critical resources from Global South countries, contributing to rapid soil depletion, land systems change and biodiversity loss. This ecological breakdown is driven by the profit motives of corporations based in the Global North, but it is the world’s poorest and most marginalised communities that suffer from the devastating impacts of continued resource extraction. As we will see in Chapter Five, big fashion is inseparable from the issue of land ownership and pollution – land stolen and shaped by colonial conquests and land ravaged by the corporate thirst for export crops.

This process of extraction from the Global South results not just in ecological impacts. It also systematically deprives the South of the resources required for key infrastructure and development. Resources that could be used to meet essential human needs are instead appropriated for the sake of corporate expansion in the Global North, perpetuating a cycle of inequality and deprivation.

The same underlying systems and structural drivers propel the dual crises of inequality and ecological breakdown. It is vital that our response takes account of this by offering transformative, intersectional solutions. That is why our vision is of a radical alternative in the form of a Global Green New Deal that centres the voices of workers and those most impacted, that offers a pathway for a just recovery from the climate crisis in ways that guarantee everyone’s right to live with dignity by tackling the systemic causes of poverty, inequality, structural oppression, and ecological breakdown.⁴

Building the power of intersectional movements with fashion’s workers at the heart, is the way to bring forward the bold visions and radical demands that can transform fashion beyond the swapping of materials, to the uprooting of injustices and the power monopolies of its corporate elites. This report offers us a starting point for an alternative way in which to approach a just transition, in a way that appropriately apportions responsibility, and challenges us to re-think what we value the most.



Asad Rehman
Executive Director
War on Want

The fashion industry's climate impact

The fashion industry ...

produces

100 billion

pieces of clothing

and

24.4 billion

pairs of shoes

every year



will increase its greenhouse gas emissions

50%

from 2020 to 2030

consumes enough water to meet the needs of

5 million

people



dumps the equivalent of

3 million

oil barrels of microfibre in our oceans



is responsible for

20%

of all industrial water pollution



Data source(s): Greenhouse gas emissions forecast, water usage and pollution stats from Consumption and Production Unit at the UN Environment Programme: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1035161>. Estimated item production stats from McKinsey 'State of Fashion' report: <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion>.

1. The global impact of the fashion industry

“Fashion should be about art, creativity and the creation of beauty, but it’s none of that right now – at least not for tens of millions of people. Workers who make clothes should get to feel like they’ve created something of beauty, yet nobody feels that.”

– Nandita Shivakumar, Coordinator, Campaigns & Global Partnerships, Asia Floor Wage Alliance

How to make clothes

Humanity faces a fashion challenge: eight billion people need to be clothed and shod in a way that does not cause ecological havoc or human suffering. This report is dedicated to lifting our collective vision to consider radical alternatives – such as degrowth – which would transform our clothing system to leave a lighter touch upon the Earth, and erase the misery inherent in garment production. If this report can join the dots between the crises of climate, inequality and poverty, and offer an alternative way of managing this industry, why does big fashion itself not do this?

The short answer is because we live under a capitalist economic system that is not based on human need or minimising damage to the planet. The system we live under imposes an inappropriate measure of how to use what we have to fulfil human need: profitability. In the words of New York economics Professor Richard Wolff, interviewed in this report: “If it isn’t profitable, it doesn’t get done.”



Waste material from a garments factory dumped in a canal causing it to become almost ecologically dead at Savar in Dhaka, Bangladesh, December 2017.

Profit accumulation is at the heart of capitalism and the fashion industry. It is what drives the race to the bottom, pushing labour and environmental standards down and down, culminating in factory fires, and collapses – and rivers dyed blue and orange by toxic chemical run-off.

Big fashion brands exist to make maximum profits for the people who control them. This is why solutions will never come from the industry itself and we cannot afford to

continue looking in the same places for ideas. Instead, this report seeks new perspectives on how we should decide fashion's future, and in so doing; decide the future of life upon this planet.

Shifting threads

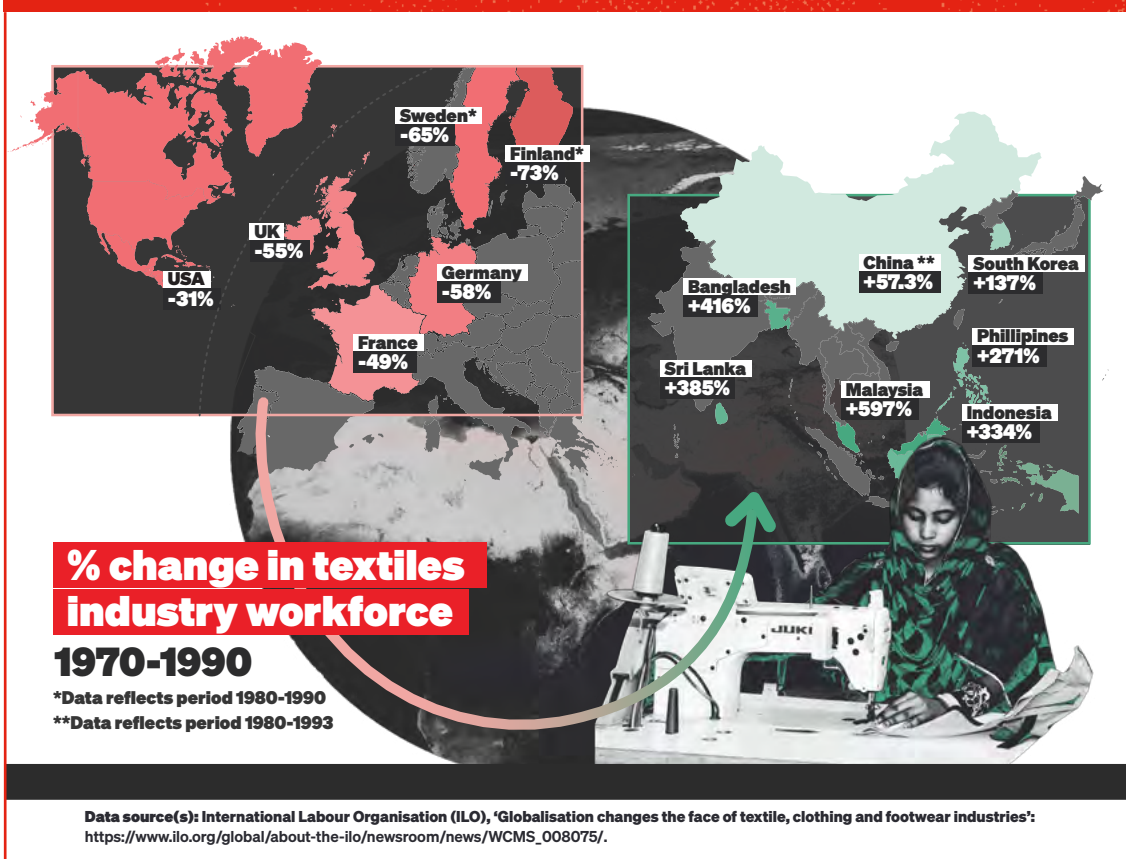
A key reason profits are so high for big fashion corporations is because of how clothing is produced. The decades between 1970 to 1990 saw the production of clothing, footwear and textiles shift across the globe in search of lower manufacturing costs and lower environmental regulations. The industry in Europe and North America suffered huge job losses, while Asia in particular experienced major job gains. This shift changed not just where clothes are made,

but how much people are paid to make them – and the conditions that they are made in. The entire industry transitioned from the formal sector into the informal sector, with negative consequences for workers' wages and conditions.⁵

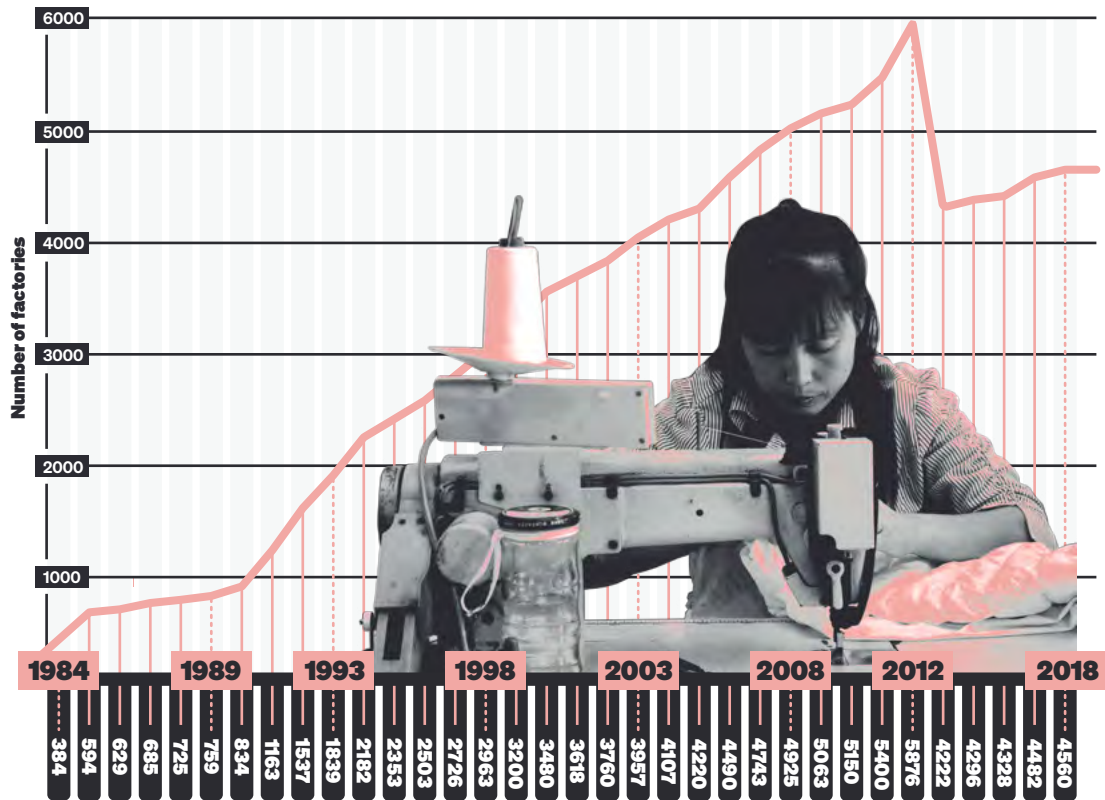
This globalised shift continues to shield people in the Global North who buy fashion from the pitfalls of production: worker exploitation in factories, poverty, abuse, rock-bottom wages and soil and water pollution. Instead, countries in the Global South are left to deal with the impact of the fashion industry.⁶

Breaking down the cost of a €29 t-shirt, the Clean Clothes Campaign found that while profit to a clothing brand and materials each accounted for 12%, or €3.61, payment to the worker who made the t-shirt was just 0.6%, or €0.18.⁷

Shifting production to the Global South



Textiles factories in Bangladesh



Data source(s): Md. Shahajada Mia, Pabna University of Science and Technology, 'Ready-Made Garments Sector of Bangladesh: Its Growth, Contribution and Challenges': https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Number-of-garment-factories-in-Bangladesh_fig1_336851265

In the late 1970s, Bangladesh had an estimated twelve garment factories. By 1985, there were 450 factories, and by 2015 there were 7,000.⁸ By the 1990s, the factory workforce was 90% women, and Bangladesh was hailed as an economic success. But the women stitching hems, snipping threads, and folding and pressing garments were paying a high price, both physically and emotionally. Between 2005 and 2012, more than 500 people died in factory fires and collapses in Bangladesh.⁹ Then in 2013, 1,138 people were killed in the Rana Plaza collapse.

Fashion production currently employs an estimated 4.2 million people in Bangladesh, with clothing and footwear production accounting for 80% of all Bangladeshi exports.¹⁰

This over-dependence on garment exports is the result of Bangladesh being steered into the fashion industry by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, which wanted Bangladesh to abandon hopes of self-sufficiency and open up its economy to global markets.¹¹

After independence in 1971, Bangladesh's economy was characterised by strong trade restrictions, including high tariffs on imports, to support a strategy of import-substitution (an economic policy that prizes domestic production over foreign imports). While the 1980s saw a moderate relaxing of this strategy, in the 1990s large-scale trade liberalisation was implemented as a cornerstone of neoliberal economic dogma. Trade liberalisation benefitted the garment industry

as exporters were provided with easy access to credit, low import taxes on machinery and tax rebates.¹² Big fashion meanwhile gained access to a labour pool comprising millions of impoverished people.

Forty years on from the start of trade liberalisation, Bangladesh remains in this precarious trap, creating vast profits for some of the most powerful multinational corporations in the world, yet unable to achieve financial stability. It is a prime example of national ambition thwarted by neoliberal ‘solutions’ that were only ever designed to be a dead end.

Becoming economically dependent upon a single product is “a recipe for economic disaster,” explains Professor Wolff. “Capitalism is an extremely unstable system. Every four to seven years on average capitalism has a crash, which means periodically your industry zooms up and then it zooms down, it has a good year and then it has a bad year. But if you’re a country that just exports garments, you don’t have any flexibility, you’re an entire society focused on one commodity – the product controls you rather than you controlling the product.”

When crisis strikes, countries are forced to borrow money from banks and financial companies, from other countries, or from global institutions such as the IMF. When the time comes for this loan, or even just the interest on it, to be paid back, a new drain is created on an already poor society. When commodity prices fall – as we saw with fashion during the Covid-19 pandemic – more money must be borrowed, and the cycle of debt continues.

Colonial pathways

The British Empire shaped the world through slavery, colonialism, military aggression, and financial power. In the process it amassed vast wealth through a deliberate policy of deindustrialisation and then wealth extraction. Professor and economist Utsa Patnaik calculated that between 1765 and 1938, Britain drained US\$45 trillion from India.¹³ (For perspective, Britain’s entire GDP for 2018 was approximately US\$3 trillion.¹⁴) These centuries of looting built British infrastructure, while causing incalculable damage to the socio-ecological fabric of communities across India.



Workers in a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, May 2020.



Today, big fashion follows these colonial pathways to industrial sites where safety standards can be evaded. Nandita Shivakumar of the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) describes the fashion industry as “an extraction of wealth from the Global South in terms of land and labour”. This, she says, “ranges from non-payment of wages, the lack of a living wage, to pollution and gender-based violence. This extraction is utilised for both big fashion and consumers in the Global North. This neocolonial system does not help develop local industry and it certainly does not help workers.”

Liability troubles

When production shifted to the Global South in the 1970s and 1980s, clothing companies rushed to take advantage, paying workers rock bottom wages and maximising production to pile clothes high and sell them

for less, creating demand and fulfilling supply to drive profits higher.

The clothes were not of course affordable for the people making them – one study found that a worker in China doing a 50-hour week would have to spend half her monthly wage to buy a pair of Nike trainers.¹⁵

Before the globalisation of clothing, many Global North companies manufactured their own products in factories they either owned or had very close relationships with. But with production now subcontracted to the Global South, clothing companies stopped manufacturing and concentrated on building brands instead.

This severed the official link between corporations and their legal liability for the way their products were produced. Fashion corporations tried to shrug off responsibility by branding themselves as ‘buyers’ rather than

Garment workers at work in a factory during Covid-19 pandemic in Gazipur, Bangladesh, May 2021.



Cost of a t-shirt



primary employers, as if they did not control virtually every aspect of the production process. In their endeavours to build brands, efforts went into PR machines to repair reputations, over fixing bad practices. It has taken decades of campaigning to re-establish, and continually fight for, the fact that corporations have a duty towards the people who make their clothes and a responsibility for how those clothes are made.

Yet it remains extremely difficult to hold big fashion accountable, making the fashion industry a dangerous, destructive, highly polluting place. "It is almost impossible to hold a brand liable in a production country, yet nor can we really hold them liable in consumption countries," explains Shivakumar. "It is not a feasible economic fight for a Global South

union to go to the US, find a lawyer, and fight with these huge brands."

Competition

As well as profit and a lack of company liability, competition shapes the fashion industry. Big fashion corporations compete to make the highest profits, while countries compete to supply big fashion.

"There is so much competition between countries," Shivakumar continues. "Asia should be seen as a region, but countries compete with each other for contracts, and within a country like India, states compete against other states."

Professor Wolff concurs: “It has become relatively easy to buy and install machinery to make clothing, and the skills needed to work these machines are fairly easily taught, so it becomes a struggle in which factory owners in India, China, Bangladesh, Vietnam and so on compete to produce the sneakers, blouses, underwear, socks for the market. They are in a primitive, ruthless competition.”

If factory owners are all submitting bids for contracts to make shirts, and are all in competition with each other, how do they achieve the lowest bid? “They do it by gaining an advantage they can translate into a lower price,” Professor Wolff explains. “They have to find the cheapest workers, they have to work them mercilessly, they can’t have a union, and they can’t rent or build a safe building.”

Ongoing research by the Clean Clothes Campaign has found that, as of 2023, there aren’t any major brands, either fast fashion or luxury, which can prove all workers in their supply chain earn a living wage. “No garment or sportswear company recognises that brand business practices have a direct effect on workers’ wages, leaving millions of workers deprived of not only wages but sleep, access to health care, safe transport, the ability to live with loved ones, adequate food, education, even time poverty from needing to work extra hours.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, it takes the average fashion company CEO just 28 minutes to amass what a Bangladeshi garment worker earns on average in a year.¹⁷

These factors – the pursuit of profit, lack of company liability, globalisation, colonialism and competition mean that behind the scenes, the fashion industry is a violent system at every turn. From endemic gender-based violence, to climate violence and state-sanctioned oppression of workers and unions by police and paid thugs, to intentional neglect as a

form of violence – as seen at Rana Plaza. Professor Wolff describes this violence as “the lubricant of the whole system,” something that is ever present rather than a particular event.

At its heart, the fashion industry is built on injustice, and would not exist without the exploitation of women, of the Global South, of migrants, of people of colour, of the land and our collective natural resources. But the violence that accompanies this exploitation is also a sign of a system in flux, of people unwilling to put up with the unfairness of the system – wherever there is oppression, there is also resistance.

