

Can fashion ever be fair?

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Abstract

The recent global economic crisis has highlighted the vulnerability of millions of women in apparel supply chains worldwide. Despite decades of activism and a plethora of corporate social responsibility and ethical labelling initiatives, there has been little evidence of progress toward greater equity in the fashion sector. Why can't we make fashion more fair? This article explains historically rooted causes of inequity for Black and Brown women in apparel supply chains and details the rise of Fair Trade initiatives intended to use market forces to improve existing practices and support alternatives. Attempts to use consumerism and market forces to drive social change raised deep questions for social movement actors regarding first principles. Notwithstanding years of effort, Fair Trade apparel has failed to achieve any significant market penetration. Yet the sector as a whole is experiencing overlapping shocks of digitisation, climate change and pandemic-exacerbated disruptions to supply chains. Social movement actors are also targeting the sector with new demands for social and economic justice. This may provide opportunities to redesign our thinking around Fair Trade and what constitutes fairness in fashion.

Keywords: fashion, labour, gender, Fair Trade, Fairtrade, sweatshops, apparel, certification, ethical standards, antiracism, decolonisation

Introduction

Millions of women workers in the garment industry worldwide were precipitously laid off last year due to the COVID-19 crisis. These vulnerable and predominantly Black and Brown women have borne the brunt of the crisis in an industry rooted in colonialism. This article examines root causes of inequity in the apparel industry and seeks to address the question: why haven't we been able to make the apparel sector fair for the women who harvest cotton and sew garments?

Despite repeated attempts to introduce ethical alternatives to historically exploitative production models over the years, the industry has been resistant to change. This article contextualises the deep-rooted historical basis for discrimination in the industry, details attempts to address symptoms since the resurgence of the anti-sweatshop movement in the 1990s, including attempts to promote a Fair Trade standard for garments, and discusses current social trends and pressures from consumer and producer markets, and what they may portend for the future. The article draws both on the extensive literature covering ethical initiatives for apparel, and on my own direct experience as a labour rights advocate in debates around the development of a Fair Trade apparel label over the course of a decade.

When did Fashion Become Unfair?

The modern-day apparel sector is a direct heir to colonial forces that created lengthy textile supply chains and built dynastic fortunes for white men on the labour of Black and Brown women (Beckert, 2014). Patriarchal control of women is central to continued success of shareholders, both historically and in the present day. While the industry remains highly dominated by men – as corporate executives, financiers, factory owners, designers and promoters – it can't run without women. Women plant and harvest cotton, and even where men own and control cotton production, women's unpaid labour keeps the sector viable. Women sew the garments in apparel factories. Women sell the clothes, as retail store workers. Women are the shoppers, particularly for low-cost 'fast' fashion, as they seek to clothe their families. Women are the models who are used to create the fantasies around fashion, premised on sexualised images of women that are implicitly understood to be controlled by men.

While cotton became a global commodity early in the colonial era, garment production was intentionally kept within the US, UK and other industrialised economies until recent decades (Beckert, 2014). Beginning in the 1970s, the manufacture of apparel intended for so-called 'developed' or high-consumption countries¹ shifted dramatically to low-wage countries in the developing world. Core countries pushed periphery countries to move toward export-promotion strategies and promoted formal trade agreements that reflected this agenda (Compa & Trubek, 2005). Governments in high-consumption countries also promoted the notion that this industry was creating jobs for women (Powell, 2014).

Beginning in East Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, countries began promoting female wage labour as an untapped resource. The rapid economic growth of many Asian nations (most notably Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand and Malaysia) was attributed to their comparative advantage including the availability of feminised labour (Amsden, 1989). Since that era, women have comprised and continue to comprise well over half the light manufacturing workforce around the world (Cirera & Lakshman, 2017). Moreover, more than two-thirds of the global labour force in garment production is estimated to be female.

While some touted these jobs as improving women's status, others pointed out that the system intentionally created an 'underdeveloped' class of Black and Brown women workers worldwide (Amin, 1974). This recognition led to the theory of a New International Division of Labour (NIDL), describing a new global class divide where rich consumers rely on a Brown and Black and feminised proletariat (Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983). Academics and activists began to understand that power and control over women workers was at the core of the supply chain, within the transnational corporation.

