

Interview with Andrew Morgan

THE DIRECTOR OF *THE TRUE COST*



WHO PAYS THE PRICE FOR OUR CLOTHING?

THE TRUE COST



The film *The True Cost* is a story about clothing. It is about the clothes we wear, the people who make them, and the impact the industry is having on our world. The price of clothing has been decreasing for decades, while the human and environmental costs have grown dramatically. *The True Cost* is a groundbreaking documentary film that pulls back the curtain on the untold story and asks us to consider: Who really pays the price for our clothing?

Dana Geffner, Executive Director of Fair World Project, sat down with the Director of *The True Cost* to learn why this story was so important to tell and what we as consumers can do to stop exploitation in the clothing industry.

Q: Why did you decide to make this movie and tell this story?

Andrew: I do not have a background in fashion and never thought about making this kind of film. I started to become interested about the role that business plays in the world in relation to human rights, extreme poverty, inequality and environmental impact. I began to believe that solutions to our problems will invariably be through business. As a filmmaker, it was too big to tackle, and I could not get my arms around that film. Then I picked up the newspaper and read about this clothing factory collapsing in Rana Plaza [in Bangladesh] and read that, at the time of the collapse, they were making clothes for major western brands that I knew. I read this horrifying account of how something I interact with every day in my world is having this unseen impact in other peoples' lives all over the world. That instantly grabbed me, and within a week, we decided this was a film we wanted to make.

Q: The film shows locations from all over the world. Where did you go, and whom did you interview?

Andrew: We filmed in thirteen countries. This needed to be a global film because it is one of the true major global issues of our times. It does not matter what country you live in, this affects human beings, and I wanted to make a film that went to so many places that you almost forgot where you were. So the focus is not really on the place, but rather that it is our shared home. So that took us to really rich, beautiful parts of the world. We filmed during all the major fashion weeks in London, Paris, Milan, New York and Los Angeles. It also took us all over Southeast Asia: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Japan, India and Uganda. The focus was really on the stories of the people we followed.

We followed a twenty-two year-old garment worker named Shima Akter who works in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We followed a woman named Safia Minney, who owns a fair trade clothing company called People Tree, in London and Tokyo. And then we followed a cotton farmer in Luc, Texas named Lorey Pepper. Around those three stories we met a whole bunch of experts, from economists to really big influencers in the fashion space, and both activists and traditional designers, people like Stella McCartney and brands like Patagonia.

Q: How has the fashion industry changed?

Andrew: One of the startling facts is that the world consumes 400% more clothing right now than it did two decades ago. The world now makes between 80-90 billion new articles of clothing each year. This has created a real shift; clothing historically has been something we made with great intentionality and integrity, something we held onto our whole lives and even passed on to our children. It was something we valued.

The impacts of a global economy have allowed us to offshore labor, cut costs and produce mass quantities of clothing much more cheaply. Clothing has now become a commodity that we see as disposable, and that is really brand new in the history of fashion. It is a very modern concept to be able to buy things that are so cheap that it means nothing if they fall apart after a few wears. That volume increase and shift in mindset have turned up the dial on some already very problematic issues, making it now nothing short of a state of crisis or emergency in a lot of areas.

Q: The term "fast fashion" is talked about in the film. What is fast fashion?

Andrew: "Fast fashion" is a term that parallels "fast food" and implies that it probably is not very good for us. Fast fashion was initiated when brands began to copy design looks from runway shows. They put them through production and manufacturing at lightning speeds in order to have them in stores within weeks, and sometimes days, after they were seen on the runways.

But this supply chain is dangerously fast and precariously volatile. We are incentivizing a constant state of rush, a constant state of "How fast can we get it there?" and "What corners can we cut?" Those cut corners led to the egregious and extreme cases of human exploitation and tragedy that have recently grabbed the world's attention.

Q: Why is fast fashion happening? Who is demanding it?

Andrew: From one standpoint, we live in a market-driven, consumer-based, consumption-fueled economy. The mandatory ingredient for our economy to grow is for consumption to be kept very high all the time. Our standard economic model only measures profit, while many of the costs that go into making things are unseen. We do not factor in the use of natural resources, like water and other resources that are increasingly scarce in parts of the world where things are being made. People want to buy the cheapest things. As consumers, we judge products on whether they look good and are cheap. So, in that regard, the market incentivizes the lowest-quality product.

We can also look at it in another way – a lot of essential items have become more expensive, like insurance, homes, a college education and healthcare, while other things have become less expensive, like clothing. So when my life feels less in my control, I can find therapy in buying something super-cheap. So, as the middle class gets squeezed and is unable to control the prices of these essential items, then there is a natural movement towards feeling in control by buying these cheap pieces of clothing.

“The world now makes between 80-90 billion new articles of clothing each year.”

Q: What is fast fashion doing to workers around the world?

Andrew: The fashion industry is where some of the most vulnerable people are systemically exploited. The fast fashion industry did not create the idea of offshore labor, very low union representation, or very low worker rights standards; that happened when we moved into a globalized economy. Fast fashion has taken a fragile situation and pushed the pedal down as far as it possibly can go. It has created the most egregious example of business trampling on the rights and needs of the most vulnerable people.

