

Committee: Youth Assembly 2

Topic: Discussing ethical sourcing and fair labour practices in fashion supply chains

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Topic Introduction

Fashion, like any other industry, is driven by customer demand and trends. At the same time though, what every business should strive for, is an ethical supply chain, meaning a system consisting of people and organisations responsible for the manufacturing of the product as well as the transportation of the product all the way to the consumer. In order for these chains to be considered ethical they need to relate to a set of characteristics. Firstly, they need to be sourcing sustainably, meaning that the raw materials used for the fabrication of a product need to be sourced in a sustainable way. Then they need to ensure fair working conditions for all of the workers, respect their rights both as employees and as humans, safe working conditions, fair wages, and overall respect. However, over the years the world has seen quite the opposite. What we call “unethical” supply chains, a problem caused mainly from the pressure towards firms to develop and deliver new styles in record time due to the growing demand for fast fashion. Thus, a joint effort is needed in order to ensure that ethical sourcing and fair labour practices are established and maintained in fashion supply chains.

Definition of key concepts

Fair labour Practices

“Fair labour practices are those that uphold the dignity of workers, provide them with a livable wage, and protect their rights¹”.

¹ Team, The oboloo. “What Are Fair Work Practices? Definition.” Oboloo, 14 Dec. 2022, oboloo.com/blog/what-are-fair-work-practices-definition/.



Ethical sourcing

“Ethically sourced means that products and services from each point in a business’s supply chain are obtained in an ethical way. This includes companies actively upholding labour rights, safe working conditions, business ethics and more as they purchase products from suppliers²”

Supply chains

“The system of people and organisations that are involved in getting a product from the place where it is made to customers³”. They consist of the suppliers, who provide the raw materials, the manufacturers, transforming these raw materials into the final products, the distributors, handling the storage and transportation of the product from the manufacturers to the retailers or directly to the consumers. Lastly, the retailers are the businesses that will actually sell the product to the consumers through physical stores or online platforms.

Child labour

“The term child labour is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. ⁴”

Ethics

“Ethics, the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad and morally right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. ⁵”

Background Information

Many fashion businesses rely on international supply chains, often based in countries without established fair labour practices, making ethical sourcing a crucial issue. Many workers in these supply chains have to deal with poor working conditions, inadequate compensation, and labour exploitation—including child and forced labour. With high levels of pollution and waste from unsustainable production practices, the environmental impact can also be severe. Lastly, there has

² Sedex. “What Does Ethically Sourced Mean?” Sedex, 25 Feb. 2022, www.sedex.com/blog/what-does-ethically-sourced-mean/.

³ Cambridge Dictionary. “Supply Chain.” @CambridgeWords, 12 June 2024, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/supply-chain#google_vignette. Accessed 24 June 2024.

⁴ “What Is Child Labour | International Labour Organization.” Www.ilo.org, 20 Apr. 2024, www.ilo.org/topics/child-labour/what-child-labour.

⁵ Singer, Peter. “Ethics | Origins, History, Theories, & Applications.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 15 Apr. 2024, www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-philosophy.



been a demand from the customers for more accountability and transparency as the firms become more conscious of these issues. One of these problems is unsustainable sourcing, meaning that the raw materials used for the production have not been sourced in a sustainable way. Another issue is unfair labour practices, which can entail a number of issues that constitute violations of the worker's rights, such as unfair compensation, which is when the workers are not paid enough for the labour they are doing and severe working conditions, which is when the factories do not have the ideal condition for those working with them and therefore workers may have to continue their work even when that means they have to inhale potentially toxic chemicals.

The importance of ethical supply chains

Ensuring fair labour practices is of significant importance, considering the workers' well being, empowerment and the promotion of a just society. Defending human rights in the supply chains fosters work environments in which the dignity and the rights of the workers are respected. According to the United Nations Global Compact report, 71%⁶ consumers bear in mind human rights when making a purchase, from which we can understand the expansion of the concern raised in the global community, increasingly influenced by many companies' commitment to ethical practices and also the significance of ethical supply chains for consumerism and companies' clientele and income.