This feminised proletariat had its roots in systems built long prior to the globalisation of manufacturing supply chains. Wage labour itself as a 'modern' economic relationship emerged in the context of early capitalist textile production in the early 1800s. Images of women mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts, and similar locales are emblematic of early days of the industry (Dublin, 1979). The abusive conditions that female immigrant workers faced were dramatically spotlighted in the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City in 1911, which killed 146 immigrant women workers and galvanised attention to the first ethical labelling initiative in the United States, the National Consumers League's 'White Label' for non-sweatshop apparel (Von Drehle, 2004).

Moreover, as noted earlier, production of the most notable raw input for garments, cotton, continues to be dispersed globally in a pattern established during the early colonial period. Cotton today is produced in many countries, with substantial concentrations of production in India, Brazil and Uzbekistan. Textile and apparel production are heavily concentrated in low-wage countries; top garment-producing countries include India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Turkey and the combined region of Central America/Caribbean (producing for the US market). These geographies exemplify a core-periphery relationship between producers, at the periphery, and dominant corporations, which sit at the centre in the US and EU. Geopolitical relationships among

¹ This essay will avoid the 'developed/developing' country description as I find this to be a false dichotomy. 'Global North'/'Global South' are equally problematic, as core-periphery relations do not follow national boundaries. I will refer instead to core and periphery nations. Core nations tend to be home for the capital holders in this industry, including headquartering the major multinational corporate actors; periphery countries tend to be where most workers and producers are.

governments reinforce the power of corporate actors, as 'core' actors have aggressively pushed free trade regimes that sustain this power imbalance.

The apparel sector's current geographic spread has much to do with its historical origins. In pre-colonial times, textile production was largely artisanal. Colonial expansion reorganised the production of cotton, textiles and apparel, creating entrenched power dynamics between those who owned and controlled the means of production, and those who produced. Cotton continues to be produced largely in former colonies. As for textile and apparel manufacture, while geographies of production have shifted, the social, political and economic conditions for workers remain similar to those of the early Industrial Revolution. Altering these entrenched dynamics requires interventions far more profound than those we have seen to date, as I will describe.

In the Master's House: Ethical Alternatives and their Limitations

'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'
(Audre Lorde)

Given deep historical underpinnings to inequity in the apparel sector, are ethical alternatives possible? Global supply chain organisation is not accidental, but intended to isolate individual elements of the chain from having too much power. This ensures there are no quick fixes. Yet a number of ethical alternatives over the past several decades have sought to improve equity in the industry by promoting alternatives on the margins of this deeply inequitable system. This section will describe the limitations of such approaches.

Using the master's tools: corporate social responsibility

A wave of anti-sweatshop activism began in the 1980s, in the wake of large segments of the apparel sector relocating to low-wage periphery countries, enabled by trade liberalisation. Public exposés of practices by several prominent multinational apparel firms including Levi-Strauss, Nike and Walmart – which was the subject of a television report that revealed that garments it retailed carrying a 'Made in USA' label were actually produced with child labour in Bangladesh – provoked companies to seek ways to correct the most egregious of the abuses. By the early 1990s activism and media exposure succeeded in pushing companies to adopt codes of conduct regarding labour and human rights and to develop private, voluntary monitoring systems to supervise these codes.

While Fair Trade advocates during the same decades fought for a rebalancing of power in agricultural commodity chains, anti-sweatshop advocates debated a series of corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts promoting incremental change to improve conditions for workers within the existing system of production. Some of the most well-known systems, emerging in the late 1990s, were the Fair Labor Association, Fair Wear Foundation and Social Accountability International. While such initiatives billed themselves as multi-stakeholder, all were dominated by the presence of apparel brands in governance roles. All of the voluntary monitoring systems were quickly subjected to critique from labour and human rights activists (AFL-CIO, 2013). These critiques included a failure to address entrenched power dynamics, either in initiative governance or in factory-level labour relations; lack of transparency and integrity in the auditing process; and the fact that CSR initiatives remained peripheral to company operations and sourcing strategies. The driving impetus was cheap, fast fashion, and therefore suppliers were given price points for final products that did not accommodate the cost of ethical practices. Instead, these costs were pushed down to suppliers. Tragic events such as repeated factory fires in Bangladesh and the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2014, which resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and several thousands of people injured, called even more attention to the ineffectiveness of CSR in current sourcing practices everywhere (Locke, 2013; LeBaron & Lister, 2016).