Big profits, poverty wages

Revenue and profits

Fashion industry revenue in 2022*

£1.2 trillion



*estimated

AVERAGE ANNUAL PROFITS OF SELECTED BRANDS (2019-2021)

NIKE
£2.97 billion

LOUIS VUITTON
£2.57 billion

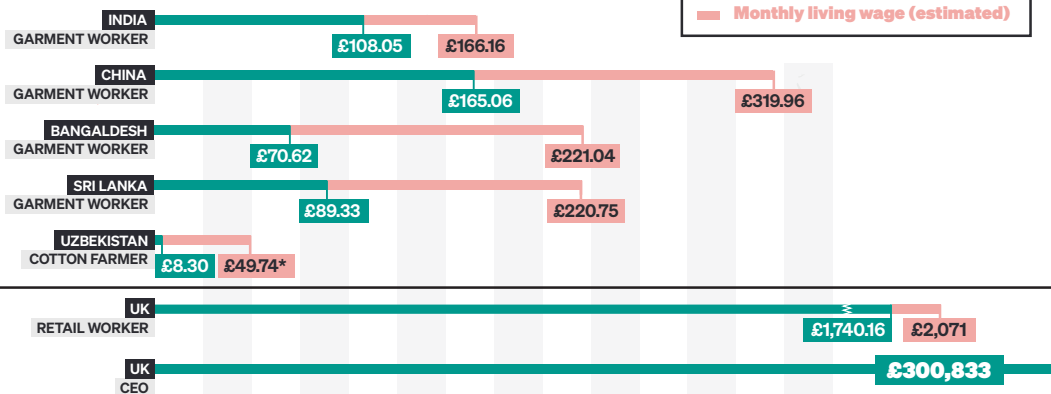
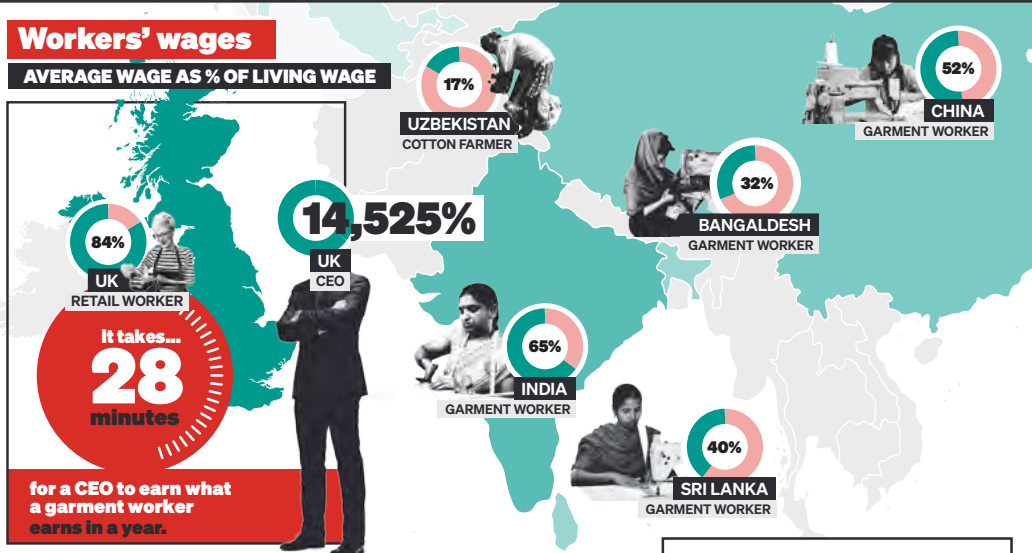
ZARA
£1.94 billion

adidas
£771 million

next
£382 million

Workers' wages

AVERAGE WAGE AS % OF LIVING WAGE



Data source(s): Revenue estimate from P.Smith, 'Revenue of the apparel market worldwide from 2014 to 2027' published on Statista: <https://www.statista.com/topics/5091/apparel-market-worldwide/>. Average profits of leading fashion brands from McKinsey via Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/953410/economic-profit-of-leading-fashion-companies-worldwide/>. Average wages of garment workers from Leander von Kameke, 'Average monthly basic wage of garment workers in selected Asian countries between March 2020 to March 2021' via Statista: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1281264/average-monthly-wage-garment-workers-asia/>. Living wage data from Asia Floor Wage: https://asia.floorwage.org/?page_id=17. Additional wage data on Uzbekistan cotton farmer wages from International Labour Organisation '2020 third-party monitoring of child labour and forced labour during the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan': https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_767756.pdf. Retail worker average wage UK from Glass Door: https://www.glassdoor.co.uk/Salaries/london-shop-assistant-salary-SRCH_IL06_IM1035_K07,21.htm. UK Living wage from the Living Wage foundation: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/>.

*Living wage figure for Uzbekistan from Numbeo estimated cost of living: https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/country_result.jsp?country=Uzbekistan*1.6 (average dependents: <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR84/02Chapter2.pdf>)

2. What about the jobs?

“ We did not tell you to come here. You came here, not to do charity through the industry, but because you know that you can pay less and make more profit. And now you have enough profit and are thinking okay, we don’t care whatever happens to them, we’ll just go away. It’s not right – the workers’ voice should be included. We should have our space whenever decisions are being made. ”

– Kalpona Akter, Founder and Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS)

The fashion industry is a driver of poverty, debt and stark inequality – and a major cause of ecological and climate damage. This must change, but how?

These social and environmental crimes have the same systemic causes, yet in some quarters the debate on how we change the fashion industry has become polarised between ‘workers’ and ‘planet’.

Environmental movements call for consumption to be drastically reduced or ended for the sake of the planet – people must buy *better*, shop *less*, or not shop for clothing at all – while factory jobs are written off as dull, dangerous, short-term, and cheap.

In return, economic justice and workers’ rights movements highlight the impact of this reduction on people, communities, and national economies across the Global South: millions of job losses and the undermining of the fight for decent working conditions.

If we do not bridge the two key imperatives of environmental and economic justice – care for

the planet and workers’ rights – there is a high risk that policies designed to reduce environmental impacts will further harm the rights and livelihoods of millions of farmers and workers in fashion supply chains.

At worst, some proposed environmental ‘solutions’ to radically reduce the fashion industry’s carbon footprint – such as consumers simply buying less – risk devastating consequences for millions of people in the Global South, particularly Black and Brown migrant women and their communities. Such proposals threaten to replicate the patterns of so-called sacrifice zones, whereby geographical areas are consigned to permanent economic disinvestment and environmental disaster in order for others to benefit.

As well as being ethically untenable, such approaches severely limit the public support needed for a transition to become a politically viable possibility, while making useful material for populist politicians who seek to stoke up reactionary feeling to slow down or stop any kind of environmental transition.



Bangladeshi garment workers and other labour rights activists take part in a rally to mark International Workers' Day in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on May 1, 2023.

The intentional co-optation of human rights narratives also serves to protect big fashion's interests. In 2019, Karl-Johan Persson, CEO of H&M, gave an interview in which he stated that while shaming fashion consumers “may lead to a small environmental impact, it will have terrible social consequences.”¹⁸ The idea that H&M is on the side of workers, rather than primarily concerned with its own profit margins, jars with the regular exposés of gender-based violence, stolen wages, and labour rights violations in H&M supply chains.¹⁹ But by expressing concern for factory jobs if clothing production drops, Persson is able to exploit the tension that exists between environmental campaigners, people scared to lose their livelihoods, and politicians fearful of falling popularity, to push back against environmental pressure.

Neither environmental nor workers' rights campaigners can risk their arguments being co-opted in this manner. Nor is the divide between environment and workers' rights that has sprung up a real one. This report



Workers' rights campaigners and trade unionists marching in London to demand a just transition to renewable energy.

challenges ‘planet versus workers’ as a false dichotomy and a fabricated divide that generates tension and division. By offering a thorough investigation of the systemic causes of the damage done by the fashion industry, we hope to bridge this divide and show how the current growth-at-any-cost model is the real culprit.

From growthism to degrowth

To avert ecological and climate breakdown we must actively replace fossil fuels with a rapid rollout of renewable energy, cutting the world’s carbon dioxide emissions in half within a decade and reaching zero emissions by 2050. This must be done in an equitable way, recognising that responsibility for emissions lies with Global North countries. It also means measures to eradicate energy poverty and to reduce consumption. This is very hard to do while we are, as a global community caught in the trap of ‘growthism’.

Economist and author Jason Hickel defines ‘growthism’ as the idea that all sectors of an economy must mindlessly grow all the time, regardless of whether or not a society actually needs them to, and no matter the consequences. It is a political ideology that has become a dangerous dogma.²⁰

‘Growthism’ has led to unsustainable levels of energy and resource-use in Global North countries, which is driving ecological breakdown. As an alternative, ecological economists propose that we should decide what sectors we *actually* need to grow (for example public transport, healthcare or renewable energy), and which sectors are destructive and socially less-necessary – and so should be actively scaled down or ended entirely (sectors mostly organised around capital accumulation and elite consumption). This idea, of scaling down certain sectors and forms of production, is known as ‘degrowth.’

What is degrowth?

In English, ‘degrowth’ is not a word that makes immediate sense. It has its origins in Latin languages, “la décroissance” in French or “la decrescita” in Italian, which refer to a river reverting back to its normal flow after a disastrous flood.²¹

As an idea, degrowth critiques the capitalist drive to seek growth no matter the devastating cost to people or planet. As a movement, degrowth is calling for societies, both local and global, to prioritise social and ecological wellbeing instead of corporate profit, over-production and excess consumption. Rather than aiming to reduce all forms of production, degrowth is specifically about reducing *less-necessary* forms of production and is targeted at rich Global North countries, as those most responsible for driving the environmental damage and the climate crisis.

In practice, this means democratically reducing the scale of industrial production in Global North countries, and instead prioritising care and environmental justice so that everyone can live well within planetary boundaries. Crucially, it means radically redistributing resources to make up for past and current harms, such as slavery, colonialism, land theft, wealth hoarding, and rigged debt schemes and trade rules. In this way degrowth is a means for people in the Global North to recognise and oppose the structures that continue to limit possibilities in the Global South.

As economist Tonny Nowshin explains: “Degrowth fundamentally embeds the discussion of giving back resources that are taken by extraction from the Global

South to the Global North, including wages. Degrowth doesn't only focus on production but also redistribution of produce and resources. From a social justice perspective, degrowth is one of the frameworks that needs to make sure we are decolonial and caring for everyone. It's not only about giving people more material things to reach a basic standard of living, but also making space for other forms of wellbeing like social connection, community, producing differently and sharing."²²

Degrowth is not a recession or a plan to make workers and the poor pay the price of change, nor is there any space within the degrowth movement for critiques pushing right-wing, racist or sexist ideologies.

While the word degrowth may not trip off the tongue, as Degrowth.info states, this strange word is supposed to be a disruption – pointing to the end of business-as-usual and a horizon of opportunity for us all.

As the economist Samir Amin wrote: "Today, modernity is in crisis because the contradictions of globalized capitalism, unfolding in real societies, have become such that capitalism puts human civilization itself in danger. Capitalism has had its day."²³

The fashion industry produces an estimated 100 billion items of clothing²⁴ and 24.4 billion pairs of shoes²⁵ every year. Even using the loosest definitions of what constitutes human need, fashion is an extreme example of a sector organised around socially-unnecessary production. This makes it a top candidate for an industry that could be degrown, while still

meeting the need for high-quality clothing that is neither resource-intensive nor devoid of creative and aesthetic design.

But if the industry shrinks dramatically, the essential question is what will happen to the jobs of the tens of millions of people currently working in clothing supply chains – from farmers growing cotton, to factory workers, freight drivers, warehouse workers and shop staff?²⁶ Is it possible to transform society to protect people and their livelihoods while degrowing the industry?

In January 2023, Kalpona Akter, Founder and Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS), described factory workers' lives as "still dire", with workers caught between long shifts, poverty wages, and gender-based violence on the one hand, and increasing economic instability due to a recession and reduced orders on the other. With rising inflation, no wage increases for five years and increased job instability, basic necessities are becoming unaffordable for many. "Garment workers are in a very difficult situation in terms of buying food," Akter says. "Pretty much all of them are cutting back on food and that includes for their children as well."

When workers lose their factory jobs, as so many did during the Covid-19 pandemic, they do not receive severance payments or unemployment support, and are unable to rely on public services. Akter describes fired workers as "going back to ground zero." Nor are there other employment opportunities, except domestic work, which Akter describes as stigmatised even though it can occasionally pay better than garment work.

"I really don't buy any of this discussion about green economies without workers' voices and without worker protection for the wages," Akter says, in a strong response to people who argue or infer that garment jobs are

disposable. Akter describes a situation where people talk about fast fashion and creating carbon-free economies, but never think about the workers. “Making a carbon-free economy, or a green economy, or a Green New Deal or whatever you want to name it – where is the workers’ voice in that?” Akter asks. “If someone comes and talks about a green economy and says here is the workers’ voice then that is fine, otherwise I don’t validate any of these discussions.” “If it does not involve workers then this process is not democratic,” Akter continues. “It should not be a top-down approach. It should be bottom-up, you need to hear us. You need to know how we will be impacted when you do this new deal.”

“We did not screw this up, we workers did not do anything,” Akter adds. “It is *you people* who wanted to have more clothes at less prices and who put us in a difficult situation with poverty wages and long shifting hours,

and now you think you need to do something that will make a green economy but you’re not going to think about us? No, it should not be like that! We want to have our space at the discussion table and make sure we are not losing anything. Until then, don’t talk to us about green economies.”

Unequal exchange theory

There is no need to imagine how badly scaling back could go if done in an unplanned, undemocratic manner. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an unexpected but enormous drop in production, which spelled disaster for garment workers and their families. In one pandemic survey, the Worker Rights Consortium found that 88% of the workers they interviewed had been forced to cut back on food for themselves and their households due to loss of income.²⁷ Similarly,



Garment workers boarding the Shimulia ferry to travel back to Dhaka to resume work during lockdown in Munshiganj, Bangladesh July 2021.





 **Garment workers stage a roadblock demonstration demanding their unpaid wages in Dhaka, Bangladesh, March 2021.**

research from the Asia Floor Wage Alliance concluded that during the pandemic, workers coped by engaging in their own mental and physical degradation and that the pandemic saw the “mining of workers’ bodies.”²⁸

In July 2021, the Clean Clothes Campaign stated that garment workers globally are owed US\$11.85 billion in unpaid income and severance pay, from just a single year of pandemic upheaval during March 2020 to March 2021.²⁹ Since the pandemic, the industry has been impacted by continued economic instability and the global cost-of-living crisis, leading to more hardship and uncertainty. This series of global shocks illustrates an important point about the structure of not just the fashion industry, but of the global economy.

These crises are gendered. Ayomi Jayanthi Wickremasekara works at the Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union (FTZ&GSEU) in Sri Lanka, where community soup kitchens have been started in response to more and more garment workers becoming malnourished. “They have only one meal a day,” Wickremasekara says. “They don’t have a balanced diet, they face skyrocketing prices, and also they have no time to cook a balanced meal for themselves. There are so many single mothers with children. Those children become malnourished and the mothers become malnourished.”³⁰

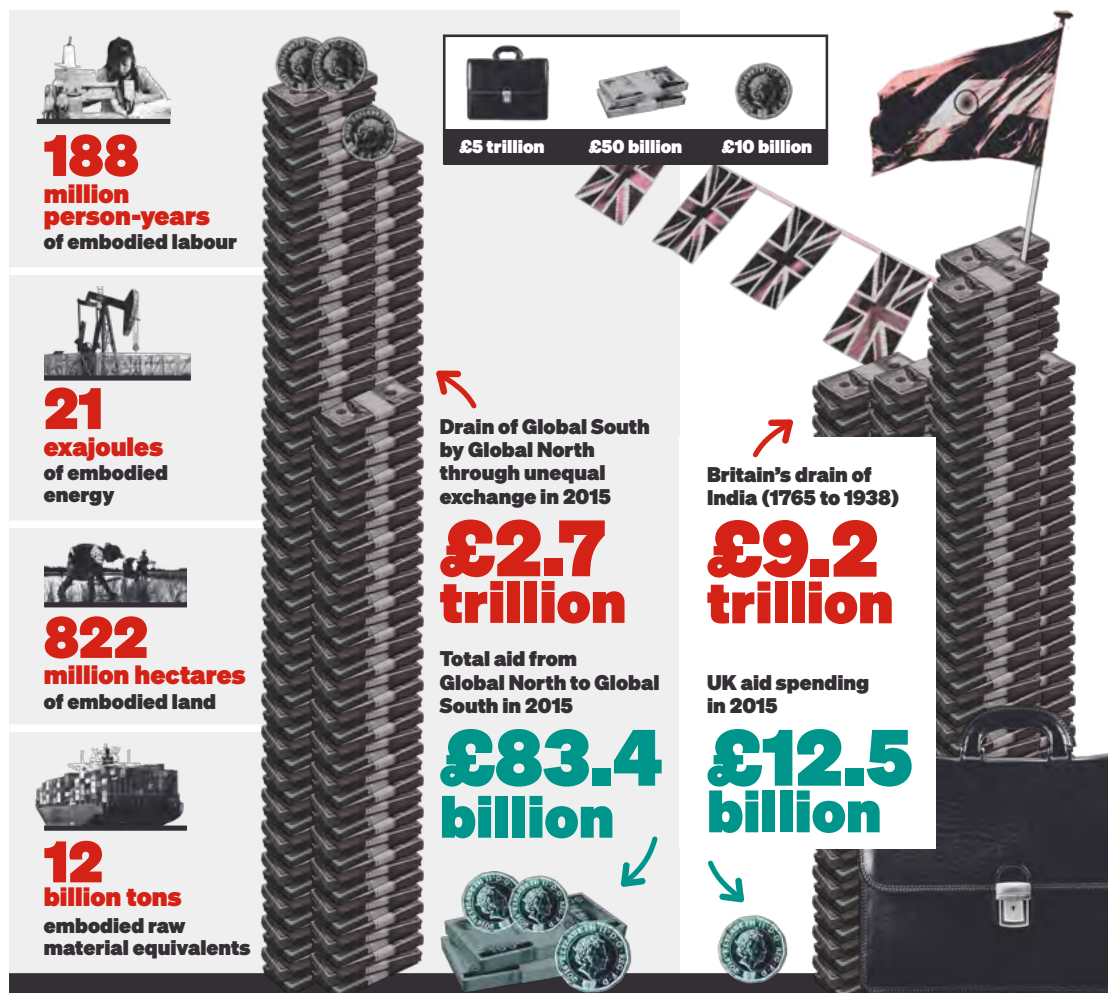
A branch of economics called unequal exchange theory states that economic growth in the rich Global North happens because vast quantities of human labour, land and

natural resources are appropriated from the Global South. In the days of colonialism this appropriation was obvious – through taxes, slavery and invasions. Today, this extraction takes place via international trade deals and systems, which dictate differing prices and standards for different countries and regions.

