

FORCED LABOR IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

By: Elisa Antonucci, Thomas Comte, Rachel Fruehman, Jenna Sipprell, Mayumi Pedraza

OVERVIEW

Behind many multi-million dollar companies lies vast supply chains filled with unethically sourced raw materials. Cotton is most often produced in developing countries with textile dependent economies. The fashion industry's high demand for cotton has led to several developing countries, like Uzbekistan, to force civil workers to hand-pick cotton. Hand-picked cotton is valuable to manufacturers as it is clean and sells at a lower price due to free and forced labor. This tainted cotton is then sent to spinning mills in countries like Bangladesh, where working conditions are often inhumane compared to many companies' place of incorporation. While many big brands have implemented policies concerning sustainable sourcing, companies struggle, or are unwilling, to correct their supply chain. Not-for-profit organizations like the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), help corporations with promises of more sustainably sourced cotton. Although, the reality is that the country of origin for this fiber is often untraceable due to loose regulations. Given the complexity of many clothing companies' supply chains, products marketed as "sustainable" may actually originate from companies where free and forced labour is imposed. This is how many companies "greenwash" their consumers into thinking that their products are sustainable.



VF Corporation

Who is VF?

- An apparel, backpack and footwear company who owns these brands: Vans, Timberland, The North Face and others.
- Mission is to connect their consumers to lifestyles, activities and experiences they cherish most.

Approach on sustainability:

Environmental sustainability

- Continuously increasing their use of recycled and sustainable cotton.

Social sustainability

- They banned the use of cotton grown in Uzbekistan. VF's suppliers must abide by this policy by providing certification.
- Created a four step mandatory policy for suppliers: Record, document and audit all the manufacturers in the supply chain.



Patagonia

Who is Patagonia?

- They create outdoor sportswear without creating unnecessary harm.
- Mission states that they are in business to save our home planet.

Approach on sustainability:

Environmental sustainability

- Aware of the impact that every product has on the planet.
- Using material such as recycled cotton, polyester, nylon, hemp.
- The cotton they grow is regenerative organic certified.

Social sustainability

- Produce products under safe, fair and legal working conditions and are founding members of FLA (Fair Labor Association).
- They have complete transparency of their supply chain, they own the farms that produce their cotton, work closely with the outsourced clothing factories and material mills.
- Publicly disclose a list of all the suppliers on their website.



INDITEX

Inditex

Who is Inditex?

- A Spanish multinational clothing company.
- 8 brands: Zara, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, and others.
- Mission: To create value beyond profit and to put social and environmental aspects at the center of their decision making.

Approach on sustainability:

Environmental sustainability

- Closing the Loop initiative: create a cycle of life for products and therefore eliminating waste by 2025.

Social sustainability

- Social Sustainable Division: provides training to all suppliers and manufacturers to ensure they abide by Inditex' code of conduct that dictates ethical and responsible behaviors for manufacturers and suppliers.
- Implemented a traceability program: know where all garments are cut, dyed, washed and manufactured.

H&M Group

H&M Group

Who is H&M Group?

- Hennes and Mauritz (H&M) - H&M Group, is a multinational clothing-retail company
- 8 brands such as H&M, COS, Weekday and others
- Mission: Great design should and can be available to anyone.

Approach on sustainability:

Environmental sustainability

- By 2020, all of their cotton will be sourced more sustainably
- By 2030, aims for 100% recycled and sustainable sourced materials
- By 2040, aims to have a climate positive value chain.
- In 2018, they collected 20,649 tonnes of textiles for reuse and recycling through garment collecting initiative.

Social sustainability

- Provide their 1.6 million textile workers with safe working conditions and fair living wages
- Approach human rights based on UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights



RECOMMENDATION

Companies and governments must take action in order to assure that their whole supply chain does not encompass any forced labor or ill working conditions. The main goal would be to eliminate the tradeoff between social and environmental issues within the fashion industry.

This can be done by:

- The industry must create one organization that monitors, implements regulations (like implementing Fair Trade Certification) and audits all parties of supply chains of corporations, ensuring social and environmental sustainability. This organization should have a certification so companies who are part of the fair trade fashion can be recognized by consumers.
- Companies should be hands on in their supply chain and know the ins and outs. They must be informed of the focus of third parties like BCI. This will detect what parts of the supply chain are not being monitored and which need improvement.
- Boycott from suppliers who sell untraceable cotton as they most likely utilize forced labor or inhumane working conditions. By doing so, it will decrease the demand for this cotton and decrease the amount of civilians forced to work in the cotton fields.

Amongst the five companies listed, Patagonia is the company that sets a good examples to others. With complete transparency in their supply chain, they are able to monitor each step. As other companies are trying and working to get to where Patagonia is, it is not a change that happens overnight. Rather, the companies must be willing to adapt these practices.



Puma

Who is Puma?

- Puma is the 3rd largest sportswear manufacturer in the world.
- Mission: Be the "Fastest Sports Brand in the world".

Approach on sustainability:

Environmental sustainability

- 10FOR20 Initiative; by 2020 assure that 10 aspects are more sustainable: climate, human rights and materials etc.
- By 2020: using 90% of BCI cotton.
- In 2018 started mixing organic cotton with their BCI cotton.

Social sustainability

- Participate in Fair Labour Association which helps them implement a Fair Compensation Strategy.
- Suppliers aren't subjected to these audits, leaving a gap in the visibility of their supply chain.
- Lists their 126 core-suppliers on their website.