The CSR initiatives' need to continue a business relationship with participating retailers compromised their real ability to challenge root causes of company and industry practices. It remained common practice in the apparel industry to place last-minute orders and to insist on short turn-around times (the so-called 'just-in-time' sourcing system). Thus, while on the one hand apparel suppliers were told to apply ethical codes of conduct to their operations, on the other hand they continued to face a feast-or-famine situation, gravitating between insufficient

and excessive orders. This could only be managed through continuing practices like forced overtime, pushing workers to work round-the-clock to complete an overload of orders, and non-payment of wages or sudden layoffs when orders were cancelled. CSR initiatives failed to address these structural issues which remained the root cause of inequity, as these practices relied on a continuous supply of cheap, malleable labour.

Enter Fair Trade: an alternative model?

Frustrated with the severe limitations of these CSR initiatives, by the mid-2000s the anti-sweatshop movement had begun to look to Fair Trade as activists considered how to implement a system that would rebalance power dynamics in the industry and create a market for ethical production practices. In particular anti-sweatshop activists sought to strengthen the role of independent unions and other worker organisations. Fair Trade movement proponents, many of whom were also international development organisations working at grassroots levels with farmers, were better positioned to challenge the underlying industry logic than other CSR advocates, as this deeper challenge to colonial legacies was precisely the impetus for introducing Fair Trade as an alternative into commodity markets. As Mookerjee has noted,

Alternative trade recognised the effects that colonisation had on the worldwide trading system and sought to create a more equal world. For Fair Trade, this looked like a world where the products on the shelves in the developed ‘West’, which were produced in Africa, Asia and South America, were made by people who did not experience exploitation. . . . The West had a moral obligation to set up fairer trading systems with those countries that experienced such appalling degrees of oppression under colonial rule. It is, therefore, no surprise that the best-known Fair Trade products, such as sugar, cocoa, tea, coffee and cotton, are connected with a long history of slavery and oppression. By attempting to overthrow the trading systems between Europe and Africa, Asia and South America, which were put in place under colonialism, the Fair Trade movement is an anti-colonialist movement.

(Mookerjee, 2019)

Yet the real attraction, for many, was the premise that change could happen by relying entirely on voluntary market behaviour. Fair Trade advocates were effectively promoting agricultural products and handicrafts in US and EU markets, with growing market share for some commodities, particularly coffee, throughout the 1990s. Consumers appeared to have an appetite for ethical labels. Public surveys of consumer attitudes constituted the body of data available on the market for ethical or ‘sweatfree’ apparel. Advocates hypothesised that the market was failing to connect a very large number of ‘conscientious consumers’ who would be willing to pay more for clothing manufactured by companies that ensure good working conditions and/or respect worker rights with ethical producers (Robinson, Meyer & Kimeldorf, 2014).

Could Fair Trade bring change to apparel workers who were deeply locked into post-colonial supply chains? Could a market alternative appealing to consumers – a modern-day White Label – possibly be the answer? Anti-sweatshop activists built bridges with Fair Trade campaign organisations to explore synergies. In 2005, Ian Robinson at University of Michigan and I organised a conference bringing together Fair Trade and anti-sweatshop groups, ethical and Fair Trade companies, unions and apparel worker representatives, to catalyse a new strategic approach.