The scale of resource and labour extraction from the Global South to the Global North

is vast. Jason Hicke led a research team which analysed data from 2015, and estimated this Global South extraction equated to 12 billion tons of embodied raw material equivalents, 822 million hectares of embodied land, 21 exajoules of embodied energy, and 188 million person-years of embodied labour. In a single year, that works out as value worth US\$10.8 trillion – an amount of money that could end extreme poverty globally 70 times over.^{31**}

Extraction of wealth and international aid*



Data source(s): Unequal exchange calculations, resource appropriation and total North to South aid spending from Jason Hicke, 'Imperialist appropriation in the world economy: Drain from the global South through unequal exchange, 1990–2015': <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S095937802200005X#bib416>. Drain of India from Utsa Patnaik, 'British Raj siphoned out \$45 trillion from India: Utsa Patnaik': <https://www.live-mint.com/Companies/HNZA71LNVNXXQ1ealKu6M/British-Raj-siphoned-out-45-trillion-from-India-Utsa-Patna.html>. UK aid spending from UK gov: <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-aid-spending-statistics-and-recent-developments/>

* Drain of raw materials, land, and labour quantified through prevailing global average prices — best for understanding Global South losses from unequal exchange (in constant 2010 USD, converted to GBP @ 2010 exchange rate for presentational purposes)

** Drain of raw materials, land, and labour quantified through prevailing Northern prices — best for understanding Global North gains from unequal exchange (in constant 2010 USD)



TKMaxx retail store shop sign Ipswich, UK.

The team also concluded that from 1990 to 2015, this value drain from the Global South totalled US\$242 trillion³². This outstrips the aid sent by the Global North to the Global South by a factor of 30. Unsurprisingly, the paper concluded that “unequal exchange is a significant driver of global inequality, uneven development, and ecological breakdown.”

The geopolitical and commercial power of Global North countries and corporations enables them to cheapen the price of both natural resources and human labour in the Global South – and control national economies and global commodity chains such as garment production.

Economist Ndongo Samba Sylla has written about financial flows being less hampered today than during colonialism. “In the Global North, this pursuit of colonial economic logic entails an undermining of the previous socioeconomic and political achievements of

working classes and hence a widening of within-country inequalities,” he writes. “In most of the Global South, next to the weakening of working classes power, neoliberalism has consisted in suppressing nations’ and people’s right to self-determination through the imposition of deflationary policies, forced ‘free trade’, privatisation and financial liberalisation.”³³

Prices are always political

The price tags on the t-shirts, jeans, dresses, and jumpers in a Global North shopping centre do not represent the true value of these items, either in terms of material or labour. “The notion that prices are an accurate reflection of value is a very deep-seated assumption in capitalist ideology – and it is totally incorrect,” Jason Hickel explains. “There’s nothing natural about prices. Prices are an artefact of power.”

Just as the wages of nurses in the UK rise or fall depending on the bargaining power of working-class unions versus the government, the price of clothes in the UK is dependent upon the bargaining power of the countries, companies and workers that provide materials and labour to the garment sector. The value of a t-shirt on the UK high street should be seen as an effect of bargaining power, rather than a sign of the value of the product. “The cheapness is an illusion,” says Hickel.

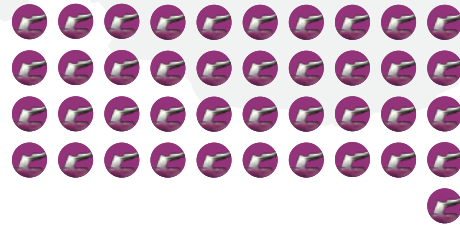
Mountains of cheap clothes are possible because rich Global North countries have virtually all of the bargaining power in the world economy – which they use to maintain the status quo. The World Bank and the IMF – key institutions governing global economic policy – are deeply undemocratic, with unelected leaders from the US and Europe and voting systems that favour Global North countries. The US, Europe and the G8 nations³⁴ control over half the votes – particularly unfair given that 85% of the world’s population lives in the Global South. By this count, in the IMF the vote of someone from Britain is worth 41 times more than that of someone in Bangladesh, despite colonialism supposedly having ended decades ago.³⁵

“ Inequality begets inequality ”

– Jason Hickel, economist and author

“Inequality begets inequality,” Hickel continues. “Those who have power can determine the rules of the economy and they compress the prices of the weak. This is what occurs when it comes to the cost of labour in Bangladesh for example. There’s nothing natural about cheap labour in Bangladesh – it’s the effect of an imperialist economy over the span of several hundred

IMF inequality



The vote of someone in the UK is worth
41 times more
than that of someone in Bangladesh
in the International Monetary Fund



Data source(s): Jason Hickel, ‘Apartheid in the World Bank and the IMF’: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/26/it-is-timeto-de-colonise-the-world-bank-and-the-imf>.

years, which has worked specifically and actively to cheapen the price of Bangladeshi labour and resources.”

This vast inequality in the global economic system is the reason countries in the Global South are stuck servicing the Global North through exports and sweatshop labour. Export industries like garments are offered as economic miracles, along with coffee, tea and cotton, but they are a trap designed to maintain the flow of labour and raw materials from the South to the North. A combination of structural adjustment programmes, unjust trade rules, privatisation, austerity, and forced trade liberalisation meant avenues to sovereign economic development were cut off to Global South nations from the 1980s onwards when, as Hickel has written, rich Global North nations began to suspect that “the shift toward economic sovereignty in the

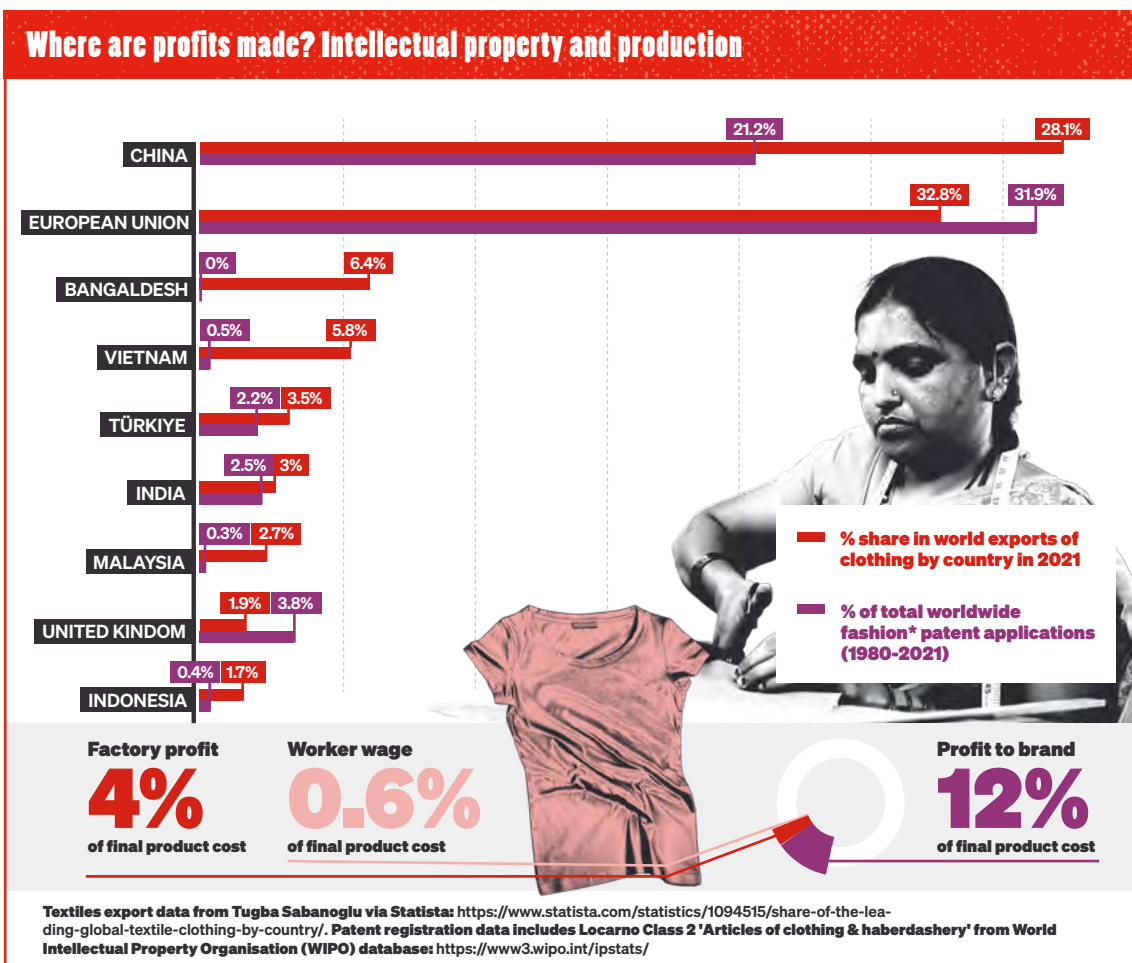
South threatened access to the cheap labour, raw materials and captive markets they had enjoyed during the colonial era.”³⁶ All of which prevents Global South countries from using fiscal-monetary policies necessary to mobilise production around socially useful work.

Instead, in order to earn foreign exchange, important for building infrastructure and importing food and fuel, Global South countries have to open themselves up to exploitation from Global North nations and corporations – opening the door to poverty wages, unsafe factories and a cascade of waste and chemical effluent.

Additionally, the cultural devaluing of clothes made in the Global South must be tackled. Price differentials in international trade

deliberately keep the costs of fashion low but this is accompanied by a spectre of cheapness – of ‘cheap labour’ making ‘cheap clothes’ in ‘cheap countries’ and none of it being worth any more than what is paid. This extends to the four key fashion weeks taking place in the Global North, while Global South designers and brands are devalued. This means ending the racism that keeps countries like Bangladesh on the bottom rung of the fashion industry because the taught kudos is for clothing designed by Italians rather than Bangladeshis or Indians.

Radical change also means ending the patent system. The Global South contributes most of the world’s industrial labour and industrial production, and yet the overwhelming majority of both the credit and the profits go



to the Global North. Much of this power is protected by the patent system, which allows big fashion to trademark their brands and aspects of the appearance of the products they sell. This cements the monopoly power of big fashion and means that despite clothes and shoes being made in the Global South with Global South materials and labour, the money is still hoarded by the Global North.

Organisations in the Global North hold 97% of all the patents in the world economy.³⁷ “In a scenario where patents are abolished, we’d be buying our clothes directly from Bangladesh and they would accumulate the profits there,” argues Jason Hickel. “Were it not for patents, Bangladeshi manufacturers could also sell their products under the

name Zara or H&M and therefore achieve whatever final price prevails in markets for those goods.”

All of this underlines the severe injustice of Global South dependency upon the North for its dollar earnings, and begs the question – why should Global South countries remain subordinate partners within global supply chains?

“Instead, Global South countries should pursue a more sovereign use of their productive capacity,” argues Jason Hickel. “This recession in the Global North has had devastating consequences for the poorest people on the planet in the Global South and that is not a situation that is tenable. That



UK activists from War on Want and Labour Behind the Label demonstrate in solidarity with garment workers facing wage theft in Adidas' supply chains. London, November 2022.



 **Garment workers stage a protest against Amazon demanding fair wages and union rights for all Amazon supply chain workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 2020.**



vulnerability should be reduced, and it should be reduced by organising production around sovereign economic development.”

Rather than being based on exports to the Global North, Global South production could instead be less exposed to global supply chains, organised around domestic requirements and regional trade to insulate economies from fluctuations in Global North demand, fluctuations that are only likely to increase as the climate crisis intensifies.

Amid the injustice is a place of great possibility. The countries of the Global South are not poor because they lack people to work, land, or natural resources, but because all their labour and resources are organised

around the economic interests of the Global North, which has the power to maintain this imbalance. What we must do is imagine what could be achieved if the Global South stopped servicing the Global North. What might Bangladesh look like if its productive capacity were not organised around the economic interests of the rich world?

Imagine the potential of 188 million person-years of embodied labour and 822 million hectares of embodied land being put into something other than producing exports such as clothing, electronics, coffee, or cotton. It is here that the possibility of a society built upon care, craft, culture, public services and regenerative agriculture becomes a very real possibility.

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Why do people work?

In the fashion industry, factory jobs are notoriously low-waged. People work to meet their basic needs and yet even their basic needs are not met. Take this snapshot from Shivakumar: “I have met workers who have spent forty years working in the industry, the second generation of their family is now in the industry, they’re producing for global brands and yet they cannot afford to build a toilet in their house.”

Similarly in Sri Lanka, where from 2022 onwards a national debt crisis has caused havoc across society, garment workers face great hardship. “The majority of garment employees are migrant workers and female,” says Anton Marcus, Joint Secretary of FTZ&GSEU. “Most of them are the breadwinners of their families but they do not earn enough income to support their family as well as themselves, so they live in

private boarding houses where the conditions are very bad and without basic facilities.”

“They didn’t have any income in the village area and therefore in their family they didn’t have a voice,” Marcus continues. “But when they started earning in the factories they had some income, and therefore a voice in their family.” This hard-won independence is being undermined by the financial crisis and the withdrawal of orders by multinational corporations.

The structures of the global economy currently stop Global South countries from deciding how they want to use their own productive capacity, but let us explore what it could look like if this kind of autonomy existed. We must first examine why people have jobs in the first place. Under capitalism, people work in order to pay for basic needs such as shelter, food, healthcare, clothing, education and so on, with the lucky ones also

 Aerial view of people working in an open-air laundry with colourful fabric hung to dry in Narayanganj, Bangladesh.



working to pay for leisure activities or to create savings. Shivakumar's example of the Indian garment worker paid poverty wages to produce globally-recognised clothing illustrates how even basic needs are not met by a lifetime of work, with the real value of the job lying in what it produces, not what the worker earns.

This is an essential point for figuring out a degrowth transition – the central question at the heart of transforming an economy should be: *what do we want our economy to actually be producing?*

“When politicians call for job creation, they never specify that there's a deficit of specific products that we urgently need to produce more of,” explains Hickel. “If, for example, there was a deficit of refrigerators then we should mobilise labour to make refrigerators. But it's always just ‘we must add more jobs’ and so the question becomes *why – what are we producing for?* The answer is we're producing for capital accumulation. It doesn't matter what we're producing, it only matters that we're producing for capital.”

If this political position was rethought, rather than just having people producing endless garments to make profits for corporations, Bangladesh could be asking:

What do we need?

What do we want to be producing?

What are we producing too much of?

What are we not producing enough of?

This allows the conversation to be about real goods and services rather than abstract jobs or abstract levels of GDP. “GDP doesn't really matter,” Hickel continues. “What matters is whether we are producing what our society requires – what people actually need to live good lives.”

Change in the Global North, Change in the Global South

If this is starting to sound difficult to achieve, it is vital to note that huge changes in the world of work are on the near horizon. Automation and artificial intelligence threaten the traditional world of work, and the pandemic has shown the insecure nature of so many sectors, from tourism and hospitality to manufacturing and construction. Similarly, the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that productivity will be badly hit by temperature increases caused by the climate crisis, with the percentage of total working hours lost rising to 2.2% in 2030, a productivity loss equivalent to 80 million full-time jobs. The most vulnerable regions to this particular burden of increased heat stress are southern and South-East Asia, western and central Africa.³⁸

Analysing work in a scaled-back fashion industry can be divided into two regions – richer nations in the Global North and the poorer Global South countries. Let's look briefly at the Global North end of the fashion supply chain, where hundreds of thousands of people are also trapped by low paid jobs, in retail, warehouses, freight transport, merchandising, cleaning and internships – which are still often unpaid – alongside the millions of other jobs in the wider economy that are not truly enriching for the worker or for society at large.

The good news is that in Global North nations, ecological economists have a very simple solution. It starts with scaling back less necessary forms of production – identifying which industries are harmful or superfluous and not pouring resources into them. Once this has been achieved, there will be so many more available workers that everybody's working week can be shortened from 47 hours to 30 hours or even 20 hours.

“ There’s no reason that anyone should waste their time engaged in the production of goods that are socially unnecessary and organised only around corporate profit. It’s not just a waste of resources and energy, it’s a waste of human lives. ”

– Jason Hickel, economist and author

The hours of work needed to complete socially agreed upon tasks can then be distributed far more equally to eliminate the extremes of some people being hugely overworked and stressed, and some having

little or nothing productive to occupy them. The other effect of this would be a dramatic increase in leisure time that people could fill as they wished. Unsurprisingly, a multitude of studies, from the USA, France and Sweden, have all shown that working less hours makes people happier and healthier, as well as boosting gender equality, both in and out of the workplace.³⁹

The move to a shorter working week would also free up millions of hours for care work and restorative activities – time, for example, for looking after children or older relatives or friends, time for volunteering in the community, time for planting and caring for trees and plants and restoring waterways and habitats. This is also a vital part of delinking jobs from economic growth, which would allow us to abandon the idea that economic growth is the ultimate objective of human existence.



A woman sews a patch on torn clothes from an old sock.