Why is ethical sourcing important?

Ethical sourcing is fundamental in pursuit of promoting fair wages and ensuring safe working conditions and for the entirety of the workers. Examples of these safe working conditions are having access to essential goods like water and first aid necessities, no physical, verbal or psychological abuse, and protection of the worker's health from the toxic substances and chemicals that are being inhaled. It serves as a stepping stone towards the elimination of both child labour and forced labour, ultimately creating a more humane working environment. At the same time, the adaptation of sustainable production practices also contributes to the current, global, environmental crisis while supporting local communities, safeguarding their welfare and stability. Furthermore, ethical sourcing promotes growth and fair market conditions, which in turn accelerate economic development.

⁶ 2022 Annual Report - UN Global Compact, [ungc-communications-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/docs/about_the_gc/2022%20Annual%20Report_%20Executive%20Summary%20\(English\).pdf](https://ungc-communications-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/docs/about_the_gc/2022%20Annual%20Report_%20Executive%20Summary%20(English).pdf). Accessed 23 July 2024.



Businesses that uphold strong ethical sourcing standards not only improve their standing but also win over customers' confidence and allegiance by showcasing their dedication to a more fair and better world.

Causes

In order to fully understand the issue connected to “unsustainable” conditions within these industries we should delve into the causes of it. What pushes these industries, and especially the fashion industry towards these practices? According to the APQC study, even though the conditions were taking a positive turn in 2023, this picture changed during 2024. The aforementioned survey showed that “84% of respondents have re-evaluated or modified their supply chain strategy over the past year to overcome ongoing obstacles.”⁷ Many are the factors that contributed to this change. Firstly the wars have made not only the sourcing but also the shipping of goods costly and limited. In addition to that, the continuous growth of global commerce has created a minimization of transportation capabilities, something that causes delays and therefore increases the costs of transportation. More specifically, if a ship stays still for more days than expected, the cost of the voyage increases. As a matter of fact, “Panama Canal, which ushered 14,000 passages through its waterways in 2023, has to restrict daily usage of the route by about 40% in 2024. This means major shipping lines are being rerouted via other methods, including rail and air, which come with their own sets of hurdles.”⁸

What is happening currently?

As we can witness from the report drafted by the EU and more specifically the committee of legal affairs,⁹ the international community is becoming more alert, particularly in regards to labour and environmental standards, and is taking legal action towards companies, holding them accountable for their supply process, something that was not the case in the past. . Supply now

⁷ Davey, Lizzie. “7 Supply Chain Issues: How to Overcome Them in 2024.” Shopify, 30 May 2024, www.shopify.com/blog/supply-chain-issues

⁸ Davey, Lizzie. “7 Supply Chain Issues: How to Overcome Them in 2024.” Shopify, 30 May 2024, www.shopify.com/blog/supply-chain-issues

⁹ En En Draft Report - European Parliament - European Union, www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/JURI-PR-657191_EN.pdf .



involves both economic and non-economic factors, such as the sustainability of contractors and suppliers, the source of raw materials like wood, and the positive impact on local economies. According to a survey published in September 2021 the pandemic of COVID-19 served as a stepping stone in the pursuit of establishing the idea of ethical sourcing.¹⁰ Supply professionals must uphold integrity and remain alert for signs of modern-day slavery, fraud, corruption, human trafficking, and child labour throughout the supply chain. In addition, consumers themselves have become willing to pay a premium for goods that hold clear ethical certifications, such as Fair Trade labels.

Timeline of Events

November 15, 1988	Fair Trade Certification ¹¹ was established
1989	Uzbek Cotton Scandal-Qoralash ¹²
June 9, 1998	Creation of the Ethical Trading initiative ¹³
1999	Fair Labour Association ¹⁴
April 24, 2013	The collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh ¹⁵
June-July 2022	5 year strategy by the Tripartite Working Group on Options to Ensure Decent Work in Supply Chains ¹⁶

¹⁰ Moncayo, Carlos. "Council Post: The Economic Benefits and Best Practices of Ethical Sourcing." Forbes, Forbes Magazine, 5 Apr. 2023, www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/04/04/the-economic-benefits-and-best-practices-of-ethical-sourcing/.