At that time the Fairtrade International (then known as Fairtrade Labelling Organisation) served as the sole global umbrella for national level labelling organisations. Fair Trade USA (then known as Transfair USA) served as the US affiliate to Fairtrade International. US- and EU-based anti-sweatshop advocates began engagement with both Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA to address the thorny question of certification for apparel. Representing the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), I participated actively in both the US and international consultative processes.² At first glance, the Fairtrade certification standard seemed to provide at least as much basis for engagement as the existing CSR initiatives. Anti-sweatshop activists were clear that their aim was distinct from Fair Trade movement aims with respect to other commodities like coffee, as they did not seek to collectivise production, and this was perhaps an early error. The proposed apparel model

² ILRF’s engagement with Transfair USA is detailed in Franzese, 2014.

accepted the employer–worker relationship in garment factories but aimed to create organising space for independent unions. Fairtrade’s hired labour standard, which covers core labour rights and acceptable conditions of work, seemed to address anti-sweatshop goals, as its progress requirements include a living wage and active worker participation in representative organisations.

This article will not review the rising tensions between Fair Trade movement actors such as Oxfam America, United Students for Fair Trade, Co-op America, Catholic Relief Services and others that prevailed throughout this period. Suffice it to say, early champions for an anti-colonialist vision of Fair Trade issued a cautionary tale to US- and EU-based anti-sweatshop activists drawing on their experience with Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International regarding bananas, coffee and other commodities.³ Tensions within Fair Trade regarding approaches to the banana sector were illustrative. While unions and labour rights advocates saw the potential to work with Fair Trade on plantation-produced bananas where unions could be recognised, smallholder cultivators in co-operatives, faced with competition from these plantations, objected to a ‘worker voice’ model that served multinational corporations and reinforced an ugly colonial history in banana supply chains (Frank, 2005). These tensions resurfaced in the move to create a Fair Trade label for apparel, as the next section will discuss.

Manufacturing stakeholder consensus

Fair Trade USA initiated a stakeholder consultation and scoping process to develop a pilot for Fairtrade apparel, developing collaborations both with smaller, mission-driven firms and with larger firms that expressed an interest in testing the waters, most notably Levi Strauss & Co. Both small and larger firms were also motivated by a growing awareness of environmental issues in the cotton sector and were exploring moves toward organic cotton. Indeed firms such as Maggie’s Organics were willing to step forward to test the market for products that were both organic and Fairtrade certified.

On this basis, Fair Trade USA commissioned a paper on market feasibility in 2005 (Quigley & Opal, 2006). This paper was used by Fairtrade International as a springboard to convene global stakeholders and further explore the issues at multi-stakeholder meetings in 2006, 2007 and 2008. In the European market, retailer Marks and Spencer (M&S) indicated willingness to step forward as a market leader, again with a primary interest in responding to campaign work on social and environmental issues in the cotton sector.

The idea of a certification process that could verify production from cotton through the spinning, weaving and cut-and-sew garment production was appealing and challenging. Pilots with smaller companies highlighted the enormous challenges even of ensuring the integrity of Fairtrade certified cotton fibre in cloth entering cut-and-sew facilities, as cotton from multiple origins may be mixed in the stages of cloth production. Moreover, while smaller companies such as Maggie’s Organics could with some effort verify the integrity of inputs throughout their supply chain, market leaders such as M&S and Levi Strauss could not do so without considerable shifts in their existing production and sourcing processes, and considerable investment of resources in verification processes. This pushed the Fairtrade certification bodies to consider alternatives with less integrity but greater possibility for scale and shorter time to market, such as the mass-balance approach which allows a label to be used for a product containing both Fairtrade certified and non-certified raw inputs.

Throughout this phase, the schism between certification organisations and social justice movement actors widened. In 2013, after years of offering public comments on the standards under development, a number of Fair Trade and anti-sweatshop groups sent an open letter to Fair Trade USA expressing serious concerns with the evolving standard and system. They noted in particular a concern that expanding Fair Trade to the apparel sector without coordination with major labour movement advocates or trade unions would undercut the deep and transformative impact on producing communities that distinguished Fair Trade from other social auditing programmes. Anti-sweatshop groups publicly critiqued weaknesses in the Fair Trade USA certification model. The Worker Rights Consortium published an investigative report detailing concerns within the supplier used for

³ Jaffee and Howard (2010) provide a good synthesis of the tensions and tradeoffs between approaches intended to disrupt and provide market alternatives, and those intended to harness and accommodate existing market dynamics.

the Fair Trade USA pilot project, Rajalakshmi Mills (Worker Rights Consortium, 2011). During this same period, ILRF released a report summarising concerns with the application of the hired labour standard in factories producing FLO-certified soccer balls in Pakistan (ILRF, 2010; Athreya & Campbell, 2014).