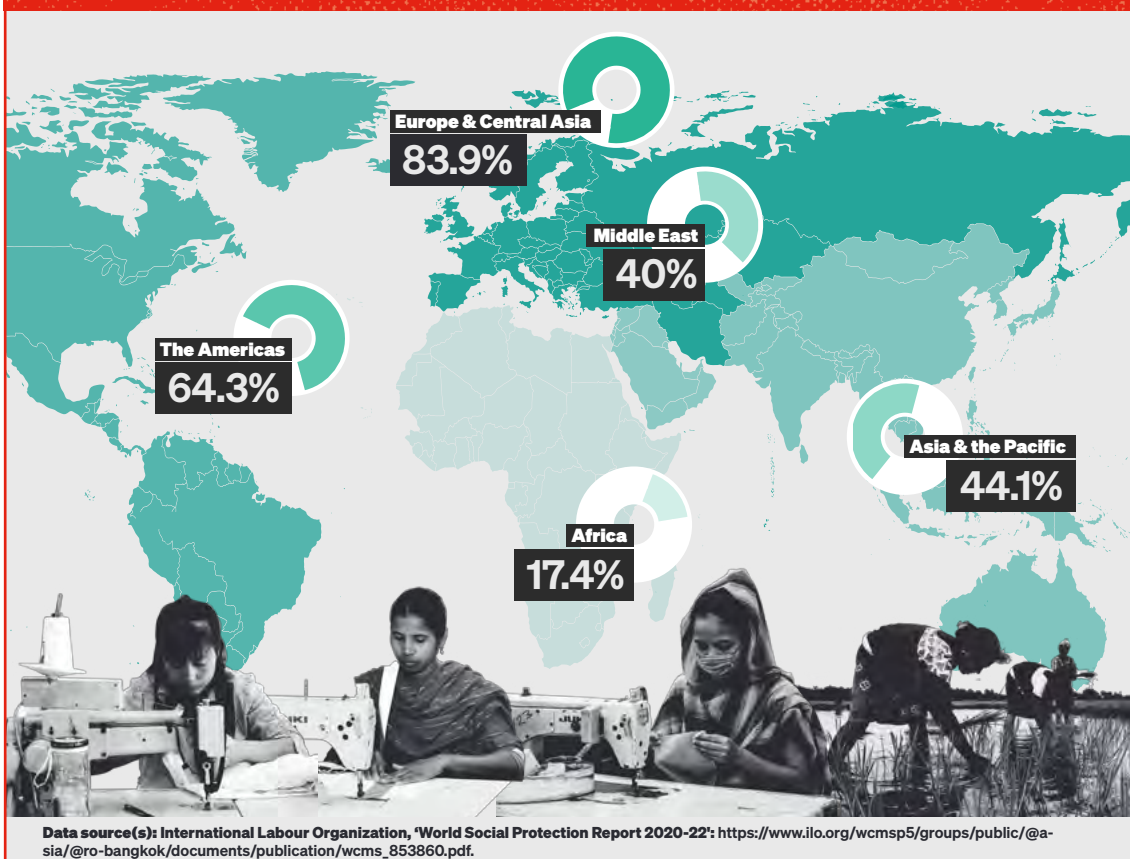
Another idea is the concept of becoming a society of ‘prosumers’, where people work half the week then use the other half to repair, produce, and share the goods we already have – completely independently of industrialised production systems. We have so much already in existence that repair – of electronics, of furniture, toys, clothes – must become a central part of an ecological economy.⁴⁰

Central to this would be guaranteed jobs that provide a generous living wage. A climate job guarantee would provide everyone with the right to a quality job and the necessary education and training to work on socially-vital projects. Job guarantees are routinely hugely popular in polling.⁴¹ Advocates for such a move include US congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, who is a strong advocate for a

federal job guarantee and has pointed out that economic justice has always been a core component of the fight for racial justice. Civil rights icons from Martin Luther King Jr to Sadie Alexander, an iconic Black US economist, all advocated for a job guarantee to address racial discrimination against Black workers while improving labour market conditions for all.⁴²

Hand in hand with rearranging the economy around human need rather than profit accumulation, is the need to treat essential services as a public good rather than a commodity. When profit is no longer the point of transport, communication, and energy provision – let alone education or healthcare – everyone will have access to the resources that underpin a dignified life and well-being.⁴³ In the export economies of the

Global picture of social protection benefits



Global South, any solutions must deal with the fundamental structural problems that inhibit these changes. In countries that have been deprived of their own resources and labour, leaving them unable to fully invest in public services, and where the basic necessities of life such as health and education have to be paid for at point of use, there is not a safety net for anyone who loses their ability to earn a wage. Research from the ILO found that as of 2020, 53.1% of the world's population – as many as 4.1 billion people – are denied any kind of social protection benefit. There are significant inequalities across and within regions; coverage rates in Europe and central Asia (83.9%) and the Americas (64.3%) are above the global average, while Asia and the Pacific (44.1%), the Arab states (40.0%) and Africa (17.4%) are far more unequal.⁴⁴

These structural issues must take priority, as any shift to a lower-impact economy in the Global North will create huge changes in employment in countries where there is significant poverty. Billions of people cannot and must not be left excluded from the basic foundations of a dignified life.

Kalpona Akter says there is currently not much discussion in Bangladesh of what kind of livelihoods garment workers could move to if the industry were to be degrown. “We know it's a huge deal but there is no precaution from the government nor from the manufacturers or civil society. I think we need to worry about it – if out of the blue our workers start losing their jobs, there is no alternative industry ahead of them at this moment.”

Once again, we return to the issue that there is nothing natural about this existing poverty. Global South countries which are poor, are not poor because of a deficit of labour or resources – in fact they are often very rich in these things. The problem is that labour and resources are mobilised overwhelmingly

around production for global supply chains which primarily service the profits of major corporations in the Global North, and which facilitate consumption and growth in those economies.

“ If out of the blue our workers start losing their jobs, there is no alternative industry ahead of them at this moment. ”

– Kalpona Akter, Founder and Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS)

The challenge then becomes how labour and resources can be mobilised around necessary production to meet local needs. For every region, country and community there will be different answers to what would be a better use of people's time than stitching clothes for billionaires, but as Hickel says: “Every unit of labour that's presently devoted to fast fashion could instead be reorganised around producing decent housing, or electrification, or healthcare, or schooling or whatever it might be.”

In Bangladesh, Akter is very clear on one thing that must be at the forefront of any transition: “I'm here to work on any kind of deal if it says that our workers will be getting a living wage. Why? At present in a family of four, all four people need to work because the income from one or two persons is not enough for the family.” The key factor to meeting job losses is a living wage, which means one or two people working can provide for their family.

The question of alternative jobs for garment workers has been on Akter's mind since the pandemic decimated the industry. “The government should have vocational training in

high-skill industries, and we should target our home market as well as export,” she says. “If we have a living wage and can create an alternative job market that could be high tech or agriculture, that way we can save these workers, otherwise we really don’t know what will happen.”

The options for a climate job guarantee, complete with education and training, are endless – the vital work of building a sustainable world includes; improving housing infrastructure, renovating and insulating homes, building ecological transport systems, energy

network transformation, developing and installing renewable energy systems, restoring forests and ecosystems, developing permaculture projects, meeting human care needs, disaster relief work, building flood defences, pollution clean-up, urban planning and community restoration. A free and fair system that allows the Global South to properly use its own labour, land, people and resources for the common good, rather than multinational profit-generation will end the artificial scarcity of jobs and income that keeps so many people poor and dispossessed.⁴⁵



Garment workers and others shopping in their free time, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2019.



3. Fashion is not an island – workers at the heart of a just transition

“ *Just Transition is a principle, a process and a practice.* ”

– Just Transition Alliance⁴⁶

The global fashion industry is not an island. Like many transnational corporations, the business models reflect a rigged economic system designed to maximise profit and amass wealth for the few, at the expense of the majority of people and of our natural world.

For 500 years, the capitalist logic of exploiting people and extracting limitless amounts of the Earth’s natural resources has fuelled slavery, colonialism and imperialism, creating a global economic system with the deepest of roots in racialised and gendered injustices. This embedded the idea that people and ecosystems in some parts of the world can be sacrificed because they have less value than those in the richest countries of the Global North.

Colonial powers such as the UK changed economic systems in the countries they colonised – from producing food to feed local populations, to producing cash crops for export to meet the needs of European countries. Minerals were extensively mined and exported from colonised countries, with companies adopting cheap and forced labour from the very communities that had been forcibly removed from the land. This

extraction of resources and exploitation of labour, especially women’s labour in garment factories, continues today in the business models of big fashion.

Underpinning this rigged economic system are unfair and unequal trade and tax rules that leave Global South countries dependent on international loans and export-led trading models. Nations must then pay back unjust debts with crippling interest, as well as meeting the costs of ecological and climate breakdown that they did not cause.

These forces are the threads that hold big fashion together, and it is these threads that must also be unpicked to enable radically different futures for millions of farmers, factory workers, homeworkers, drivers, distributors and retail workers.

The urgency of the climate crisis has propelled debates about how to transition to greener ways of living. But for the transition of polluting industries such as fashion to be sustainable and fair, it means looking at the whole business model, and it means a re-visioning of the wider global economy from



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 Children work in the cotton harvests to send to textiles factories, in Burkina Faso, January 2008.

one that is measured through capital growth and profit, to one that is for the benefit of the majority of people, that works to protect the climate, nature and our ecosystems, and operates within planetary boundaries.

The Climate Justice Alliance describes a just transition as: “a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste-free. The transition itself must be just and equitable, redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be.”⁴⁷

The previous chapter opened the possibilities of radical change that a degrowth approach to our economies offers. But the challenge of degrowth is also the equitable scaling down of energy and resource use, producing and consuming less and better to guarantee a safe and habitable planet. Richer Global North countries have to scale down in order for more globally equitable energy and material use, enabling countries in the Global South to have the productive capacity to meet human needs and achieve equitable development.

A just transition along ‘degrowth’ lines means removing the barriers for countries currently locked into fashion exports as their economic lifeline to make genuinely sovereign decisions about economic development and priorities. It means that the people who are dependent on

fashion should be the ones the just transition protects and provides alternatives for. This is not a transition to save big fashion in its current profit-orientated form.

There cannot be justice in a future that puts the needs of garment workers anywhere but the centre, along with the farmers producing cotton and the homeworkers who are often hidden from consumer view. This is why

intentions behind a just transition for the fashion industry must be rooted in global, purposeful, solidarity between movements of workers, and social and environmental movements. Any just transition must recognise and redress the harms already done through centuries of colonial-style enterprise that have stolen wealth, resources and labour from Global South countries.

“ Any discussion on a just transition to a greener economy must take place not on capital’s terms, but on labour’s. A transition to a more just and sustainable world is not possible by pushing more austerity on workers, or by forcing consumers to use greener products and materials. It is only possible through the payment of living wages for supply chain workers. It is only then a fundamental redistribution of wealth happens and without it, a just transition is not possible. ”

– the Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Union (TTCU), a Dalit women’s union in India



A climate justice campaigner elevates the Asia Peoples’ Movement on Debt and Development call for climate reparations at COP27 climate conference in Egypt, November 2022.



Principles of a just transition

Fair shares

A 'fair shares' approach means all individuals have a fundamental right to an equitable share of the world's resources' including the carbon budget for 1.5°C, access to food, clean water, healthcare, education, and other basic needs. It recognises historical and current patterns of exploitation and injustice, particularly by wealthy and powerful Global North countries, and seeks to address these imbalances. It requires redistributive policies and mechanisms to redress global inequalities and disparities, such as Global North reparations for the climate crisis, including loss and damage, progressive taxation, cancellation of debt, and trade rule changes.

Countries of the Global North and their fashion companies have grown wealthy by

accumulating profit 'at home' from the low-paid labour and overuse of natural resources of Global South countries. A fair shares approach would curtail corporate ability to extract wealth in this way, it would mean policies focused on ensuring those most responsible for climate breakdown pay the costs including through reparations and loss and damage funds.⁴⁸ It fits with the model of degrowth, as those countries that have grown rich through the extraction of resources and labour would focus on degrowing damaging industries and investing in real climate solutions and sustainable alternatives, whilst poorer countries that have lost out are able to develop their own economic pathways.

Worker-led

Those most impacted should be the ones central to developing the policies to redress historic wrongs and build new equitable and



Garment worker in Cambodia protesting high street brands to demand full wages and severance during the pandemic.



just futures. This means ensuring that workers, and worker rights advocates like Kalpona Akter interviewed for this report, shape the discussions on how the fashion industry must change.

The right to join and to form trade unions is fundamental to worker-justice campaigns, whether as agricultural, land, factory, shop, distribution centre or home-based workers. A thriving trade union movement is the basis for workers in fashion to collectively have the power to negotiate for better wages and working conditions, and to exercise their labour rights. This is particularly important in the context of supply chains and as a crucial counterweight to corporate power.

Trade unions are essential to ensure workers' interests and voices are influencing the policymaking process, representing the interests of workers, and advocating for a just transition. Trade unions can help to ensure that a degrowth-based transition is not only environmentally sustainable, but also socially and economically just. In this way, trade unions are critical to achieving a just and sustainable future for all.

Re-balancing power and re-writing the rules

The structures of the global economy have historically placed too much power into the hands of large corporations working to maximise profit and accumulate capital, enabling powerful elites to dictate the terms of business and trade.

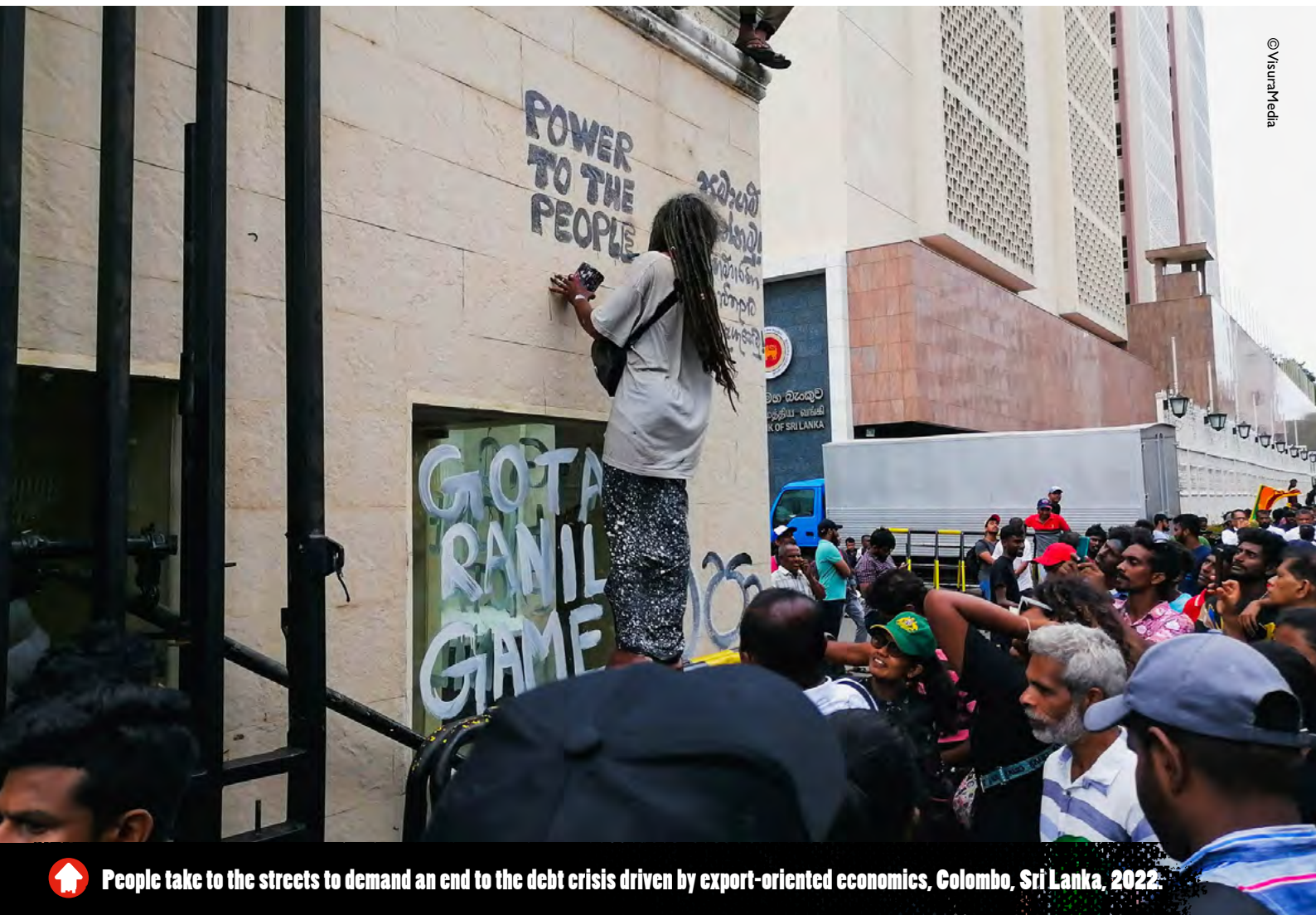
Trade liberalisation has expanded corporate power and encouraged production and distribution through extensive and growing networks of global supply chains. Big fashion has been able to avoid accountability for conditions within supply chains and yield its power to force a race to the bottom to

achieve the lowest production costs and maximise profit margins.

To facilitate a just transition of the fashion industry, we must stop trade rules from facilitating wealth extraction from the Global South. This means abandoning or strictly circumscribing trade deals, and revising or abolishing treaties, investment agreements and institutions that entrench corporate power and the domination of the Global South by the Global North. We must abolish Investor-State Dispute Settlement⁴⁹, which allow corporations to sue governments for pursuing public-interest policies that may impact a corporation's future profits, and intellectual property rights that monetize climate-mitigation technology and put corporates in control.

