



Get Involved in Changing the Apparel Industry!

A very brief introduction to apparel supply chains

Apparel supply chains are complicated, including multiple stages from raw materials to finished product. Typically each stage of the supply chain takes place in a different location, often a different country. Cotton grown and ginned in one country may be sent to another for spinning, dyeing, and weaving, and then on to another for final cut and sew production. This movement, along with the use of contractors and subcontractors throughout the supply chain, makes it very difficult to trace a piece of apparel through all stages. And at any given stage workers could be exploited. Significant human rights abuses and poverty are rampant in apparel supply chains, including, as just a few examples, impoverished small-scale cotton farmers in West Africa and child workers in factories. Unsafe conditions in factories put workers at daily risk, as seen most tragically when the Rana Plaza collapsed in Bangladesh in 2013 killing over 1,000 workers. To learn more, visit our media library:

<http://fairworldproject.org/resources/further-reading/sweat-free-apparel/>.

Alternatives

The good news is that there are brands creating alternatives by investing in sustainable agriculture, ensuring fair payment to farmers, and creating decent jobs, as well as advocating for policies and structures that would transform the entire sector. In apparel, the focus is often on the end of the supply chain, that is the final cut and sew factories. The source of raw materials is often ignored or only sought after for its perceived personal benefits, for example consumers who want only the “purest” cotton against their skin may choose organic cotton. Yet small-scale cotton farmers and animal fiber farmers are often extremely marginalized and paid poorly. Fortunately, many brands are starting to source cotton and other raw materials in a way that supports small-scale farmers. Some are even supporting farmers who practice regenerative agriculture to restore soil fertility while sequestering carbon to address our climate crisis. Traditionally fair trade brands work with small-scale producers in the Global South, developing long-term relationships with fair pay. Because supply chains are so complex and expensive to develop, some brands focus on improving just one or two stages of the supply chain or addressing just one or two existing problems, but have a tremendous impact on the communities with which they work. Some brands are attempting to ensure their entire supply chain is fair, which often means developing new supply chains.

There is also a movement advocating for policy changes and cultural shifts that would change the sector by enforcing decent wages and working conditions for workers and emphasizing quality clothing over cheap “fast fashion.”

As a concerned consumer, here are a few ways you can be part of transforming the apparel industry.

#1 Look for Apparel Brands that Are Creating Alternatives

Here are some examples of brands to look for that are making a real impact at one or more stage of the supply chain.

1. [Fiber Shed](#) is not a brand but rather an initiative based in California that seeks to create regional fiber sheds where small-scale farmers and apparel producers are connected to each other and the local community where markets for their products thrive. At the farm level, there is a heavy focus on regenerative agriculture to restore soils.
2. [Global Mamas](#) works to provide financial opportunities to disadvantaged women in Ghana. This non-profit apparel company provides training, benefits, and good pay to the more than 500 women they work with.
3. [Marigold](#) is a fair trade clothing company that uses the traditional hand block printing and technique with natural dyes for their fabric and works with a co-op of women in the slums of Mumbai who are trained to sew and create fashionable fair trade apparel, some of which is sold into the local market so that not all of the beautiful, high quality products get exported. Women who do not excel at sewing are trained to work for the food service component of the organization to provide meals to the community. About ten years ago, Marigold started buying organic cotton from a farmer organization that helps farmers escape debt and increase income in an area of India where indebtedness and suicide rates are quite high.
4. [Maggie's Organics](#) has a long history of investing in and developing full supply chains using organic and fair practices. They have worked to transition farmers to growing organic cotton, invested in new cooperatives, and have been vocal critics of free trade agreements such as the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).
5. [Marketplace: Handwork of India](#) is a non-profit apparel company committed to building leadership for social change, capacity building, and empowerment of the artisans they work with in India. This non-profit works with small-scale fabric suppliers who use traditional printing techniques and 480 artisans organized in cooperatives who produce the final apparel products for men and women.
6. [Mata Traders](#) is a fair trade apparel company working with producer groups in India and Nepal. Mata Traders not only seeks to help end global poverty and protect traditional craft, they also seek to continuously improve their own supply chains, looking deeper into the supply chain to improve their own buying and impact for example, as well as the structures and policies that marginalize producers to begin with.
7. [People Tree](#) is a sustainable and fair trade company that invests in livelihoods and the environment at every stage of production, from the production of cotton and wool, through the final production of apparel. They aim to provide a scalable fair, sustainable, and fashionable alternative to the typical culture of fast fashion.
8. [Under the Nile](#) is an organic and fair trade baby clothing company that uses organic, fair trade Egyptian cotton. All products come from SEKEM, an organic and sustainable development initiative that works with farmers and production facilities, all of which are organic and fair trade certified.