Concerned about this pushback from advocates, Fairtrade International proceeded cautiously. One of the issues surrounding an apparel label was that of full supply chain integrity; while very small brands could maintain enough integrity for a process that was verifiable from cotton production through cut-and-sew, larger firms like M&S were not able to verify full certification of cotton in their textiles. In the meanwhile, competing initiatives in the ethical marketplace were offering to provide verification on a mixed or mass-balance approach where as long as firms purchased a certain share of certified product for their raw inputs, they could use a label on a final, finished product such as a T-shirt whether or not the specific item had certified inputs. Fairtrade International adopted this mass-balance approach to cotton. By separating the challenges of certifying cotton and certifying apparel production, Fairtrade gained more flexibility in its approach to apparel factories.

Through 2014 Fairtrade International worked with an expert advisory group, of which I was a member, to consider appropriate standards for the textile (cloth) through garment (cut-and-sew) production. The Fairtrade International textile standard was released in 2015. As of this writing, this standard is being applied. The Fairtrade textile standard contains a progressive requirement for suppliers to pay living wages, criteria for training workers on their rights, establishes in each factory a compliance committee of elected worker representatives and in principle protects independent unions. Fair Trade USA also continued with its own separate certification process with brands including Patagonia, J. Crew and Athleta. The advocacy group Fair World Project has provided a side-by-side comparison of the Fairtrade International and Fair Trade USA standards (Canning, 2020).

The master's house is still standing

While I have taken some time to explain how and why an apparel standard emerged, this article is not intended to be about the details of such a standard. It is about the failure of this or any other ethical labelling approach to fundamentally transform the sector. To date, both of the Fair Trade apparel certifications – Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International – have only reached a small handful of firms, and in the process one of the two initiatives, Fair Trade USA, has become even more distant from the international development community from which it arose. In no sense has Fair Trade certification been transformative of underlying sexism, racism, economic conditions or labour relations for the workers who produce apparel.

Fair Trade garments have failed to gain any significant market share. Companies may claim there is an insufficient consumer market for such products. Is the problem really that consumers are unwilling to look for labels, or is it that companies are unwilling to raise the price point for suppliers to accommodate the cost of fairness? When given a chance to pivot to a full-integrity supply chain where cotton, textiles and finished garments would all be certified, why couldn't at least a few market leaders do so? Some larger companies, including both Levi Strauss and M&S, have made more comprehensive commitments toward sustainably produced and organic cotton (Fairtrade Foundation, 2017). Other large firms, such as H&M and Adidas, are committing to increase use of recycled and otherwise sustainable fibre in their product (Rosen, 2021). There has been no such shift in sourcing toward equity for workers, however.

After thirty years of cautious experimentation and consensus-building: why have ethical alternatives intended to build worker power remained in a tiny corner, representing a small fraction of the industry, and why, despite their failures, do CSR models continue to dominate as the preferred fix to inequity in the sector? Even in the wake of the 2013 Rana Plaza tragedy that galvanised global attention, the industry relied on private voluntary fixes in the form of two CSR initiatives, the Bangladesh Alliance and the Bangladesh Accord (*The Economist*, 2013). While one included workers in its governance, both relied on strong corporate participation and therefore neither was designed to shift the predominant business model. This brings us to a fundamental truth: equity inherently and by definition redistributes wealth and rebalances power. Advocates have tried to make the 'business case' for practices that include a worker voice but perhaps we must accept that *there is no*

business case we can make to the actors who profit most and hold the greatest power in the current system. There may be a few that are persuaded by the moral logic.⁴ Market incentives for Fair Trade and other alternative models simply cannot be effective, unless we fundamentally change the logic of the market itself. And that cannot be done through accommodation of current market actors.