Tax is a crucial form of government revenue, providing funds to invest in public goods and services such as health, education, infrastructure, welfare provision and climate mitigation. Yet the world is losing over US\$427 billion in tax each year to international tax abuse. Tax Justice reported in 2020 that: "Nearly US\$245 billion is lost to multinational corporations shifting profit into tax havens to underreport how much profit they actually made in the countries where they do business, and consequently pay less tax than they should. The remaining US\$182 billion is lost to wealthy individuals hiding undeclared assets and incomes offshore, beyond the reach of the law."⁵⁰

In the last decade a number of fashion brands have been exposed for tax avoidance including Next,⁵¹ Gap,⁵² Inditex,⁵³ and Kering – owners of luxury brand Gucci.⁵⁴ As profits are manoeuvred further up through the supply chains into the coffers of big fashion shareholders, Global South countries manufacturing garments sold to Global North consumers are effectively robbed of seeing the tax revenue from these highly lucrative sales.



People take to the streets to demand an end to the debt crisis driven by export-oriented economics, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2022.

This is not unique to the fashion industry, almost all global corporations are utilising tax policies, weaving complex webs through corporate structures to reduce their tax responsibilities. The problems are with both the profit-driven priorities of corporate giants, and the tax policies that enable them to move money around to minimise tax liabilities for profit.

Debt plays a huge part in the economies of garment-producing countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. Governments around the world borrowed heavily to meet the costs of tackling the

Covid-19 pandemic. For those countries already servicing heavy debts, the costs of the pandemic tipped them into economic crisis. In 2019, the total global debt owed was already as high as US\$101 trillion⁵⁵, rising to US\$226 trillion in pandemic hit 2021.⁵⁶

For Sri Lanka, international debt is a key driver of the political and economic storm that has unfolded since 2022. The country's reliance on foreign investments from private and state lenders, and loans from international financial institutions including the IMF, means the Sri Lankan economy is particularly unstable.

Along with heavy borrowing, Sri Lanka political leaders implemented policies of deregulation and cutting taxes for the wealthy and creating low-tax privileges for foreign investors. Combined with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which ripped through Sri Lanka's already fragile, debt-laden economy, ravaging the key tourism, plantation and garment export industries; Sri Lanka was toppled into debt crisis.

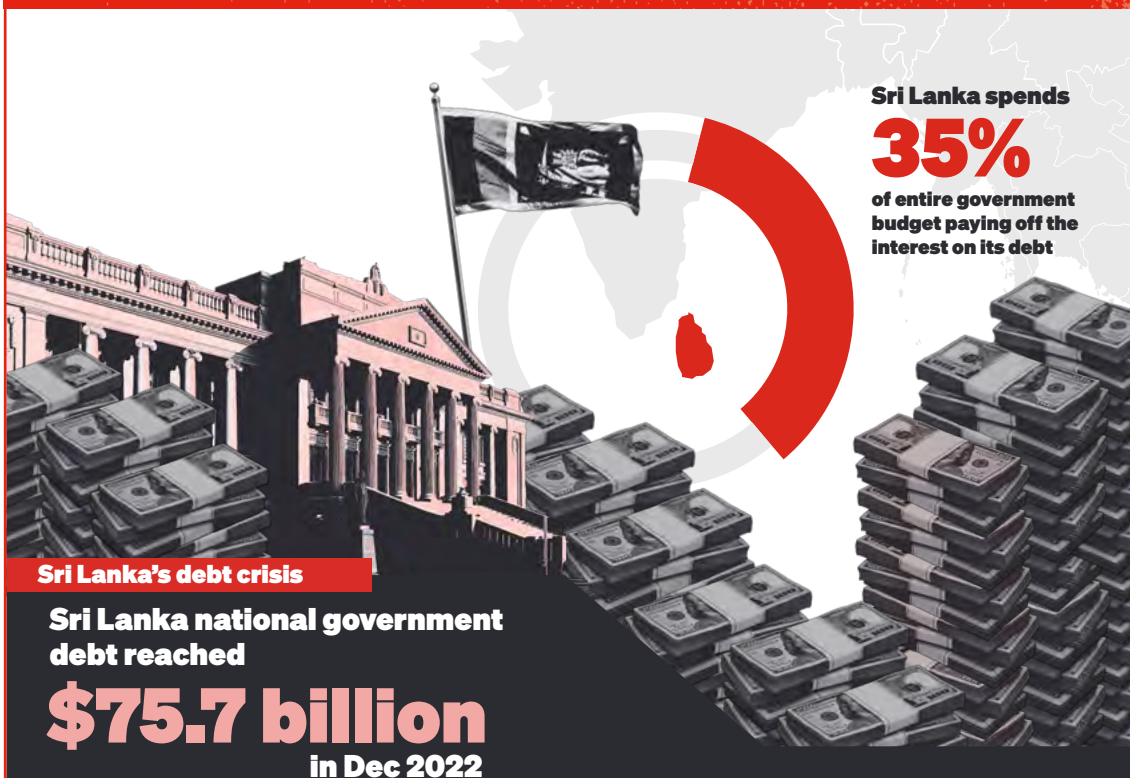
The cancellation of unsustainable debts for countries such as Sri Lanka will be a prerequisite for any just transition that will impact workers in a key export industry such as fashion.⁵⁷

With all that is wrong with the fashion industry, it is clear that fashion corporations cannot be trusted to lead the way towards a

just transition of their industry in line with the principles set out above. The experiences of other polluting and exploitative industries, such as food and energy, illustrate that those who have an interest in maintaining the status quo are not the ones to provide either the vision or the motivation for alternatives.

The workings of the global economy demonstrate that the neoliberal political and economic institutions that dictate trade rules, debt management and tax policies cannot lead the way. Their interests lie in preserving the very systems that have accelerated inequality, poverty and climate breakdown – and have laid the foundations for countries of the Global South to be treated as sacrifice zones as the 'solution' for continued profit-driven economic growth in an era of ecological breakdown.

Sri Lanka's debt crisis



Data source(s): Sri Lankan government debt statistic from CEIC data, 'Sri Lanka National Government Debt': <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/sri-lanka/national-government-debt>. Government budget spent on interest repayments from Our World in Data, 'Share of government expenditure going to interest payments, 2020': <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-government-expenditure-going-to-interest-payments>

Building the power and connections of movements globally is key to holding governments and corporations to account. Civil society organisations at the frontline of dealing with the human and environmental costs of corporate greed are able to vision alternatives that meet community needs, and that can reverse ecological damage and work within planetary boundaries. They have been living the impacts of poverty, inequality, loss of biodiversity and ecological breakdown in their communities, and can see how these intersecting crises have materialised.

Workers' associations, organisations and trade unions are able to champion the rights of workers and act as a counterbalance to corporate power, and are key to advocating for workers' rights in international policy spaces. Putting forward the voices of those who are most directly impacted is crucial to ensuring the transition of any exploitative and polluting industry is based on justice.

4. What is Big Fashion doing?

“ I barely even know what the word sustainable means anymore. ”

– Stella McCartney, fashion designer⁵⁸

The clues that the fashion industry is wildly unregulated are seen in the deluge of words printed onto clothing labels: *eco*, *eco-innovative*, *recycled*, *upcycled*, *vegan*, *fair wage*, *fair trade*, *locally made*, *carbon neutral*, *organic*, *made with renewable energy*, *made with love*, *circular*, *biodegradable*, *zero waste*. These

words, which can be made up and printed at random, stand in for legislation and provide a cover for unethical corporate behaviour.

In September 2022, the Netherlands Authority for Consumer Markets ruled that terms “Ecodesign” from Decathlon and

The big greenwash: sustainability claims and reality

39%

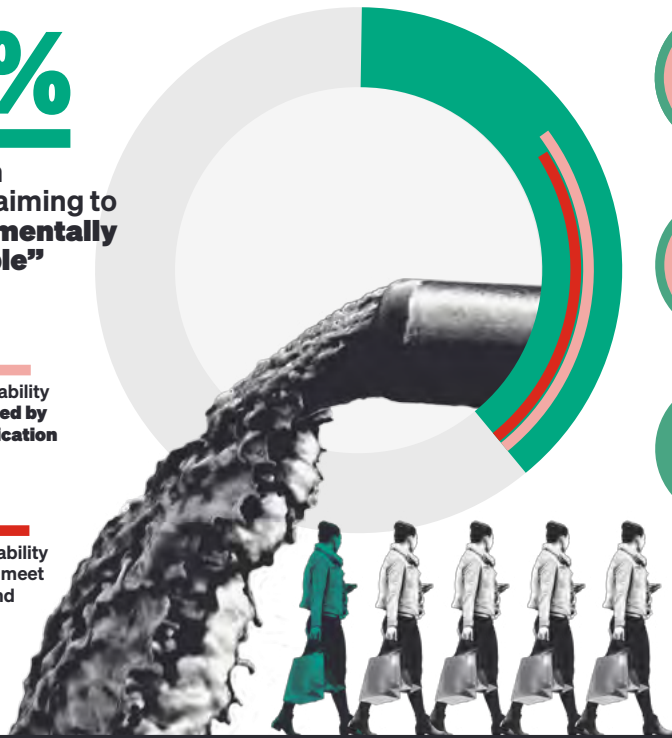
% of fashion products claiming to be **environmentally “sustainable”**

62%

% of those sustainability claims **unsupported by third party certification**

59%

% of those sustainability claims that **do not** meet UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) advertising guidelines



ASOS
discover fashion online

53%
64%
59%



H&M

42%
100%
96%



M&S
EST. 1884

48%
14%
88%

Only **18%** of UK shoppers trust brands' own sustainability claims

Data source(s): Synthetics anonymous, 'Fashion brands addicted to fossil fuels': https://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SyntheticsAnonymous_FinalWeb.pdf.
*4,000 products from 12 brands marketed within ranges advertised as sustainable

“Conscious” from H&M were unclear or insufficiently substantiated. It told the two fashion companies to stop making misleading sustainability claims on their clothes and websites.⁵⁹

This was not the first time H&M’s heavily-marketed ‘conscious’ collection has come under scrutiny. One recent study into synthetics found that H&M’s ‘conscious’ range actually contained a higher percentage of synthetics than its main collection – 72% versus 61%. The same report analysed 12 brands and 4,000 products, discovering that brands routinely deceived consumers with false claims. While 39% of the products studied had some kind of green claim attached to them, 59% of these claims flouted the guidelines set by the UK Competition and Markets Authority. The worst offenders were H&M with 96% false claims, ASOS with 89% and M&S with 88% false claims.⁶⁰

Further crackdowns on greenwashing are expected, with H&M facing a class action lawsuit in the US; and Boohoo, George at Asda, and ASOS being investigated by the Competition Markets Authority in the UK.⁶¹ It is little wonder that the public has lost faith in fashion’s green claims.

One 2020 survey found that 81% of EU citizens do not trust the environmental claims listed on clothing products.⁶²

Behind the labels and the mistrust is a worrying landscape. Big fashion lacks transparency and there is a lack of reliable global data or peer-reviewed research into fashion’s environmental impact. Estimates of the global greenhouse gas emissions from fashion vary wildly from 1.8% up to 10%.⁶³ For an industry that overwhelmingly produces non-essential items, if either of these figures is correct, it is far too high.

Big fashion is showing no credible sign of meeting international climate goals. The UN predicts emissions from fashion will *increase* by nearly 50% by 2030.⁶⁴ Similarly, a 2019 survey of 62 major clothing brands found that less than a quarter had any kind of target set to reduce water pollution, and only 6% were monitoring progress against these targets.⁶⁵ An additional study from The Climate Board found no correlation between stated climate commitments from brands and actual carbon reductions.⁶⁶ Similarly, the New York Times reported in 2022 that over 200 million trees are cut down every year to produce man-made cellulosic fabrics such as viscose and rayon.⁶⁷



A high profile public relations launch by H&M to advertise the opening of The Conscious Pop-Up Shop, New York, USA, April 2015.



Junk science

“Self-regulation in the form of certification or voluntary initiatives has failed.”⁶⁸

– Changing Markets Foundation

The proliferation of certification schemes has grown, as fashion has become one of the world’s most polluting industries. There are now over 100 sustainability certification schemes in use in the fashion and textile industry. A 2022 study by the Changing Markets Foundation (CMF) analysed the ten most popular of these initiatives, all of which are voluntary. The findings were extremely damning, with CMF stating most of the initiatives “fail to meaningfully uphold high levels of ambition and thus merely provide a smokescreen for companies.”⁶⁹

Such schemes are instantly compromised by the fact they are paid for by the very corporations they are supposed to monitor. As well as exposing a lack of transparency and independence, the stifling of debate or alternative models, and an inability to call out paying members, CMF concluded that the very existence of these certification schemes allows big fashion to actively delay progress – with fashion companies able to sign up to multiple schemes whose distant targets just ‘kick the can down the road’ whilst giving the brand a veneer of active responsibility. This pretence at action derails more concrete means of change such as the passing of legislation, with big fashion able to point at schemes and say progress is in hand.

Voluntary schemes also tend to take a seemingly arbitrary focus on a garment’s life cycle. This obfuscation of the overall picture allows big fashion to shape the entire conversation around sustainability.

“Picking and choosing a patchwork of certifications and initiatives also means that the systemic issues around fast fashion, reliance on fossil fuels and overproduction are neatly avoided, allowing companies to keep their skeletons in the closet and distract consumers from the industry’s wider environmental impact.”⁷⁰

– Changing Markets Foundation

In 2009, Patagonia and Walmart created the Sustainable Apparel Coalition which developed the Higg Materials Sustainability Index. The Higg Index lists polyester, which is made from petroleum, as the most sustainable of all fibres, leading critics to state that the entire scheme was created to greenwash fossil fuel manufacturing. In a recent blow to the credibility of the Higg Index, the Norwegian Consumer Authority recently ruled H&M and an outerwear brand called Nørrona could no longer use ‘environmental’ clothing labels based on the Higg Index.⁷¹ The truth is that serious change will be lengthy and expensive with one estimate stating it will take a trillion dollars in global investment to decarbonize the industry.⁷² The alternative, however, has a much higher price tag.

Change the world, not just your wardrobe

Well-meaning attempts to change the fashion industry’s environmental impact tend to focus on individual lifestyles and moralistic personal approaches to buying, caring for, and disposing of clothes. Yet in terms of carbon emissions,

“ Unlike its fossil fuel friends, the fashion industry appears to have gotten ahead of the sustainability problem first by acknowledging it, then by pumping tens of millions into developing its own gold standard for sustainability, creating a closed loop of shared stakeholders with nobody to hold them to account.”⁷³

**– Rachel Donald, Reporter,
The New Republic**

the production of fashion (including transport) accounts for an estimated 80% of a garment’s impact.⁷⁴ (Where this calculation varies, even low estimates place this figure at 60%.⁷⁵) This means that the vast majority of harm done by the fashion industry is a result of production decisions made in corporate supply chains.

While making low-carbon, environmentally-friendly choices is important, placing all the emphasis on individuals detracts from our drastic need for structural economic change. Nor will we convince ordinary people that they have a place in the movement for transformational change if we bombard them with repetitive, apolitical messages of guilt and shame.

Economics professor Jayati Ghosh says we must also consider the full picture with any green initiative – what actually happens to recycling after you put it in a green bin? Where has the lithium in solar panels been extracted from and with what consequences?

“You can’t simply say, well, I am being good in my little area,” Professor Ghosh argues. “You being individually good is never going to be enough if all the incentives in your economy are going the other way. I can be good in my individual habit, but if I’m part of a broader ecosystem, in which 80% of consumption involves really a lot of waste, or unnecessary plastic, or heavy emissions then it’s not useful.



The Karnopara Canal has turned purple due to the discharge of wastewater from nearby Dyeing factories, and commercial waste. Dhaka, Bangladesh, August 2019.



I should be campaigning to insist on different standards. You can't just say I'll be good myself. You have to demand policies that make everybody conform."

A narrow focus also ignores the terrible legacy of environmental destruction built up by big fashion over many decades. Nandita Shivakumar, at the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, says that to properly confront sustainability we must reject the narrow definition proliferated by the fashion industry.

"The current understanding of sustainability of big fashion brands refuses to solve or even acknowledge the climate crisis caused in the Global South *already* by the fashion industry and their purchasing practices," Shivakumar says.

For example, industry reliance on cotton has meant that central Asia's Aral Sea, once the world's fourth largest lake, has already been

turned into a desert, with 25,000 square miles of seabed now exposed in a disaster that has reduced the stability of the climate of the entire region.

The second danger of allowing corporations to define 'sustainability' so narrowly is, Shivakumar says, "the creation of an artificial separation between ecological issues and labour rights. Big brands are willing to pay millions to carbon reduction, but not even a few thousand dollars for severance or unpaid wages during a pandemic. This is very telling – it shows that brands care about sustainability when it affects customers in the West (as the climate crisis will have direct and indirect impacts on all), but they don't care if the Asians producing for them starve from hunger. It's a way of saying certain lives matter more than others. We need to stop brands from selling this narrative of sustainability to us."

 Art installation by Jessica Lowndes at unveiling of Conscious Collection event at H&M Miami, USA, April 2013.



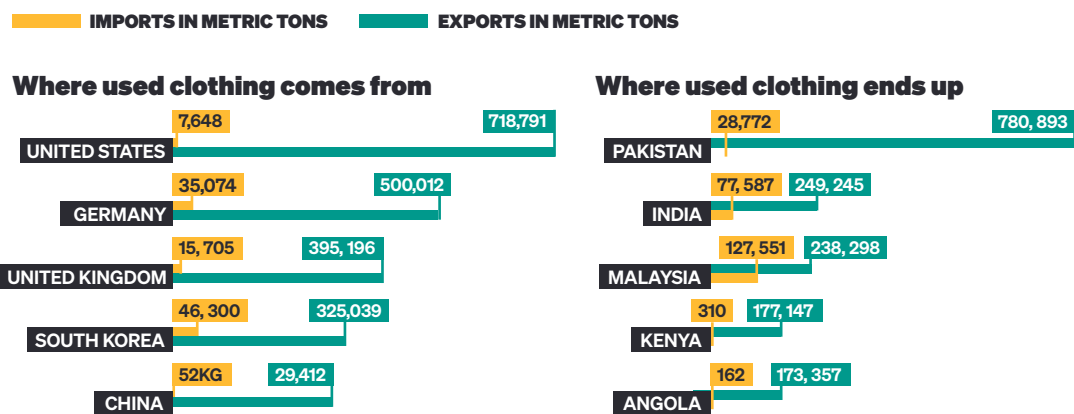
This branding of sustainability also extends into coverage of the fashion industry with a heavy bias towards environmental issues rather than workers' rights. The neglect of workers' rights is a key reason big fashion gets to maintain the illusion that the sector is 'sustainable,' and part of the solution to the climate crisis and social progress – instead of being a major emitter and cause of harm. Clean Clothes Campaign is very clear that “no major clothing brand is able to show that workers making their clothing in Asia, Africa, Central America or Eastern Europe are paid enough to escape the poverty trap.”⁷⁶ This means big fashion is flouting human rights as well as their own codes of conduct. Using the global economic system that drives down prices and creates

competition between countries, factories, and workers, big fashion pays a pittance while raking in billions in profit.