¹¹ "Our History." Fair Trade Certified, 13 June 2024, www.fairtradecertified.org/about-us/our-history/.

¹² Brown, Matthew. "Qoralash: The Uzbek Cotton Scandal and the 1980s Soviet Press Narrative of Uzbek Cultural Backwardness." Nomadit.co.uk, 22 Oct. 2022, nomadit.co.uk/conference/cess2022/paper/67141.

¹³ ETI. "Who We Are | Ethical Trading Initiative." Www.ethicaltrade.org, www.ethicaltrade.org/who-we-are.

"Ethical Trading Initiative." Wikipedia, 11 Nov. 2022, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_Trading_Initiative.

¹⁴ "Home." Fair Labor Association, 11 July 2024, www.fairlabor.org/.

¹⁵ Holland, Oscar. "10 Years after Rana Plaza, Is Bangladesh's Garment Industry Any Safer?" CNN, 23 Apr. 2023, edition.cnn.com/style/article/rana-plaza-garment-worker-rights-accord/index.html.

¹⁶ "ILO and Supply Chains." International Labour Organization, 23 Apr. 2024, www.ilo.org/topics/supply-chains/ilo-and-supply-chains.

"ILO Strategy on Decent Work in Supply Chains | International Labour Organization." Www.ilo.org, 27 Feb. 2023, www.ilo.org/resource/gb/347/ilo-strategy-decent-work-supply-chains.



March 2023	International Labour Organization adopts strategy on decent works in fashion supply chains ¹⁷
January 2024	USA created a project that can eliminate forced labour in the cotton production of Uzbekistan ¹⁸

Major countries/ organisations and alliances

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a country that is actively battling unethical supply chains of the fashion industry. However, the country is facing severe issues regarding their working conditions. . Due to the insufficient safety measures, workers daily inhale toxic and even carcinogenic chemicals to humans while there is no access to food or water during working hours. One of the most extreme cases is the Rana Plaza collapse where 1134 workers were killed in Dhaka, Bangladesh in 2013. According to CNN: “the collapse was triggered by vibrations from diesel generators switched on following a power outage. But subsequent investigations revealed a long catalogue of failures, oversights and — according to organisations like the global nonprofit Transparency International — corruption at practically every stage of the seven-year-old building’s life.”¹⁹

¹⁷ “ILO and Supply Chains | International Labour Organization.” Www.ilo.org, 28 Jan. 2024, www.ilo.org/topics/supply-chains/ilo-and-supply-chains

¹⁸ uz, Daryo. “U.S.-Funded Program Aims to Eradicate Forced Labor in Uzbekistan’s Cotton Industry.” Daryo.uz, daryo.uz/en/2024/01/12/us-funded-program-aims-to-eradicate-forced-labor-in-uzbekistans-cotton-industry

¹⁹ Holland, Oscar . “10 Years after Rana Plaza, Is Bangladesh’s Garment Industry Any Safer?” CNN, 23 Apr. 2023, edition.cnn.com/style/article/rana-plaza-garment-workers-10-years-accord/index.html



Figure 1: Rana Plaza Collapse²⁰

United States of America (USA)

The United States of America plays a significant role as many fast fashion brands are based and have products that are not ethically produced. For instance, in factories where Old Navy's pieces of clothing are being produced, many young children are forced to work, many workers are abused and pregnant women that are in need of money are fired. Also, the popular brand Fashion Nova launches approximately 600 new products each week²¹, and the workers in factories are being underpaid, while it has been reported the adverse working conditions, as the clothes are being created by synthetic fabric, acrylic, and even nylon²².