This requires us to reconsider the role of certification systems. As Jaffee and Howard (2010) point out, both Fair Trade and organic certification have been subject to contesting forces since their inception; the ethical frame that makes these labels attractive to consumers simultaneously makes the labels attractive to large corporate actors. The only way the larger actors can engage and capture this market share is by watering down the labels. Well-meaning advocates may have inadvertently accelerated this process of institutional capture. For example, activists launched a high-profile campaign targeting Starbucks in the 1990s and insisting that the company source Fair Trade coffee. The label became the activists' goal, rather than increased leverage and bargaining power for co-operative producers (Jaffee & Howard, 2010). In our work at ILRF targeting chocolate companies for use of child labour, we grappled with similar tensions between promoting and creating market space for genuine producer-led alternatives, such as Divine Chocolate and Equal Exchange, and simply asking large corporations to adopt Fair Trade labels.

So in a sense this retrospective article is also a *mea culpa* from a social movement activist. By focusing our energy on improving the integrity of certification standards and processes, we lost sight of the fundamental reasons we embraced the Fair Trade model. An important lesson for social movements may be that in the rush to create multi-stakeholder alternatives and work with companies, activists may lose sight of first principles.

Another lesson for 'core' country activists is to avoid the false promise of consumerism. Consumer movements have a role within social movements, but it should be a relatively small role; moreover, activists should not consider attempts to make a market-based appeal to consumers (i.e. via a label) to constitute engagement with consumer *movements*. Consumer preferences in the sector are largely shaped by women, so we assumed we could appeal to individual consumers to help ensure better conditions for women farmers and workers. Yet consumer preferences never translated into consumer power, and this is what would have been needed to maintain the integrity of the certification systems (Micheletti 2003). Where consumers intentionally identify and self-affiliate into membership organisations, as many in the environmental movement have done, there is at least some power. However, individual consumers entering stores and making purchases will not influence power dynamics. Indeed an ever sophisticated advertising industry learned long ago how to shape the behaviour of individual consumers, and does so today using increasingly sophisticated methods (Wu, 2016).

Anti-sweatshop activists lacked the broader force of organised and mobilised citizen-consumers to balance out the influence of the large corporate actors. Without this, as Jaffee and Howard (2010) explain, 'standards have been transformed from a mechanism with which to force the internalisation of ecological and social costs into a device that places its imprimatur upon production and trading structures that continue the externalisation of those costs'.

Certification alone could never do enough to bolster workers and farmers in the face of this industry's concentrated wealth and power. So perhaps it's time to abandon the certification systems altogether.

Redesigning Fashion: Is a Feminist, Anti-Racist Industry Possible?

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this article: can we have an apparel industry that is more equitable for the women around the world who pick the cotton and sew the clothes? If ever there were a time for us to rip out the seams and remake the fashion industry, this is it. We are in a moment of profound global upheaval, no less than during the industrial revolution of the 1800s. Entire industries are being reshaped by digitisation and artificial intelligence and by the now five-alarm level of our climate crisis. The immediate

⁴ Disney Corporation heiress Abigail Disney stands out as an example of a beneficiary of the system who has allied with social movements that would reduce the wealth and power of her own family.

COVID-19 economic shocks on top of these factors will change the world. But can we remake it in ways that are just and equitable?

The apparel sector has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and a global economy in recession. According to *Just Style*, the coronavirus pandemic erased US\$297 bn from the global apparel market in 2020 – a 15.2% decline from 2019. Many apparel brands reacted by abandoning their commitments to ethical sourcing, simply refusing to pay for already completed, delivered and processed goods (Worker Rights Consortium, 2020). This had devastating impacts for suppliers; for workers, it was an existential threat. CSR commitments ultimately proved to be peripheral to industry interests, as in the downturn brands abandoned vulnerable workers despite ostensible commitments to their safety and rights.