The creation of an artificial divide between workers' rights and the climate crisis disrupts the need for a holistic view of the fashion industry, which shows the parallels in how poorly people and planet are treated. Ecological and climate damage, poverty and inequality have the same systemic causes – yet in the same way that social debate has become polarised between 'workers' and 'planet,' corporate solutions replicate the patterns of sacrifice zones by failing to address systemic causes.

Dumped

Dumping fashion waste across the globe



The UK exports 8 cargo ships of used clothing every year.*

*Based on 1,170 cubic feet shipping containers, containing textiles (freight Class 175: 2.27kg/cubic foot)

That's 148,933 full shipping containers.



Data source(s): United Nations Statistic Division accessed via: http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=Worn+clothing+and+other+worn+articles&d=ComTrade&f=_1Code%3a64%3byr%3a2015%2c2016%2c2017%2c2018%2c2019%3bcmdCode%3a630900&c=2,3,5,7,8,9,11,12&s=_crEngNameOrderBy:asc,yr:desc,_l2Code:asc&v=1

“We collect a lot of Tommy Hilfiger, a lot of H&M, a lot of Zara, sometimes I ask brands – where do we bring those items so that you can recycle them? Well, they are not interested in that.” Elmar Stroomer is the Co-Founder of Africa Collect Textile (ACT). “You ask a big brand why do you not use your used clothes as feedstock for new ones? But they don’t want their old clothes back, because they are still – in 2023 – not applying eco-design or design for circularity criteria when they design stuff.”

The refusal of big fashion to adopt circularity means the world has a massive textile waste problem – with an estimated 80% of end-of-life garments ending up in landfill or incinerators.⁷⁷ Circularity of material and resource use is the idea that you only ever borrow a resource from a central pot of resources and must be able to justify using it and be able to return it to the pot to be used

again.⁷⁸ The fashion industry is the antithesis of this, with clothes designed as one-off items, and big fashion taking no responsibility for what happens after it has profited from an item’s sale.

“ You ask a big brand why do you not use your used clothes as feedstock for new ones? But they don’t want their old clothes back, because they are still – in 2023 – not applying eco-design or design for circularity criteria when they design stuff. ”

– Elmar Stroomer, Co-founder of Africa Collect Textile (ACT)

 A forklift operator offloads bales of imported clothes at a facility in Kandla, India, September 2022.



Once clothes get categorised as waste in the Global North, one place they end up, via private recycling companies, is Kenya. These exports generate vast profits for companies and governments, but the environmental and social damage they create was recently highlighted in the *Trashion* report by Changing Markets Foundation. This report estimated that each year, over 300 million items of damaged or unsellable clothing made of synthetic or plastic fibres are exported to Kenya, where they end up dumped in landfill, clogging up rivers, or burned – adding zero benefit to Kenya’s second-hand clothing market.⁷⁹ Similar crises are taking place in Chile’s Atacama Desert and in Ghana.

It is a situation Elmar Stroomer and his business partner Alex Musembi are highly familiar with. They argue that without any infrastructure, dumping millions of tonnes of waste in Africa hurts everyone – microplastics going into the ocean, carbon dioxide from burnt textiles, and methane from landfill is *not only a Kenyan problem*. “You should realise that you are far from done by just sending that waste over here,” Elmar Stroomer says.

ACT has a network of clothing collection banks in Kenya. Donated clothes are carefully sorted and either redistributed or upcycled into items such as backpacks or rugs, or downcycled into filling. ACT also takes responsibility for recycling the workwear of private security firms who cannot risk their old uniforms falling into the wrong hands.

ACT say Kenya is an interesting place to be developing textile circularity, as east Africa is one of the regions where there is potential for a closed loop. Cotton can be grown, there is an existing infrastructure of spinning mills, weaving facilities, and garment factories – which currently make clothes primarily for export. If locally-made clothes weren’t exported, materials could be recovered,

sorted, and placed back into the same systems that created them. A regional closed loop could be created.

But in the meantime, ACT say it would cost €20 million to process a single year’s worth of second-hand exports from the UK alone. “The EU and the Global North need to invest here in local infrastructure,” Alex Musembi says. “It’s very difficult to get that money – unless people are willing, unless there are laws, unless people are shouting more – that is when they will do it. Something must be done, money must be invested into Africa if we are to process even more of their materials.”

5. Land struggle is the struggle

“ *For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.* ”

– Franz Fanon, political philosopher from Martinique and author of ‘The Wretched of the Earth’⁸⁰

The study of fashion’s colossal impact on the environment can feel abstract or science-based, obscured by statistics and greenwashing. But far from being abstract, a roadmap to clothing that does not exploit or wreck our planet is fundamentally tied to current political struggles for justice. Start pulling on the thread of land rights and you will see the entire interconnected nature of exploitation in the global fashion industry reaches back centuries.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that every piece of clothing that gets produced cannot be separated from the question of land. Who owns land, who controls what land is used for and what gets grown on it, who reaps the benefits and profits, who decides whether forests are cut down or pipelines laid. Who gets to kick people off land and call it private.⁸¹

This chapter also shows the uneven system of capitalism – the global elites and multinational corporations so heavily invested in the production of cotton, and other exports such as fur and viscose, that they have tilted the world away from freedom, food sovereignty and what is actually needed towards an extractive system that has 822 million hectares of Global South land used to service the Global North.

The following essays contained in this chapter show land as going to the heart of colonialism and capitalism. But they also underline the importance of crediting the people who have been doing what is now referred to as ‘slow’ fashion for millennia. ‘Sustainable’ fashion is not a new practice, but rather one that has been subsumed and trampled by colonialism and capitalism.

As we stand on an environmental precipice there has never been a more important moment to understand that the alternatives are not just in the future, they are happening now. We must listen, learn, and support clothing systems that are grounded in land-based practices – not just because they are better than what we have now, but also because they are deeply political. A decolonisation that is expressly tied to the return of stolen land⁸² contains the start of a fair and just world.

It is up to all of us who care about the state of the fashion industry to support farmers’ strikes, land right struggles and pipeline protests. We must protect the water, the air, and the land where we are, while standing in solidarity with Indigenous communities, farmers, and land defenders across the globe. **Never forgetting that everything we will ever wear is a product of two things – human labour and land.**

Land as kin

by **Shawkay Ottmann**

Shawkay Ottmann is a PhD student at Cornell University in the Apparel Design program. She has undertaken research and published writing at the intersections of fashion and Indigenous participation for a range of publications and contexts.

Canada is not known for its fashion. It has not traditionally held a position on the list of fashion capitals, and it is not currently a major clothing and textiles manufacturer.⁸³ Yet, the foundations of the Canadian state were built on the fashion industry. When the Hudson's Bay Company claimed what would become Canadian territory, it was in the name of fur. The push into First Nations land, the relationships formed with First Nations and Inuit peoples was primarily for the fur trade. While the ravages of the clothing and

textile industry can be seen globally, perhaps it is in a nation built on fashion that an antidote to the crisis can also be found. Not in the history of the first corporation nor in the area and the consequent settler-colonial state, but in the Indigenous practices that have continued from the pre-colonial era into the present day.

Diverse cultures can be found across the continent, with many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples living with different ways of being, knowing and doing. In Canada alone,



A sign held up at a Canada Day protest against the ill treatment of indigenous people by the Canadian state reads: "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we're seeds." Ontario, Canada, April 2021.



there are more than 50 distinct nations and 50 Indigenous languages.⁸⁴ With the existence of extensive pre-colonial trade routes, however, knowledge, beliefs, and cultural practices were widely disseminated, which allowed for similar cultural expressions throughout many nations.⁸⁵ The intimate understanding of the land is included in the similarity in cultural expressions.

For Indigenous peoples across North America, all of nature is animate. Everything embodies spirit – animals, rocks and places – with creative processes and energies.⁸⁶ As Potawatomi Nation botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer stated, in Indigenous ways of knowing “human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation. We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn.”⁸⁷ This quote reveals the lack of human exceptionalism in Indigenous ways of being and the understanding of land as kin.

Indigenous peoples are taught to be mindful of and make decisions considering ‘all my relations’, that is the extended relationships we share with all people, and further, with all of nature, with all creation. Land was and continues to be a living library, the means to not only survive, but to thrive in connection to the ancestors, our human and non-human kin. Land provides a home, and a means to understand identity. Thus, as kin, land is sacred and belongs to itself, therefore could not be bought or sold, but could only be shared.

As with all relationships, reciprocity is paramount. Nature sustains humanity, and in return humanity is to act as a steward to the land; to respect and follow the natural laws that create endless renewal and sustain all life. In the time before settler contact, all Indigenous clothing was land-based. That is, all clothing was created with elements from the land within the context of a reciprocal

relationship, non-separation from, and interconnectedness with nature.⁸⁸

Land-based practices are also deeply rooted in place, meaning that subsistence was found locally, with trade providing rarer resources.⁸⁹ A sign of respect, and means to maintain reciprocity with the land that provided all materials, was in the creation of well-made clothing. Through respectful adornment, balance was maintained and relations with the natural world were deepened, meaning clothing was a fundamental marker of Indigenous ways of being.⁹⁰ As fashion theory states that culture is embedded in the clothing people create and wear, and Indigenous culture is fundamentally linked to relationship with the land, then land is located on the body through dress.⁹¹

Private property

The ability to maintain a relationship with the land was, however, largely ripped away from Indigenous peoples. This happened slowly at first. When fur traders found their way to what would become Canada, initially First Nations peoples were able to continue pre-existing trade patterns. This changed as settlers increasingly pushed Indigenous peoples to the margins, often assuming they had title to the land. To legalize settler claims in the eyes of European states, in 1763, King George III issued a Royal Proclamation without negotiations with Indigenous nations, where he claimed extensive Indigenous lands and patronizingly placed Indigenous peoples under the Crown’s ‘protection’.⁹²

With this proclamation, the meaning of land in North America changed. While Indigenous peoples continued to live out relationships with the land, settlers enforced the idea of land as property. The individualistic ideologies embedded within colonialism reduced land to a commodity.



Mistahi maskwa (Big Bear (standing forth from left) a plains Cree chief trading furs at Fort Pitt, Northwest Territories, 1884.

© O.B. Buell / Library and Archives Canada / PA-118768

Strict hierarchies and linear development required a singular, well-defined end goal of obtaining a ‘good life’ as modelled and defined by the heteropatriarchal capitalist Western European powers.⁹³ Thus, land could be reduced to resources, to private property and an object that could be owned and whose resources could be extracted from, with no thought of sustainability.

Western ideologies have created the mass-producing, global capitalistic system that has led to an increasingly polluting fashion system that ignores human rights for unsustainable and continuous growth in profits.⁹⁴ In a world where Indigenous relationships with the land were considered ‘savage’ and capitalism was ‘civilized’, Indigenous ways of being had to be erased and land-based fashion needed to become unobtainable to sustain the idea of a singularly-correct modern world. Not only did Indigenous land-based fashion become largely unobtainable, but the government aimed to erase Indigenous peoples altogether.

During the fur trading era, Indigenous peoples were found useful in building profit and expanding networks and influence.⁹⁵ Later, in the American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, First Nations were sought after as military allies. As war ceased

to be a prominent issue and as the fur trade collapsed in 1821, First Nations were moved from useful economic and military partners to “social and economic problems who would benefit from Christianization and the adoption of sedentary agriculture.”⁹⁶

In 1830, the Indian Affairs department (the branch of the British colonial government formed to deal with First Nations) was transferred from military officers to civilian administrators in response to this shift.⁹⁷ The British colonial government started a paternal programme to incorporate Indigenous peoples into ‘white’ society through directed cultural change, or change based on coercion. Unlike undirected cultural change, directed change required a shift of worldview and could be successful in a society with more settlers than Indigenous people.

A directed cultural change required a deliberate and systematic attempt to change the culture of the marginalized group by undermining systems of belief, social and political structures, and psychic well-being. As historian J.R. Miller states, “It was not the fur trader or even the soldier who worked the worst damage on Canada’s Indians; it was the missionary, the schoolteacher, and the bureaucrat who thought they knew better than the indigenous peoples what was good for them.”⁹⁸ In the 1830s, the deepest damage was only beginning. The main methods used to force cultural change was in the creation of residential schools and reserves.

The Canadian Indian residential school system was preceded by church-run schools as early as the 1630s and 40s. Theoretically, the schools were meant to ‘civilize’ and ‘Christianize’ Indigenous children while teaching basic skills.⁹⁹ These schools, both prior to and after the 1880s creation of the government-run boarding school system, failed. The schools were plagued with mental, physical, and sexual abuse,

malnourishment, disease, and death. Indeed, as an introduction to the schools, many survivors recall being stripped of their clothes upon arrival, the last physical connection to kin and culture destroyed and replaced by uniforms that were often little more than scraps.¹⁰⁰ Throughout their time in these institutions, an estimated 50% of the children who attended the schools died.¹⁰¹ Yet, all failures were placed on the children and their parents, and so children were removed from their homes, their land, through force or coercion until the last school closed in 1996.¹⁰²

With missionaries came the schools, but with the onslaught of settlers came land disputes. The Canadian government started negotiating treaties to gain access to and have First Nations surrender their claim to land. First Nations peoples entered into treaties as pacts of friendship and mutual assistance, along with an understanding that settlers would enter their land at some point in the future, and that they would be provided with the means to gradually move to an agricultural economy.¹⁰³ Treaties were made from sovereign nation to sovereign nation.

Yet, with Canadian Confederation in 1867, Canada acted in bad faith. At the same time the 11 numbered treaties were being negotiated and signed from 1871-1921, legislation was being passed to move First Nations from under the protection of the king to being wards of the state.¹⁰⁴ The Indian Affairs department was given extensive control, and in the Indian Acts of 1876 and 1880, along with the Indian Advancement Act of 1884, the government took the power to “mould, unilaterally, every aspect of life on the reserve and to create whatever infrastructure it deemed necessary to achieve the desired end”, the end of Indigenous people as an entity.¹⁰⁵

In time, this would also include Metis and Inuit people along with status and non-status First Nations.¹⁰⁶ Reserves became places where Indigenous peoples were no longer sovereign, where traditional political, spiritual, and economic practices were made illegal and European systems imposed. Freedom of movement was disallowed, and Indigenous peoples could not sell their own goods, but had to go through an imposed system of colonial Indian agents. This system of reserves and residential schools purposefully created an inability to continue creating land-based fashion.

Land as fashion

The contemporary fashion industry is a continuation of the one that created Canada. It is part of a capitalist system that colonized in the name of labour and profit, that actively removed people from the land, severing their relationship with environments and reducing nature to an inanimate commodity that can be exploited. It is a system that attempted and attempts to destroy alternative ways of being while enforcing addictions to consumerism that ignores the true cost of ever-cheaper clothing.

Despite colonial attempts to destroy alternatives, there are increasing ways for Indigenous peoples to reclaim fashion that recognizes land as kin. Organizations like Dene Nahjo,¹⁰⁷ creators like Kanina Terry¹⁰⁸, Amber Sandy¹⁰⁹, and Justine Woods¹¹⁰, and classes like Indigenous Craft Practices at Toronto Metropolitan University¹¹¹ all teach land-based fashion practices. Community networks are being rebuilt and jewellery designers like Tania Larsson¹¹² and Naomi Bourque¹¹³ source land-based materials for pieces imbued with specific cultural meaning. Designers such as Robyn McLeod¹¹⁴ are creating innovative garments that are shown at events like Indigenous Fashion Arts in

Toronto and the White Show at Milan Fashion Week. With this reclamation comes inherently sustainable, meaningful, empowering clothing that is the antithesis to the contemporary industry.

In the work of these communities, a way forward can be found. It can be found in supporting Indigenous and local land-based creators and in learning location-specific and diverse ancestral ways of creating from the

land. Though perhaps the easiest way to start is in creating a relationship with our clothes again. Perhaps by extending our understanding of 'all my relations' to the clothes we already own, the care and commitment required to maintain our garments can also lessen the burden of production placed on the land. Perhaps the easiest way to start is appreciating the abundance we already have.



Melaw Nakehko, a Dene Nahjo co-founding member, fleshes a moose hide with a moose leg bone at the urban hide tanning camp organised in Yellowknife, Canada, September 2017.



Pakistan: land struggles

by Ayesha Ahmad

Ayesha Ahmad has been teaching at public and private sector universities for 15 years, and is currently teaching Politics at Universal College Lahore (UCL). She is a freelance researcher, and a trainer on labour rights and gender equality.

The marriage of cotton and South Asia dates back to 6000 BC. The great Indus Valley Civilization spread from modern-day northeast Afghanistan to Pakistan and northwest India, and it is here that cotton was spun for the first time. Mehergarh, or modern-day Pakistan, was an arid plain where the discovery of mineralised cotton

fibre and the cultivation of a cotton crop saw women take pride in draping themselves in untailed *mul*, a handloomed cotton fabric – long before colonisation transformed the Indigenous fashion industry of the Global East. The production of this crop set forth the foundations of a textile journey that continues to shape the modern world.



Farmers working in cotton fields in Pakistan.



It was once boasted that the ‘sun never sets on the British empire’ – a statement that hid greed, conquest and generational cultural trauma. Under the apparent narrative of ‘torch bearers’ civilising the globe, the British empire erased Indigenous orientations, shaped the trajectory of the land it occupied by exploiting economies, changed the course of rivers and turned the most fertile land into pillars of concrete, bringing about irreversible climate damage. All to establish a cotton empire for a future textile industry that would benefit the Global North for centuries to come.