Uzbekistan

For many decades, Uzbekistan has had a big role on the fashion industry as it is one of the biggest cotton suppliers in the world²³, while a big part of its economy is based on the exportations of cotton, as in 2022 the income from cotton was \$3.2 billion²⁴. One of the main problems that Uzbekistan's cotton production has been facing is the forced child and adult labour. In the 1980's, the Uzbek cotton scandal came up. This scandal -The Uzbek Cotton Scandal/Qoralash-²⁵ happened as

²⁰ Holland, Oscar . "10 Years after Rana Plaza, Is Bangladesh's Garment Industry Any Safer?" CNN, 23 Apr. 2023, edition.cnn.com/style/article/rana-plaza-garment-worker-rights-accord/index.html .

²¹ Astoul, Eva. "A List of Fast Fashion Brands to Avoid & Why." Sustainably Chic, 2 Jan. 2024, www.sustainably-chic.com/blog/fast-fashion-brands-to-avoid .

²² Astoul, Eva. "A List of Fast Fashion Brands to Avoid & Why." Sustainably Chic, 2 Jan. 2024, www.sustainably-chic.com/blog/fast-fashion-brands-to-avoid .

²³ "Enhancing Transparency and Accountability in Uzbekistan's Cotton Industry." DOL, www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/enhancing-transparency-and-accountability-uzbekistans-cotton-industry .

²⁴ "Uzbekistan's Cotton Industry Rebounds after Boycott." Euronews, 18 Dec. 2023, www.euronews.com/business/2023/12/18/uzbekistans-cotton-industry-rebounds-after-boycott .

²⁵ Brown, Matthew. "Qoralash: The Uzbek Cotton Scandal and the 1980s Soviet Press Narrative of Uzbek Cultural Backwardness." Nomadit.co.uk, 22 Oct. 2022, nomadit.co.uk/conference/cess2022/paper/67141 .



many of the cotton production reports had been distorted, resulting in illegal acquisition of a large quantity of cotton.

Vietnam

For many years now, Vietnam has played an important role in the fashion industry as factories of fashion supply chains such as Zara, H&M and more, have made factories in the area. The exportation of textiles in 2022 is estimated to be \$48.8, which makes Vietnam the 3rd largest exporter of textiles in the world²⁶. However, in these factories there are many problems, which have to do with fair labour practices, that the Vietnamese government is trying to face. Jobs are provided to more than 2.5 million people while the population as a whole is almost 90 million, but the payments are low, with most of the workers having a salary of 200\$ per month²⁷.

International Labour Organization

The International Labour Organization's aim is to promote and protect worker's rights, and raise a higher rank in fair labour practices. One of the strategies developed, so as to establish ethical working conditions, is the "ILO strategy on decent work in supply chains²⁸", which was established in March of 2023. This strategy is trying to achieve zero discrimination in the workspace, coherence in all levels, cooperation so as to accomplish decent working conditions, and international labour standards.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

Fair Trade Certification

The Fair Trade Mark is the symbol of the International Fairtrade System. When the symbol is placed on a product, it means that the procedure of the collection of the respective material is ethical, and there were fair labour practices in the procedures of production and selling. Fairtrade

²⁶"Textiles in Vietnam." The Observatory of Economic Complexity, oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/textiles/reporter/vnm.

²⁷ Toward Fair Compensation in Vietnam: Insights on Reaching a Living Wage. 2019.

²⁸ "ILO Strategy on Decent Work in Supply Chains | International Labour Organization." www.ilo.org/resource/gb/347/ilo-strategy-decent-work-supply-chains. 27 Feb. 2023.



empowers ranchers and labourers to handle destitution and work on their monetary maintainability²⁹, by making an exchange model with more pleasant costs and working circumstances. Its impact has been positive, as it supports smaller businesses with fair labour practices and ethical sourcing. However, it has not managed to completely solve the issue; this certification mostly focuses on specific aspects of the production process such as fair working conditions and fair wages, while not tackling issues like ethics, sustainability and overall the economic stability for workers.