Q: What can consumers do to help workers in the apparel supply chain?

Andrew: First, start to think about your personal choices. As someone who did not think about this a few years ago, it is quite daunting and intimidating ... but I think about these things a lot now. I meet a lot of people who believe deeply in the value of human rights, of women's rights in this industry particularly, and of environmental care and protection. So when they see the film or we have a conversation, they say "I never connected those values to my individual choices." I think this can be an exciting gateway for people to say "Wow, I am a human being and make choices every day, and those choices add up, and they have an impact ... and while I can advocate for things globally, it is powerful to start thinking individually."

I have stepped off the treadmill of bringing cheap disposable clothes into my life. I did not really love the things I was wearing. I have now made clothing a more conscious decision – really thinking about the pieces that I want, the pieces that I need, that I am going to love, and that will last. It has given me space both mentally and financially.

We can make better-informed choices and support brands that honor the people who are making our clothes. I think more brands are doing this, and each of us should seek out those brands that care. I think it starts with reducing the sheer quantity, and then beginning to buy quality and appreciating the "story" that you are wearing.

Q: What government policies should be in place to protect workers?

Andrew: We are working on this with the United Nations. The problem is that we live in a globalized economy, but we are operating under a nationalistic set of rules and laws pitting developing countries against each other and creating a race to the bottom. So, how can we begin to raise the bar at the bottom?

We are creating national and international wage agreements. From a U.S. perspective, we can do this through import laws. For example, there are

certain laws in place for the types of chemicals that can be used. We think it would be good to also include responsibility for the conditions under which the products are made. We can start with what is coming in and make profound improvements. It is not going to be simple, but it starts with political will, which I think starts with awareness, which is where we are now.

A lot of people buy clothes – not bad people, just people who have not heard this story. I hope the story starts to seep in, so that we will have the will to make those choices.

Q: Where would you send people to get active in government policies?

Andrew: Presently, you will find many of the best groups out there linked on our Web site under "Learn More." Labor Behind the Label is a good one, as is the International Labour Organization's program under the United Nations called Better Work. Another big one is Fashion Revolution. They have an annual event on Fashion Revolution Day, which takes place on the anniversary of [the disaster at] Rana Plaza, April 24. It is a growing international hub and the central force right now.

Q: What did you learn that surprised you most while making the film?

Andrew: The experience of telling this story completely re-oriented my view of the world and my role in it. One of the most surprising things is that we had a false sense of knowledge when we were going through pre-production. We were doing all of this research and calculating all the data and analyzing it on a macro-level. The first country we started in was Bangladesh, and it was there that we began to see it and feel the effects of it.

I once read a quote that said "When you look at poverty from a great distance, you become arrogant." I think for me it was the startling, heartbreaking, urgent reality of what inexcusable extreme poverty feels like and looks like in real life. When we got to know the folks who were working their hearts out, unable to provide the basic necessities, while fueling companies and an industry that re-



port profits in the billions and trillions of dollars, that hurt really deep inside. I knew we had several issues here going in, important issues to examine, but I was unprepared for how great of a toll I think this industry is taking on individuals and their communities.

On the flip side, there is a lot of hope because if we get this right, we can open a lot of doors. Fashion is such a trend and a creative, forward-facing, consumer-touching, platform-raising industry, that to me this is a really good place to start facing a lot of the important issues of our time.

To watch *The True Cost* now, please visit: www.truecostmovie.com.

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TIPS TO TRANSFORM THE APPAREL INDUSTRY

Here are a few ways that concerned consumers can participate in transforming the apparel industry.

1) Look for apparel brands that are creating alternatives and improving supply chains:

- Global Mamas is a non-profit apparel company that provides training, benefits and good pay to more than 500 women in Ghana. (www.globalmamas.org)
- Marigold works with women in the slums of Mumbai. They also work with organic farmer organizations in India where indebtedness and suicide rates are quite high. (www.marigoldfairtradeclimbing.com)
- Maggie's Organics has developed their entire supply chain to use organic and fair practices. They have worked to transition farmers to growing organic cotton and have been vocal critics of free trade agreements such as the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). (www.maggiesorganics.com)
- Marketplace: Handwork of India is a non-profit apparel company committed to building leadership for social change, building capacity and empowering the artisans with whom they work in India. (www.marketplaceindia.com)
- Mata Traders is an apparel company working with producer groups in India and Nepal. (www.matatraders.com)
- People Tree invests in livelihoods and the environment at every stage of production, from the growing of cotton and wool, through the final production of apparel. (www.peopletree.co.uk)
- Under the Nile is a baby clothing company that uses organic and fair trade Egyptian cotton. (www.underthenile.com)

2) Get involved in policy activism and fight for fair policies:

www.fairworldproject.org/campaigns/trade-policy

3) Support Fashion Revolution:

www.fashionrevolution.org

To learn more, visit:

www.fairworldproject.org/campaigns/apparel