

# SUSTAINABLE FASHION'S FORK IN THE ROAD: BEYOND FABRIC TO FAIR LABOUR

## An Opinion Article by PEFC Editor Sorelle

We're familiar with the drill – cheap clothes, a revolving door of trends, and constant pressure to be seen in the latest brand. Social media influencers touting fast fashion “hauls” of dozens of items of clothing may have played a large role in driving overconsumption, but social influencing has gone both ways. Climate activists like Greta Thunberg have become pop-culture icons, winning the hearts of millions online, and opening the world's eyes to sustainability as a lifestyle. With our consumption choices under more scrutiny than ever, what we wear is even more deeply embroiled with who we are.

The energy-intensive production processes, transportation, and use of synthetic materials in the textile industry are responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions, for context, this is four times as much as the global aviation sector, which sits at 2.5% of total global emissions. The good news is that we may be starting to see a shift in consumer sentiment, with PwC reporting that more than 70% of consumers surveyed said they were willing to pay more for sustainably produced goods.

The textile industry faces a complex challenge: balancing ethical sourcing of environmentally friendly materials and responsible practices with the demands of a competitive market.

To highlight the scale, Asia-Pacific was the largest region in terms of market share in the ethical fashion market worth \$8.17 billion in 2023, and that is expected to grow to 12.05 billion in 2028.

Much of the transition has centred around materials. To be more environmentally sound, brands are moving away from fossil-fuel derived synthetic fibres like polyester and featuring traditional or new types of sustainable materials that come mainly from plant-based sources. Man made cellulosic fibres (MMCFs) – such as Rayon/Viscose, Modal, and Lyocell – made from materials like wood pulp are allowing brands to provide more cost-effective solutions alongside traditional materials like cotton, flax, hemp or rubber.

While MMCFs may be kinder to the planet, the sourcing of wood pulp can be fraught with environmental and social issues, including deforestation and unsustainable forestry practices. Their production also relies on complex supply chains, raising concerns about ethical labour practices. This is not to say MMCFs are not a valuable tool in moving us toward a greener future. However, a holistic approach that considers the entire lifecycle of the fibre, from forest to garment is needed.



### **The Human Cost of Cheap Clothes**

Simply switching to MMCFs without addressing the social issues undermines the broader goal of building a sustainable ecosystem with ethics at its core. Gruelling hours, low wages, and unsafe conditions are often the reality for garment workers. The ethical treatment of workers throughout the supply chain remains a critical, often neglected, aspect.

We're still asking if anything has really changed in the decade since the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh that claimed the lives of 1,138 workers – the deadliest industrial disaster in the clothing manufacturing industry. Media and NGOs continue to report instances of inadequate safety protocols, unfair labour practices, and even forced labour in some regions. Clean Clothes Campaign, a global network of over 235 organisations operating in over 45 countries is urging brands to end wage theft and blocking the unionisation of garment workers.

Transparency is key to ending these practices. Consumers deserve to know the origin of their clothes and the conditions under which they were made. 75% of respondents to PwC's global consumer insights survey indicated that they valued traceability on the origin of their products, indicating that people value authenticity behind the claims made about what they buy.

Fashion Revolution is raising public awareness and educating people about the systemic challenges facing the global fashion industry with the Fashion Transparency Index, an effort to hold fashion brands accountable with supply chain traceability. The Index is asking for brands to actively engage with their suppliers, ensuring adherence to international labour standards and fostering open communication throughout the supply chain. In 2023, they reported that 70 out of the 250 largest brands in fashion (28%) still score in the 0-10% range.



**Here are three questions top of mind for the sustainable textile industry:**

**Are products durable?**

**Clothes that last longer generally have a lower environmental impact.**

**Can the material be recycled or composted?**

**We don't want our clothes ending up in landfills.**

**Where and how were the materials produced?**

**We will pay more for clothes where fair labour practices are followed.**

With greenwashing rampant across the consumer landscape, independent verification systems on the claims brands can make have emerged as a solution making a tremendous impact in the environmental space. Certification schemes like the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certifications (PEFC) have improved accountability and transparency in biodiversity protection and responsible logging practices with independent audits that verify the sustainable sourcing of raw materials used in MMFCs.

The question is: can these standards also contribute to improving the social, health and safety concerns plaguing the textile industry?

When obtaining a PEFC standard – either for Sustainable Forest Management or Chain of Custody certification – growers, spinners or manufacturers are held to international standards regarding labour: specific guidelines from the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998) and the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). This includes protections for workers including freedom of association, eradicating forced labour, protecting children, equal opportunity and treatment, and safe and healthy workplaces.

The reality is that brands must go beyond mere material swaps and delve deeper into the ethical and environmental practices of their suppliers.

The shift in consumer consciousness is already driving change as buyers are continuing to choose garments that align with their values. Yet, the reality is that producers continue to rely on labour-intensive production lines and fierce competition across different production countries that drives down costs. The challenge is to encourage manufacturers to honour their commitments to workers' health and safety regardless.

MMCF's potential for positive impact is undeniable, and consumers are playing a crucial role in driving this movement by asking if the sustainability labels on their clothes cover materials *and* labour. But unlocking its full potential requires collaboration across the supply chain. It's crucial for brands and spinners to make the effort to understand the specific social, environmental, and economic realities of their chosen sources, rather than purchasing purely based on cost. This requires active engagement with suppliers, communities, and NGOs to ensure that ethical practices are truly embedded within the supply chain. How the fashion industry responds amidst the rapid growth of the ethical fashion segment remains to be seen.