Fair Labor Association (FLA)

The Fair Labor Association (FLA) was created in 1999 with an aim of achieving fair labour practices in all sectors. Not only has FLA created many programmes that can help companies grow ethically while having fair labour, but it has also made strategic projects in which include organisations such as UNICEF and ILO³⁰. A strategic project that was published in April 16, 2024, is “Strengthening Grievance Mechanisms in Uzbekistan’s Cotton-Textile Clusters”³¹, with an aim of eliminating forced and child labour, and responsible recruitment. At the same time, though, the organisation did not fully resolve the issue. First of all, participation in the FLA is indeed voluntary, thus leaving a significant number of companies that are not willing to commit to ethical practices outside. On the same note, the organisation cannot enforce legal authority, resulting in variable adherence to the ethical standards.

Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI)

The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) is a block that consists of trade unions and Non Governmental Organizations, such as BBC Studios and Anti-Slavery International³², that tries to improve and support every workers' rights in any corner of the globe. More specifically, its aim is to eliminate forced labour, reduce salary, no access to essential care and goods that many workers,

²⁹ Liu, Jane Alice. “Does Fairtrade Really Work?” www.foodunfolded.com, 3 Feb. 2021, www.foodunfolded.com/article/does-fairtrade-really-work.

³⁰ “Strategic Projects.” Fair Labor Association, www.fairlabor.org/about-us/strategic-projects/.

³¹ “Grievance Mechanisms in Cotton-Textile Clusters in Uzbekistan.” Fair Labor Association, 16 Apr. 2024, www.fairlabor.org/projects/strengthening-grievance-mechanisms-in-uzbekistans-cotton-textile-clusters/.

³² “Our Members | Ethical Trading Initiative.” www.ethicaltrade.org, www.ethicaltrade.org/who-we-are/our-members.



especially in the fast fashion industry. Again, the same problems are witnessed with the aforementioned attempts. The ETI sets standards and provides standards. However compliance to these is voluntary.

Possible solutions

Transparent supply chains and the “blockchain technology”

Transparency in supply chains is crucial for promoting ethical sourcing and fair labour practices in fashion supply chains. By ensuring visibility at every stage, from raw material sourcing to the final product, companies can identify and resolve potential issues revolving around labour exploitation and environmental impact. Transparent supply chains allow greater accountability, as companies can verify that procurement professionals adhere to ethical standards and that any potential violations are addressed. In order for the transparency in the fashion supply chains to be ensured, we can use what is called blockchain technology, which is “a method of recording information that makes it impossible or difficult for the system to be changed, hacked, or manipulated”³³.

Reinforcing certifications and standards

The reinforcement of certifications and standards can also serve as a catalyst in the promotion of ethical sourcing and fair labour practices. Certificates like Fair Trade, Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), have created a framework for assessing and ensuring that suppliers meet specific standards and criteria, such as fair wages, safe working conditions and environmental sustainability. These standards aid the consumers to make informed choices and encourage companies to maintain high standards to secure their certification. However, as mentioned before, these certifications and standards have a significant problem. Participation is voluntary, thus any future certification needs to cover the absence of “necessity.”

³³ S, Ravikiran A. “What Is Blockchain Technology? How Does Blockchain Work? [Updated].” Simplilearn.Com, Simplilearn, 23 July 2024, www.simplilearn.com/tutorials/blockchain-tutorial/blockchain-technology#what_is_blockchain_technology. Accessed 28 July 2024.



which can be done through additional legislation that ensures penalties if these standards are not established and maintained.

Industry collaboration

Industry collaboration is another key strategy. By collaborating, companies can share practices in pursuit of creating more sustainable supply chains. By doing this, the number of companies that comply with sustainable practices will increase, ultimately creating a unified front against unethically. Already existing collaborations like Sustainable Apparel Coalition demonstrate how effective these efforts can be proven as they can lead to more significant improvements in labour conditions and environmental sustainability across the industry.

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