The East India Company in the early 17th century set its eyes on Bombay and Bengal. The era of white dominance and exploitation embedded itself into a system where labour, land, resources and control were all in the hands of the ‘mighty white,’ establishing the foundation of exploitation in the name of trade. Textiles are intrinsically rooted in the Global South being colonised as a factory land for the Global North. Clothing, in its essence, has been contaminated by colonisation.

Today, Pakistan is the world’s fifth-largest producer of cotton, exporting US\$3.4 billion worth of cotton in 2021 and making up roughly 6% of the global supply.¹¹⁵ In January 2023, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics listed textiles, including cotton, as accounting for 60.82% of Pakistan’s total exports, with a value of US\$19.33 billion.¹¹⁶

Land struggle and its direct effect on the cotton crop and the garment and textile industry needs to be looked at through a lens of gender, colonisation, military rule, and other linked issues such as water supply, dam construction and urban housing schemes. This shows how the question of land does not begin and end at land itself but is deeply entrenched in power hierarchies.

Cotton and climate

Ten million Pakistani farming families are reliant upon cotton production,¹¹⁷ leading to turmoil and hardship when 45% of Pakistan’s cotton crop was washed away in the devastating climate-breakdown floods of 2022.

The floods, which followed an intense heatwave, affected a third of the land mass, killing more than 1,700 people and destroying or damaging 2.2 million homes. The floods affected 33 million people and damaged most of the water systems in flooded areas, forcing more than 5.4 million people to rely on contaminated water from ponds and wells.¹¹⁸

Increasing environmental pressure coupled with political turmoil is leading to a growing number of farm family members choosing to quit the farming profession. Young people in particular are leaving farming due to poverty, financial challenges, urbanisation and the physical and psychological struggle to repay debts. Once they have left the industry, many end up as labourers in the garment industry.¹¹⁹

Land grabs

Farmers are also being driven from their heritage-like affiliation to their ancestral profession by present-day colonialism carried out by urban land mafias. In the port city of Gwadar, Baluchistan, and the Thar Desert in Sindh, huge international development projects promised better futures for local communities, but in reality have caused the disturbance of natural habitats, mass migration, dispossession and health issues. In Gwadar for example, international capital promised to revamp the city’s infrastructure and bring it up to par with other global port cities, but now fisherfolk are facing adverse conditions because of security protocols and restricted areas of fishing.



Kissan Rabita Committee (PKRC) farmers organisation, hold placards during a protest demanding action for climate justice in Lahore, Pakistan, February 2021.



© ARIF ALI/AFP via Getty Images

Likewise, coal power plants in Tharparkar are threatening the natural habitat of the desert and have resulted in the dispossession of entire communities, as the desert land is taken over for mining purposes causing ecological and human disaster.

More land is being appropriated near to cities to build middle-class housing developments. When land around garment-producing cities like Lahore, Karachi and Faisalabad is requisitioned or taken by threats and force, more farmers are driven off the land. All of

this has instilled a constant fear of land-grabbing and dispossession that has forced farmers to re-evaluate their future in agriculture. This 'silent' pressure from culturally-hegemonic groups is an intentional mechanism to disarm the people against their very own past, and influencing, with inexplicit fear, a dream of a supposedly 'economically better' future at the expense of identity, home and ancestral knowledge.

In these neocolonial times, the coloniser is both from within and collaborating with the

old colonisers by signing on to 'white market' demand. Farmers are being displaced from their Indigenous land that belonged to them, where they once cultivated cotton which belonged to them, and are being alienated from their ancestral field skills. Instead, they are forced to work in textile factories in precarious conditions, with nostalgia of how what once belonged to them will be woven, spun, cut and tailored for the brands in the Global North.

Gender and land

Gender roles around our part of the world are deeply entrenched in societal norms and traditions, where women have traditionally held a subordinate position to men.

The intersection of land and gender especially is complex and multi-faceted and can be seen in several different ways. Firstly, land ownership is generally heavily skewed towards men in Pakistan, with women owning significantly less land than men. The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey in 2013 estimated that only around 6% of women have bank accounts, 13% have common assets, 98% of married women do not have a property of their own, and only 2% of women are owners of land.

The situation is due to several factors, including inheritance laws that favour male heirs, patriarchal attitudes towards women's roles in society, and limited access to credit and financial resources for women. This has left women vulnerable to economic insecurity and homelessness.



Pakistani women farmers hold sickles during a protest against the escalating cost-of-living crisis caused by national debt in Karachi, Pakistan, October 2008.



Women's right to use and control land are often subject to cultural and religious norms. It is a common practice and almost understood that they won't ask for their share of inheritance. The phrase *behnain haq nahi maangtein*, 'sisters don't ask for inheritance rights', is a virtue that is cherished in all traditional households. In some parts of Pakistan, women are not allowed to own or inherit land, and may only use it with the permission of male relatives. This limits women's ability to engage in agricultural work, which is an important source of income for many rural communities.

Land-use policies and development projects also often disproportionately benefit men, who are more likely to have access to political power and influence. These factors require a multi-faceted approach including legal and policy reforms to promote women's land ownership and inheritance rights, as well as efforts to challenge patriarchal attitudes towards women.

Land struggle

In the 1970s, communists led 'land-to-the tiller' struggles which continue to fight against dispossession by feudal landlords and capitalists repeating the discourse of the coloniser 'torch bearers.' Communities must be organised and their expression channelled to reach the corridors of power. Through resistance movements, activists, civil society members, and advocacy campaigns must seek ways for implementing legal and procedural laws in development, land, and environmental threats, as well as the labour rights of the dispossessed who are forced to work in textile factories.

If these movements can win, all will benefit – local communities, the ecological and democratic people of the region, and global

activists for ecology and democracy around the world.

These are the questions we must ask: how can the colonised get the land back? Can the colonised separate their Indigeneity from colonial burdens of the past and present? What really does it mean to be a South Asian without colonial roots entrenched in our very identity? How can the perils of climate crisis be tackled in a way that frees women from gendered oppression? Can global phenomena such as fashion, fast fashion and textile consumerism be looked at from a lens other than the exploitative colonial one?

6. Fashioning alternative clothes

“ In essence, I am very optimistic. It’s kind of like dreaming but that’s how you do innovation – you dream really, really hard. ”

– Paul Foulkes-Arellano, circularity consultant

This chapter is a place to explore the role that fashion would have in a new society that has different economic values to our present-day world. It is a space to discuss how fashion would change if society was structured around our long-term societal needs and

well-being, rather than short-term gains for a minority. Through the essay that follows, the writer considers some of the outcomes that could emerge through thinking about the world from a different economic and cultural starting point.

⬇️ War on Want activists memorialise the workers that lost their lives at Rana Plaza, on a 10th anniversary walking tour around companies whose clothes were produced there. London, UK, 2023.



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REMEMBER THE DEAD AND FIGHT FOR THE LIVING

What is fashion for?

By Tansy E. Hoskins

Tansy E. Hoskins is an award-winning journalist covering the textile, clothing, and footwear industry. She is the author of two books – The Anti-Capitalist Book of Fashion and Foot Work - What Your Shoes Are Doing To The World.

When I wrote *The Anti-Capitalist Book Of Fashion*¹²⁰, I invited readers to consider two central questions. The first is: what kind of a society do you want to live in? We currently live in a society where some people starve, while others hoard more money than can be spent in 1,000 lifetimes. A society where our planet is displaying signs of deep distress with wildfires, typhoons and floods wreaking

havoc, where forests are being razed to the ground, and where entire species have gone extinct. Access to medicine, housing, education, and opportunity is based upon access to wealth, and life is hampered by prejudices such as racism and homophobia. We have a society where it continually feels like the worst people are in charge.



Worn out blue second-hand stilettos upcycled into eco-friendly planters.



If this is not your ideal, then think about what kind of society you want to live in. Maybe you can picture something a little different with access to free healthcare and education assured, or maybe it is radically different with no such thing as a millionaire, let alone a billionaire, where people work only as much as their community needs and spend the rest of their time at leisure. Where everything is carefully organised to run in harmony with the biosphere, and there are no arms, meat, or fossil fuel industries, no prison-industrial complex, and racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia have been banished.

Once you know what kind of society you want to live in, consider the second question: in this society, what is fashion for? Is it for fun, or to protect and enhance the body, to act as a creative outlet, to represent culture and history, to seduce or repel, to showcase and celebrate difference, to bring joy?

The point of this thought exercise is to reframe typical questions that are asked about fashion and to see it as a performance of deeper social issues. Our fashion and clothing systems have been broken by capitalism and now exist as an excuse for the rich to exploit the poor. What fashion is currently for is to make billions for a small cabal of people, to keep in place a system of subjugation, to restrict and control populations, and to distract from inequality and crisis. No matter the makeup of the ideal society you have dreamt up, I doubt you had this in mind as the purpose of clothing. If, however, you can imagine another purpose for clothing and fashion, you can start to imagine a new world. What follows are some of my ideas for reimagining the fashion industry. They might seem radical, but in reality, as we stand on the edge of a climate precipice, they are necessary. Once you have read them, I invite you to write your own vision and then to get to work making it happen.

Ideas for reimagining fashion

- **Recognise** clothing as a human right. A rights-based approach means the right to clothing can also be linked to other rights such as the right to environmental justice, a living wage or to a trade union.

- **Decommodify** public services globally to ensure food, education, health, housing, care, clean energy, and sanitation for all.

- **Establish** living wages as a universal right.

- **Eliminate** the production of trillions of items of clothing by reorientating production away from corporate profit and towards communal need.

- **Disband** fashion corporations as unfit to be in charge of clothing production, and of our common cultural heritage, and redistribute their assets amongst garment workers and land-based clean-up initiatives.

- **Establish** job guarantees for all workers in fashion supply chains. This would release billions of people from soulless profit-work, who would now have the freedom to choose where and how they work, safe in the knowledge they'll be cared for throughout their life.

- **Offer** big fashion CEOs and shareholders climate jobs cleaning up the Atacama Desert, the Nairobi River, the Buriganga River, and the Ghanaian sewage system.

- **Instigate** a global pause in production to establish how to best use the billions of tonnes of clothing that has been produced over the past hundred years.

- **Establish** repair and redistribution warehouses in every neighbourhood. Reskill populations in the fundamental knowledge of how to care for and create

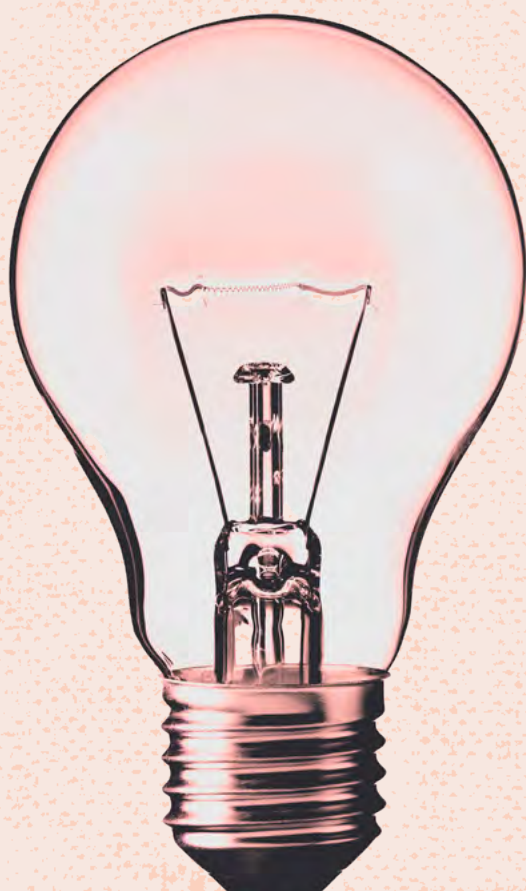
the items that protect and adorn our bodies. Maintain these workshops as key spaces for preventing loneliness and include the repair and creation of furniture, electronics, tools, and anything else people want to fix.

- **Establish** free lifelong education classes available for sewing, knitting, spinning, embroidery, pattern cutting, and shoe repair.
- **Maintain** these warehouses as clothing libraries with people free to borrow anything – from party dresses to steel toe capped boots – to allow for the shrinkage of personal wardrobes.
- **Replace** globalised production with small scale, localised and closed loop production to meet the demands of regional communities.
- **Focus** on design as the process of recreating clothing from existing material – redistributing the mountains of existing clothes, and where necessary turning them into new clothes, shoes, and bags.
- **Ban** the use of fossil fuel-intensive ‘virgin fabric’.
- **End** the process of recycling fabric by transporting it around the world, shredding it then bleaching it and dyeing it – an intensive waste of fuel, water, and time.
- **Shred** locally any clothing that is beyond use and move into other industries such as home renovation. Establish circular-use practices based on the principle that material is only ever borrowed from the Earth and must not be made unusable.
- **Increase** research into bio-fabrics, prioritising the parts of plants that are not eaten as food.
- **Stop** the allocation of large tracts of land for growing single intensive cash crops, stop cutting down forests for grazing land, and stop factory farming of animals.
- **Restore** land to the stewardship and jurisdiction of Indigenous communities, with land privatisation becoming a thing of the past.
- **Remove** the divide between producers and consumers by ending the practice of people being presented with an endless array of ready-made products that they have had no hand in creating. Localise engagement in clothing production so that people can consume far less and experience a deeper attachment to what they have.
- **Democratise** design, with clothing as an art form free of commerce and competition. Establish full engagement by people around the world in what they want to wear – wherever their religious, cultural or sexual orientation takes them. Establish the entire life cycle of a garment as a key principle of design.
- **Remove** corporate control to end clothing defined by gender, sexism, racism, cultural appropriation, homophobia or transphobia. Ideas such as ‘pink for girls, blue for boys’ will become strange museum exhibits.
- No-one to **profit** from fashion anymore, clothes to become a resource everyone has a right to. With equal access to resources and a lack of social classes, provide everyone with the ability to be as well dressed as they wish to be and engaged in cultural production.
- **Replace** arbitrary sizing categories with digital scanning and personal tailoring.
- **Replace** corporate messaging, body insecurity, and rigid beauty standards with

joy and a loving acceptance that we're each part of the holistic biosphere of life.

- **Redistribute** work evenly to allow society to reorientate towards leisure – with people having more time to make costumes and music for the carnivals and festivals that can now occur each season.

Hopefully this list has given you some inspiration and you have your own ideas to add to it. It is also worth remembering that within the exploitation of the fashion industry there is a hopeful message – if we can fix fashion, we can fix pretty much any industry. If you can see the fashion industry clearly you can also see the global economy clearly and then ask more questions. We can ask what is the food industry for? What is energy production for? What is medicine and healthcare for? What are houses and cities, forests and land for? An additional invitation is not to stop with fashion but to use your imagination to picture the wider global economy – what it is currently for, what *should* it be for, and how do we change it?



7. Changes for a fairer and more sustainable system

As fashion activists and global citizens, we must both envision and enact new ways of interacting with the people and the land-based resources that make our clothes. The world is divided between accumulation and extinction, ownership and servitude, poverty and great wealth. These divides must be broken down and reworked into a fair and sustainable system.

Building on the imagination of chapter six and bridging the gap to our necessary future, this chapter offers suggestions of changes that

could be made, from the small change of recognising the need to care for and repair the clothes that are already in our possession, to embracing the idea that it is not just rips in jeans or holes in jumpers that need repairing – but a vast system of inequalities built upon colonialism and capitalist exploitation.

Repair

An essential part of any new fashion system is repair.

Fashion therapy East London: an alternative relationship to fashion



© FastFashionTherapyEastLondon

Eleanor Tull and Sarah Richards run Fast Fashion Therapy in East London, teaching people how to repair and alter their clothes to help them buy less and lengthen the lifespan of what they already own. As active proponents of repair, they say it is a gateway to sustainable fashion that is far cheaper and more accessible than other forms of sustainable clothing.

“It can be done by almost anyone whether they have any experience of sewing or making before. It only requires basic equipment, like needle and thread, that are cheap to buy to get started,” Eleanor says. “Repairing clothing or other items also gives people a chance to slow down, you have to stop and think about the problem you’re trying to solve, consider how you can fix it and be patient in completing your repair.”



A group of participants taking part in a clothes mending and alteration workshop at East Fashion Therapy, London UK, 2023.

Repairing clothes is also a valuable tool for connecting people with important design principles. “Working out how to put something back together can also be a valuable way of seeing how it’s been made in the first place and what techniques or items of clothing need improvement. You can learn a lot from seeing which materials get the most holes or which areas of jeans rip the most.”

Discussing his ideal fashion system, circularity expert Paul Foulkes-Arellano describes a world of ‘value-added repair’, whereby clothes are updated and made even better negating the need for constant new clothes. “You’d get your wardrobe renewed in the same way that you don’t buy a new house – you repaint it. My house is 110 years old; the shell is exactly the same, but inside it looks nothing like it did when it was built. Every 10-20 years it goes through a radical redesign.”

Paul calls the building of upcycling communities “eminently sensible,” seeing it as not only making environmental sense, but a way to develop the huge emotional value attached to the clothes we already own.

Repairing inequalities

Scaling up repair so that there are workshops in every neighbourhood would connect people to the process of clothing production. “Repair can be a great way to appreciate the time that goes into every item of clothing, often people think the reason you can buy a t-shirt for £2 is because a machine has made it, but that’s not possible,” Eleanor continues. “Every item of clothing is handmade and learning this by stitching and repairing your own clothes can create a different relationship with them, and a deeper attachment to the work that’s gone into them.”

Using needle and thread repair as a means to recognise the hours and hours of human labour that goes into each garment is an important way of thinking about what else we can apply the concept of repair to. It is a way of thinking about clothing production as having been purposefully broken in a way that harms millions of people, while benefiting a tiny minority. A fashion system that pays millions of women in Bangladesh US\$75 a month, while a few billionaires have parties on super yachts is a broken one, but there are steps that can be taken towards fixing this.