There are also some brands that work through more conventional supply chains, including large-scale factories, rather than developing alternative supply chains, but try to improve conditions in this model. Examples of these brands striving for fair labor in one or more stage of the supply chain include:

1. [Alta Gracia](#) is a subsidiary of Knights Apparel selling branded apparel to colleges and universities in the United States. Workers at the cut and sew factory, located in the Dominican Republic, are democratically organized in a union and are paid a living wage.
2. [PACT](#) uses fair trade and organic cotton, supporting small-scale farmers, and is committed to using sweatshop free factories where the people who produce the clothing are treated decently.
3. [Fair Indigo](#) produces apparel and works with partner producers to provide additional product lines to meet consumer value expectations such as fair, organic, vegan, or recycled. Because their apparel attempts to meet different consumer values, not all related to fairness, Fair Indigo apparel does not fit neatly into any category. Their t-shirt line from a factory in India where 700 workers are paid good wages and receive other benefits fits the fair labor model, while some product lines come from small-scale producer co-ops and more closely resemble traditional fair trade.
4. [Patagonia](#) is a leader among mainstream apparel brands for its efforts to transparently uncover and address labor issues in its supply chains. Patagonia also invests in environmental sustainability and engages on a political level, for example opposing the Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement.

#2 Get Involved in Policy Activism

One of the most pressing issues that may affect the apparel sector globally is the passage of free trade agreements like the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP would drive the “race to the bottom” and encourage brands to shift apparel production to countries with the lowest wages and lowest human rights protection. This means fewer decent jobs for working families in all countries. It also makes it more difficult for ethical brands who do produce socially and environmentally sustainable apparel to compete.

It is important for individuals to oppose the TPP and let your representatives in Congress know you want a fair trade policy instead of corporate profit driven trade policies like the TPP. It is also important for brands to stand up and demand a trade policy that allows a fair marketplace and protects farmers and workers throughout their supply chains. Some fair brands like Maggie’s Organics and Mata Traders have already publicly opposed the TPP. Their leadership should inspire other brands to take similar action.

Here’s how you can help.

1. Let your Senators and Representative know that you oppose the TPP as currently written and that you expect a fair trade policy instead. [Visit our action page to send a letter to Congress](#). You can also [call Congress](#) to voice your concerns.
2. Ask your favorite apparel brand where it stands on TPP. If it has not publicly opposed TPP and taken a stand for a trade policy that protects workers and small-scale producers, demand that it does.

#3 Support the Fashion Revolution

Fashion trends move quickly, encouraging consumers to expect cheap clothes that may only last a season and brands to pressure supply chains to work quickly and cheaply to turn around the next line of clothing. There is now a movement to break this cycle and create a new climate in which quality and fairness are valued over fast and cheap.

Groups like [Fashion Revolution](#) are leading the call for consumers to think about fashion differently so that we can transform the industry into one that is more transparent and values the people who work in it.

Other organizations, for example International Labor Rights Forum, launch campaigns directed not at consumers, but at the businesses within the supply chain itself to demand more transparency and fairness. In addition to shifting your purchases and getting involved in policy advocacy, you can get involved with these campaigns to change the way we as consumers as well as brands, factory owners, designers, and others in the apparel sector view our relationship to clothes and start to prioritize people over profits in the apparel industry.