The pandemic lockdowns and travel restrictions also disrupted supply chains in numerous other industries, and this has pushed industry actors to consider how to create more resilient and reliable supply chains in future. This may create opportunities to remake supply chains. For apparel, some are suggesting more focus on flexible sourcing with smaller orders, producing in geographies that are closer to market, and diversifying sourcing locations (*Just Style*, 2020). Some brands may use COVID-19 as a reset button, pushing away from traditional wholesale business models and sharpening their focus on direct-to-consumer sales and setups where they control their own space and inventories. The disruption was already under way as a result of the digitisation of markets. The shift from 'brick-and-mortar' retail to platform sellers such as Amazon is relevant here. Indeed Amazon is already the single largest single vendor of apparel in the US, a shift in market power that will affect every traditional apparel retailer (Anderson, 2021). Digitisation has also affected the market for alternative models. Initiatives such as Stitchfix and Indochino are transforming the consumer experience by bringing customisable product via online platforms directly to their customers at a price point targeting middle-class consumers (DeAceto, 2017; Newman, 2019). Platforms such as ThredUP are serving a growing market of consumers in the second-hand clothing market.

The pressure of social movements is also galvanising change. Here, too, the pandemic has only served to add fuel to an existing fire. The year 2019 was called the year of the protest, due to the unprecedented wave of citizen-led activism in country after country (Chenowith, 2021). From Lebanon to Chile to Serbia, citizens frustrated with elite capture of governments of every political leaning took to the streets. And this wave of social movement action followed an equally important wave of #MeToo movement protests in 2018 demanding action to address gender-based violence around the world; and was subsequently followed by a wave of global climate strike actions. The wave continued into 2020, despite the pandemic, beginning with massive Black Lives Matter actions in the US and spurring global solidarity protests in support of racial equity. As of this writing, the largest ever farmers' strike is taking place in India, and citizens are standing up to protest autocracy in Russia and Burma, even in the face of violent government reprisals. For many, the issues are not separate. Anti-colonialism, anti-racism, feminism and climate justice are all addressing the same problem: a fundamental failure of governments and markets to protect our common future. The global trade union movement has articulated a vision of a *just transition* to a fairer and more sustainable economy (ITUC, 2017). Can these combined forces support the redesign Fair Trade needs?

In this transformative moment, space has been opened to think again about the fundamental structural reform that feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial movements have been calling for over the course of the past fifty years. The work of feminist economists Salma James, Silvia Federici and Maria Dalla Costa who in the 1970s began the 'Wages for Housework' campaign is now being rediscovered by policymakers newly sensitised to the need to invest in the care economy (Kisner, 2021). A new set of feminist economists, led by the admirable Isabelle Ferreras, Julie Battilana and Dominique Meda, launched a manifesto in mid-2020 titled *Democratizing Work*, which was signed by over 6,000 prominent economists worldwide and then widely disseminated in major publications around the world. These ideas would have been considered too risky a few years ago. Now, we realise how much we have to lose by *not* considering them.

At a moment of converging crises, social movement activists are pushing the apparel industry toward dramatic transformation. Oxfam launched a campaign to convince people to *stop buying clothes*, reflecting a

new generation of concern about the unsustainable rate at which we produce fast fashion. Anti-sweatshop activists combined forces in 2020 in response to the pandemic's effects on women workers in the powerful #PayUp Campaign, which has resulted in apparel company payments of \$22 billion to laid-off workers who had initially been denied any compensation (Graceffo, 2021). The market is responding to pressures from a real and growing movement of young social justice activists concerned with our collective future.

The initiative Fashion Revolution, launched as a global movement response to the Rana Plaza tragedy, has already succeeded in creatively redesigning the industry's annual spotlight moment, Fashion Week, rebranding it as Fashion Revolution Week to demand transformation within the industry toward greater equity and sustainability. Their manifesto states: 'We love fashion. But we don't want our clothes to exploit people or destroy our planet. We demand radical, revolutionary change.' The Fair Trade Federation, Fairtrade International and World Fair Trade Organisation are all signatories to the manifesto. Unions and social justice movements are also signatories. However, this initiative will need many more social movement actors and much greater citizen engagement to build real power and momentum.