A living wage

Everyone working in the fashion industry should be paid a wage that they can live on.

“Decent work is about the right to employment to begin with, and that employers should provide a living wage for the employee and the family. It should ensure workplace safety without discrimination and the right of employees to organise as trade unions.” Anton Marcus, Joint Secretary of FTZ&GSEU in Sri Lanka.

A living wage¹²¹ must be guaranteed in law. This should include enforceable transparency measures that compel companies to guarantee and demonstrate labour costs as part of the pricing of products. It requires measures to control the pricing and ordering practices of big fashion, to ensure that costs are not unfairly passed down the supply chain, resulting in poverty pay for workers.

Big fashion must also be compelled to financially contribute to wage guarantees and severances for workers in supply chains. Global campaigns such as Wage Forward¹²² and Pay Your Workers – Respect Labour Rights¹²³ have workable proposals that could protect workers in supply chain relationships here and now.

Universal public services

Everyone has the right to a dignified life, yet many millions are denied clean and safe water, nutritious food, affordable housing, sanitation, access to energy, or adequate healthcare. For many garment workers these conditions are a daily reality.

Universal services such as healthcare, education, housing, pensions, and social protection systems are crucial to protect people from the effects of climate injustice, prevent the spiral into poverty, and advance human rights, equality and justice. Yet they need to be funded from the public purse.

For too long, corporations and richer countries of the Global North have manipulated the rules of the global economy whilst countries of the Global South have been saddled with unfair debt and have lost out on crucial revenue through unfair tax policies and unethical corporate tax practices.

To repair this critically broken system, the rules of the global economy must shift towards fairness and justice, prioritising community need and protection of the planet, instead of profit. This means cancelling the high debt burdens including those of garment-producing countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

It means overhauling tax policies and tightly stitching the loopholes that enable corporate tax dodging on a massive scale. The UK plays a major role in creating the environment for corporations to move and even hide profits to avoid paying fair tax.¹²⁴ Countries such as the UK have a responsibility to correct these wrongs by overhauling the unfair tax system that is allowing global corporations to extract profits that should be going into the public purse of the countries where they operate.

Reducing corporate power and control

Legislative actions that increase the responsibility of fashion companies are vital for accountability and justice. Effective legal frameworks can both encourage and enforce greater due diligence, investment in workplace improvements, protection for workers, and are the tool to hold corporations and their leaders to account.

Voluntary corporate social responsibility agreements have failed. It is time to repair the damage with legislation and binding agreements. One example of an agreement that holds big fashion to account is the International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry which evolved from the landmark Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, established after the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in April 2013.¹²⁵ The Accord established a factory inspection programme that saved



Garment workers, organised by FTZ-CSEU, protesting the planned sale of a factory without the guarantee that workers will be re-hired, Sri Lanka, November 2021.



thousands of lives and made brands accountable for the factories they contract to. Ground-breaking at the time, many brands had to be cajoled into signing up to the Accord, as of 2023, many major brands including Levi's and Walmart are still refusing to sign.

A second example is the Dindigul Agreement¹²⁶ which was signed in April 2022 after a year-long campaign led by the Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU), a Dalit women's union in India. The agreement seeks to end gender-based violence in factories after 20-year-old garment worker Jeyasre Kathiravel was murdered. It was signed by H&M, Gap and PVH Corp. and the Tamil Nadu-based supplier where Kathiravel worked – Eastman Exports. The other signatories to the agreement are the TTCU, the Asia Floor Wage Alliance¹²⁷ and the Global Labor Justice-International Labor Rights Forum. The first year's results from the agreement have been remarkable.¹²⁸ These beacons of hope in the garment industry show us that what was broken can be fixed, as long as workers voices are centred.

Organised labour

It is no surprise that in an industry notorious for worker exploitation, bosses would resist the rights of workers to form trade unions. Unions have led the way in securing employment rights in many countries over the years. They have changed the nature of 'work' for the better and created social progress such as winning rights for women. Unions enable workers to come together as a powerful, collective voice to communicate with management about their working terms and conditions, and to push for safe, fair, and decent work. From health and safety to higher wages, parental leave to holiday entitlement, a thriving trade union sector is key to the realisation of workers' rights.

Big fashion, however, tries to distance itself from workers in the Global South where union busting is rife, ignoring their responsibilities whilst workers are targeted, sacked, and even killed for their trade union involvement.¹²⁹

Here in the UK, we also have some serious repair work to do. The scandal of poor conditions for workers in the supply chains of companies such as Boohoo have hit UK headlines.¹³⁰ For many workers in garment factories, trade unions are a lifeline in protecting their rights, realising safer working conditions, and improving wages.

The importance of trade unions in empowering worker voices through ensuring freedom of association and collective bargaining not only brings change at factory and industry level, it empowers working people generally. This will be key to delivering a just transition truly shaped by workers.

Protecting our planet

Scientists have identified nine essential environmental processes that regulate the stability and resilience of the Earth system, including regulation of the climate, land-systems change, freshwater use and biodiversity loss. Multiple studies show that disruption to any one of these is likely to cause widespread and irreversible environmental changes that threaten the ability of humanity and all other living species to survive. It is now clear that many years of unsustainable and unequal extraction of the Earth's resources has led to at least six of these essential boundaries being breached, as of 2023.¹³¹

Industries such as big fashion are iconic of the broader economic system that has driven to the breakdown of these vital ecological systems. As Global North countries seek to transition towards renewable energy in

response to the climate crisis, industries cannot continue to behave as if the planet's resources are infinite. The transition must instead take account of ecological limits and centre a wider bio-centric view of our ecosystems that prioritises creating the conditions for humanity and nature to thrive.

One key step to achieving this is ensuring that land rights are realised, for the small farmers and peasant communities who maintain agro-ecological approaches to crop production for clothing and other industries, and for the Indigenous communities who have acted to conserve critical elements of nature against the odds.

For the fashion industry, as for the economy at large, the transition to a more ecologically sound future cannot simply mean switching to renewable energy sources. It is vital that the transition pathways from the current crisis must not employ the same logic of extraction to minerals and materials. Instead, transformation of the industry must be based on a holistic view of the whole production cycle; transforming its approach to land, water, chemical and synthetic materials usage to re-centre the sanctity of the lands and livelihoods of those that it has mercilessly exploited up to now.

Climate reparations

It is no secret that globally, the richest 10% are responsible for the nearly 52% of the total emissions driving the climate crisis.¹³² The US, UK, Canada, EU, and Russia alone are responsible for 55% of cumulative emissions.¹³³ Global North countries have used up more than their fair share of the carbon budget in what has been termed 'carbon colonialism'. It has been calculated that this colonisation of the carbon budget would require climate reparations of US\$192 trillion, with the UK and EU combined responsible for US\$46

trillion and the US for US\$80 trillion, due to vast historical emissions.¹³⁴ The countries least responsible for the climate crisis are also the countries with the biggest limitations on them to adequately respond to the scale of its impacts. After hundreds of years of exploiting the Global South, governments of the countries that have caused the most damage must take responsibility. That must include:

- Doing their fair-share of the action required to limit temperatures well below 1.5°C by cutting their emissions to real zero by 2030.
- Stopping the promotion of false solutions such as net zero, negative emissions technologies and the commodification of nature.
- Providing new and additional grant-based climate finance based on need.
- Supporting a global goal on adaptation, with the means of implementation including finance and technology to allow countries of the Global South to adapt to the climate crisis.
- Regulating banks that are funding the climate crisis.
- Making the fossil fuel, agribusiness and fashion industries disproportionately responsible for emissions at the centre of paying for a radical just transition.
- Reckoning with colonial pasts that stole land, labour and resources.
- Giving frontline communities the freedom, resources and tools to mitigate and adapt to the changing climate, and related challenges in the present.
- Preventing the breach of all planetary limits, including those of nature and our

ecosystems using a fair shares approach to the equitable sharing of resources.

In movements around the world there is a growing demand for climate reparations – seeking recompense from those countries that caused and perpetuated harm. Forms of reparation have included apologies, financial compensation, commemorations, and measures to stop the harms and to ensure they are never repeated.

Countries on the frontlines have been demanding equity for decades, campaigning for those that have contributed most to the climate crisis to decarbonise first. The big fight ahead is to ensure that measures to address ‘loss and damage’ are implemented by those countries in the Global North that are most responsible. This must go hand in hand with ensuring that a global transition to renewable energy is equal and just, and that Global South countries are supported through international co-operation, including financial and technology transfers by rich Global North countries.

Towards a just future

We can and should learn to repair our clothes, but truly meaningful repair must mean a move away from our current extractive economic model, which exploits people and the natural world for profit. Only then can we build a just transition that transforms the clothing production into a sustainable system we can all be proud of. The dogma of growthism – that all sectors of the economy must mindlessly grow all the time, no matter the consequences – is a starkly dangerous political ideology. We know it has led to workers’ rights abuses on a global scale, to a shaking planet, and to stark poverty and inequality.

But as we hope to have illustrated with this report, amid the injustice is a place of great possibility. The moment we choose not to have our clothes and creativity be an excuse to bolster the economic interests of the Global North, we can change everything. The moment we take back our power and reject the singular drive to profit, we can end the system that expects the Global South to service the Global North that threatens the very ecosystems on which humanity relies on, and recognises that we are part of nature. The challenge is to ensure that in changing the fashion industry, the voices of those on the frontline of this industry – the workers, homeworkers, farmers, spinners, and weavers – are at the forefront of directing change. As Kalpona Akter clearly says: “We want to have our space at the discussion table and to make sure we are not losing anything. Until then, don’t talk to us about green economies.”¹³⁵ Only collectively, through listening and intense action, can we work towards a world where Bangladesh’s productive capacity is not organised around a single damaging export, but rather has been channelled into climate leadership and protection.

The evidence is clear: ultimately, we must fundamentally change the way our economies and societies are structured, including shifting the core value set that shapes our economic system towards one that centres care and well-being and allows everyone to live with dignity.

Both people and nature, must heal. We need to repair our relationship with the Earth and move towards an understanding of ourselves as just one part of the Earth’s ecosystems – to ensure that the natural world and all of our fellow species are provided with a right to thrive. This requires us to recentre the rights of indigenous peoples, challenge the systems of racial and

patriarchal oppression, and decolonise the world by ending unsustainable consumption and extraction of Earth's natural resources.

To achieve truly transformational change, we must rebuild our imaginations, to allow ourselves to build a bold vision of where we must go. In her seminal book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall-Kimmerer writes about students in her ecology class being unable to imagine a beneficial relationship between humans, animals, and the planet, and she asks: "How can we begin to move towards ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like." Wall-Kimmerer therefore writes for the need for restoration with "re-story-ation." This is just as true for the fashion industry.¹³⁶

The hope is that in placing the systems that make our clothes under the microscope, this report has set out a bold starting point for opportunity, imagination and action for a just transition of the fashion industry. When we remember that everything we will ever wear is the product of two interconnected things – human labour and land – we must place the well-being of both at the heart of our economies to realise a truly sustainable future for us all.

Glossary

BIG FASHION: refers to multinational corporations that generate constant high levels of clothing production whether their brands are high street or high end. Based on the use of the term 'Big Oil' by climate movements, 'Big Fashion' points to the terrible social and environmental consequences of the dominance of large corporations who are in ultimate control of the industry. These corporations exercise power, through their purchasing practices, that force suppliers across the world to meet damagingly low prices.

CAPITALISM: a social and economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and their operation for profit. **Corporate capitalism** refers to an economy dominated by hierarchical and bureaucratic corporations that own and control the factors of production and the amount of profits they generate. It is also characterised by corporations and corporate interest groups having undue influence and power to distort democratic processes, and shape policies that harm the public good to preference investor interests.

DEGROWTH: a set of theories that critique the concept of unsustainable and inequitable economic growth, emphasising the need to reduce global consumption and production in certain areas while advocating a socially just and ecologically sustainable society.

ECOSYSTEMS: are all the living things in an area and the way they relate to and affect each other and the environment and have a certain level of resilience to damage or but beyond a certain point **ecological**

breakdown is the drastic, and potentially permanent, reduction or collapse of capacity of ecosystems to sustain themselves, for example water that can no longer sustain life for organisms or species.

EXPLOITATION: the exploitation of workers in the fashion industry includes long working hours, low wages, no breaks, no paid holiday or sick pay, no contracts protecting pay and conditions. It can also include working with hazardous materials and dyes, banning of trade unions, instant dismissal and poor working conditions including overcrowding and in unsafe buildings. It can be described in terms of modern-day slavery, forced labour and child labour.

EXTRACTIVISM: is a highly destructive model of economic development based on the intensive and mass removal of natural resources such as metals, minerals, fossil fuels, land and water for production and profit, mostly by corporations in the global North.

FAIR SHARES: a method that enables us to find out what climate action should be taken based on: the total amount of greenhouse gases that may yet be emitted globally, before we are most at risk of irreversible and accelerated change; the responsibility of the country based on the total amount of greenhouse gases already emitted; the capability of that country, referring to existing resources, and ability to act, and the country's right to develop sustainably. At its core is the principle of equity, historical responsibility and respective capacities. It is a key principle by climate justice groups in their advocacy from the carbon budget to climate finance.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: an alternative food system based on the fundamental right of all peoples, nations and states to control food and agricultural systems and policies, ensuring everyone has adequate, affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food. The principles of food sovereignty were declared in 1996 as a result of peasants' movement struggles from around the world, particularly in the global South. Six main principles define the concept of food sovereignty: it focuses on food for people (right to food), values food providers, localises food systems, puts control over land, water and other natural resources on food producers, builds knowledge and skills of producers and works with nature (peasant agroecology).

FORMAL SECTOR: the formal economy has an organised system of employment with clear written rules of recruitment, agreement and job responsibilities. It has a standardised relationship between the employer and the employee maintained through a formal contract.

GDP (GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT): is the monetary value of all finished goods and services made within a country during a specific period, it is used to estimate the size of an economy and growth rate.

GLOBALISATION: is the process by which businesses or other organisations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale.

GREENWASHING: describes a false, misleading or untrue action or set of claims made by a corporation or organization about the positive impact that a company, product or service has on the environment.

HETEROPATRIARCHY: the dominance of heterosexual men in a society or culture.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: refers to descendants of the earliest inhabitants of a place before colonisation who share collective history with the land or natural resources where they live or have been displaced from. The land and natural resources are often very important to their identities, cultures, livelihoods.

INFORMAL SECTOR: Workers in the informal economy are not recognized, registered, regulated or protected under labour legislation and social protection. Work is often characterized by small or undefined workplaces, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low levels of skills and productivity, low or irregular incomes, long working hours and lack of access to information, markets, finance, training and technology.

JUST TRANSITION: originally understood as a framework encompassing a range of social interventions needed to secure workers' rights and livelihoods when shifting from harmful production. Increasingly now referred to as a set of principles, processes and practises that build the economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a just and equitable regenerative and sustainable economy that guarantees people the right to live with dignity and in harmony with the planet.

LIVING WAGE: a living wage differs from country to country but should ensure that working people can earn enough to meet all of their daily needs and expenses and have discretionary income left over to ensure well-being and invest in their own or their children's future. A minimum wage is a legally stipulated amount that a person must be paid but it is not necessarily an amount calculated to be a living wage level.

LOSS AND DAMAGE: a general term used in UN climate negotiations to refer to the consequences of climate change that go beyond what can be mitigated against, or that people can adapt to, or when options exist but a community doesn't have the resources to access or utilize them. Loss and damage can result from both extreme weather events like cyclones, droughts and heatwaves, as well as slow-onset changes such as sea level rise, desertification, glacial retreat, land degradation, ocean acidification and salinization. Loss and Damage is now understood as addressing the loss and damage from climate impacts that are unavoids or unavoidable and can be both economic and non-economic.

NEOLIBERALISM: a political doctrine on how politics and the economy should be organised. It prioritises the maximisation of profits for shareholders through policies of free-market capitalism, deregulation, privatisation, lowering of trade barriers, and reduction in the power of the State including reduction of government spending through austerity measures.

PATENT: is a form of intellectual property which gives exclusive rights to make, use, or sell an invention or design for a certain number of years.

RACE TO THE BOTTOM: is a term used to describe the progressive lowering or deterioration of standards, in an effort to win business when there is intense competition between companies or countries.

RACIALISED CAPITALISM: a concept that stresses the mutual dependence and development of capitalism and racism across history, from slavery and colonialism to mass incarceration and the racist global division of labour.

SACRIFICE ZONES: originating within the Environmental Justice movement to define populated areas primarily of people of colour, Indigenous or low income with high levels of pollution and environmental hazards, thanks to the deliberate siting of nearby toxic or polluting industrial facilities. These areas are called "sacrifice zones" because the health and safety of people in these communities is being effectively sacrificed for the economic gains and prosperity of others. It has also come to be understood as a wider concept that posits the idea of expendable people and geographies in particular of the global South as a core tenet of both past and present colonial and neo-colonial policies.

SOCIALLY USEFUL WORK: as a concept, socially useful work has productive meaning and value to both the worker and to the wider community, orientated around need as opposed to jobs that focus only on producing profit.

SUPPLY CHAIN/S: the sequence of processes, and companies, involved in the production and distribution of a commodity.

STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMMES: are economic policies that have been promoted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the early 1980s whereby loans are conditional on the adoption of such policies.

TRADE LIBERALISATION: removes or reduces barriers to trade among countries such as tariffs and quotas, encouraging free trade. Trade liberalisation can benefit stronger economies but put weaker economies at a greater disadvantage.

UNEQUAL EXCHANGE THEORY:

refers to an economic theory primarily developed by Arghiri Emmanuel and Samir Amin which states that economic growth in the 'advanced economies' of the Global North relies on vast quantities of resources and labour being extracted from the Global South. These resources are extracted through price differentials in international trade, which allow for them to be extracted in an almost invisible manner – this invisibility is important because it gives the appearance of no colonial coercion and so does not provoke moral outrage even while it causes global inequality, uneven development, and ecological breakdown. This report draws heavily on the work of Jason Hickel and team in putting a figure to the value of this extraction, which you will find in Chapter Two.¹³⁷

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