What does fashion still need to fix?

Maxine Bédat and Christian Smith

Maxine Bédat, director of New Standard Institute, a non-profit promoting greater social and environmental sustainability within the fashion industry, discusses the options with Christian Smith, partnership and policy lead at Fair Wear Foundation, an Amsterdam-based non-profit that works with brands to improve the rights, pay and conditions of garment workers

Writer Nick Compton

Are there areas in which progress has been made over the last five years? And where have we stalled or been derailed?
MB Fashion brands talk about sustainability like it's a trend, like animal prints, but I think it's hard to see how that talk has turned into any substantive change. To some, it's just marketing and helping to push more product, which is completely antithetical to the whole project.
CS There has been an increase in noise, but you just have to scratch the surface to see the incoherence, the lack of meaningful data points. There is the adage, 'if you measure it, you can manage it'. But what we have is a lot of measurement for the sake of measurement, for reporting's sake.
MB The industry collects a lot of data on activity, but not a lot on outcome. We're not measuring things in the right way. We're measuring that a meeting has been held, not if wages have gone up.
CS My focus is on the social side, and when I see the lack of progress, it really emphasises the inability and sometimes unwillingness of companies to address the things that really matter: pay people properly, allow for freedom of association, and support women's empowerment because somewhere between 60-80 per cent of workers in fashion manufacturing are women. And all those things have to work in combination. Having said that, effective ways of measuring do exist. Firstly, there are brands willing to be fully transparent, and that number is increasing. On top of that, at Fair Wear, we look at brand purchasing practices as a way of holding them accountable for what happens in their supply chain. We do actually have positive stories of change in supply chains where brands and factories have more of a partner relationship.

Is the media itself a problem because it's more obsessed with the shiny new thing than more complex issues?
CS If the media was really interested, then they would find ways to get this information in front of people, in a meaningful, digestible way, that would allow them to understand what was happening and what you could do in the supply chain. Still, I find it encouraging that there are an increasing number of media outlets that have started to report on complex issues.

How much can the individual consumer effect change? And how much is it their responsibility to effect change?
CS I think consumers should be aware when they have the choice to change, but it's the job of businesses to change. They need to understand the landscape in which they operate and what they need to do, and then be on top of that. And if they're not changing, then it's the job of governments to create policies and legislation that make them change. And it's the job of investors to change their own criteria for investment to force companies to change as well.
MB The companies will always say that consumers aren't demanding change. But what messages have they been receiving, and how much is spent on marketing and advertising to get people to purchase all this stuff in a completely thoughtless way?
CS Consumers won't change the industry, but they can help by voting with their wallets, supporting brands that are doing better, valuing their clothes and thus the maker.

Who are the enforcers of change, and where are the big levers of power? Is it governments or institutional investors?
CS The work that the EU is doing on mandatory due diligence legislation is really important, but we also have to be very wary of this idea that you legislate, and everything is solved. Whatever is created has to come with guidance and an understanding – we are pulling this lever, because we expect this particular action.

One of the curious side effects of the pandemic has been that people are talking about supply chains and the problems with globalisation. Are there other positives that have come out of that?
MB In the 1960s, about 95 per cent of what Americans wore was made in America. Today, it's less than two per cent. And that's not to say, bring all production back to America.





Portrait (Maxine Bédat): Bogdana Ferguson

But it is part of the reason that we are where we are. When production was done domestically and we saw that the rivers were changing to the colour of whatever the next season's colours were, that led to the creation of institutions like the Environmental Protection Agency. It was also female garment workers in New York who fought for early labour protections. But when we created this global system, we just ignored all of those gains. What we need now is a global system that doesn't encourage a race to the bottom, to the worst working conditions and the lowest environmental protections. Things become out-of-sight, out-of-mind when they're not in your backyard. But I do think it helps that more people now know that there is such a thing as a supply chain, that things don't just magically appear in a store or on Amazon.
CS We can also see that it is mostly Black and brown people who are making goods, making garments, and falling foul of this global system. This is a legacy of colonialism that we have to be upfront about.

Is circular manufacturing a solution or just a kind of get-off clause, something to just keep us buying more stuff?
MB I don't ever want to suggest that the intentions of the people working in the companies are bad, but I think circularity is a big example of green-wishing. The technology is just not there. That's not to say that we should abandon the efforts or stop investing in it, but we can't push this narrative of circularity before it's a reality. There's a real moral hazard that it will actually encourage people to buy more. It just doesn't get to the heart of the issue, which is that we've created business models within our generation that are all about disposability. The elephant in the room is business models that are just incompatible with the bounds of our resources.

And circularity leads us to think that sustainability is a design problem or an engineering problem, and that there's a technical fix. And the role of the designer seems to have been stretched, so that now they have to think first about materials and then post-consumer life, areas that weren't really their concern before. Is there a false comfort in that idea of the design fix?
MB Yes, there's this kind of new obsession with material choice. But regardless of the material choice, what is really happening at the mills? What are the incentives that the companies are creating for greater energy efficiency at those mills? The whole conversation has just shifted to material choice and that doesn't reflect the actual global impact at all. It's all based on very limited data sets, and I think it's dangerous. And essentially companies are still operating on endless growth as the key metric. We think that the demand for new stuff is something innate, but it's not – it's been engineered to drive economic growth.

Is there some advantage to the dominance of a few brands in the mass market? So if they move, it can have a massive impact?
CS If that were true, we would be seeing massive change already. And that's not to say that there aren't some really interesting programmes taking place within all those big companies. But if you are committed, just pay people properly. You have the cash to do it. And your teams can figure out how to sell that back to the customers. But everything still leads to selling more products. And from the environmental standpoint, it doesn't matter how much these big companies do – if we're not addressing overproduction and overconsumption, it doesn't go anywhere. The idea isn't just for the major brands to push the needle, it's for the entire industry to be regulated. And in such a way that they understand the planetary boundaries we live in, the interconnectivity of environmental and social sustainability, the ramifications of poor wages, and are willing to address those things holistically. That's the point at which you might start to see change. ✱
Unraveled: The Life and Death of a Garment, by Maxine Bédat ($27, Penguin Random House) takes in Texas cotton farms, Chinese factories, Amazon warehouses in the US and landfills in Africa, newstandardinstitute.org; fairwear.org