To be sure, truly ethical alternatives are possible and some brave mission-driven companies have demonstrated this. Activists' campaign work in the chocolate sector may have had a positive role in growing market share for companies such as Tony's Chocoloney, for whom the certification and label was never the real goal, but rather an entry point to educate consumers and transform markets. An initiative for fully ethical mobile phones, Fairphone, has managed to maintain a foothold in the market despite enormous regulatory challenges and complex sourcing chains. In apparel, there continue to be entrepreneurs committed to a more just vision of what this industry can be; companies such as Bare Boutique prioritise racial and gender justice and promote 'slow fashion' (Copestake, 2020). How can we create some space for such companies to thrive?

Public policy will have to play a role in reshaping markets. This is a critical moment also because governments are making big decisions about how to target public investment to ensure long-term economic recovery. Some governments are looking at long-standing gender and racial inequities that put women and workers of colour on the front lines of the crisis. These governments should look at long-term measures to improve labour markets and strengthen social protection that would ensure women workers are not left in such precarious positions in future.

In this context we might reconsider Fair Trade as representing not a set of labels, but a theory of change. In a moment where governments are under pressure to address equity, here is a radical idea: Fair Trade needs to abandon the project of enticing consumers to 'vote with their wallets' and instead become a movement for regulation that rebalances power in markets for artisans, farmers and workers, irrespective of geography. A version of this idea has already been tried. A hundred years ago widespread social unrest and indeed revolution in some countries galvanised others to establish the first multilateral organisation, the International Labour Organisation, to negotiate more incremental shifts and maintain labour peace by creating standards and systems that provided greater equity for workers. In a redesigned Fair Trade movement, there would be room for many social movement actors, including revitalised consumer movements and mission-driven businesses interested in a truly level playing field.

As detailed earlier in this article, trade policy has been used to reproduce colonial dynamics; therefore trade policy must be a focus of this revitalised movement's attention. One example that should encourage those interested in wider reform is the recent US sanction on all goods using cotton produced in Xinjiang, China (US Customs and Border Patrol, 2020). In January 2021, the US government banned imports of cotton and other raw materials from China's autonomous region of Xinjiang in response to allegations of forced labour targeting the Uyghur ethnic minority in the region (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This action built on many years of advocacy, including important ILRF work to insist that forced labour products should be treated as a form of contraband. Pressure to do the right thing can come not only through trade regulation but also consumer protection; anti-sweatshop advocates have suggested a movement-led truth-in-labelling approach that would empower advocates, not companies, to determine what can be marketed as ethically produced (Dirnbach, 2014). This

approach asserts our right as citizens to put guardrails on the 'free' market. Not everything that *can* be made and sold *should* be made and sold. Our guardrails should go well beyond just identifying slave-made products.

Trade justice advocates will need to consider all exploitative production conditions as constituting unfair trading practices, and define goods so produced as contraband. This is the moment for an ambitious rewriting of rules, taking the work we poured into voluntary standards development and re-examining its utility as a set of global guardrails, because really, why should anything be traded that is *not* fairly made? Workers, farmers and other producers should always have sufficient power to be able to negotiate for living wages and fair terms of exchange. Joining the global trade union movement's call for a Just Transition we need to call for a redesigned *just fashion*. This builds on the idea of 'slow fashion' introduced by advocates to describe an awareness and approach to fashion intended to disrupt the cycle of pushing new styles on consumers every season, and instead encouraging consumers to make deliberate and sustainable choices. Slowing the cycle of production allows companies to strengthen resilience in their supply chains, recognising this will involve greater sharing of profits within the entire supply chain to create more economic security for all actors in the system. Some companies may do this and many will not; it will then fall to social movements to work with governments to rein in those who continue to prefer exploitation. This, in turn, will require ongoing organising and investing in educating citizen-consumers – the starting point for the Fair Trade movement. And let the price of fashion reflect its true cost. We will all be clothed fairly.

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Links to relevant websites

#PayUp Campaign: <https://payup.wtf/>

Democratizing Work: <https://democratizingwork.org/>

Fair World Project/ Exploring Fair Trade Apparel: <https://fairworldproject.org/exploring-fair-trade-apparel/>

Fairtrade Textile Program: <https://info.fairtrade.net/product/textiles>

Fair Trade USA Textile Program: <https://www.fairtradecertified.org/business/standards/documents/factory-standard-apparel-and-home-goods>