



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP

## Ethics and Sustainability in Fashion

# Briefing: ‘Can localism support due diligence and greater transparency in the fashion sector?’

## Background

This month BBC Panorama aired an undercover investigation probing the practices of fast-fashion giant Boohoo, who last year made a reported **£1.7bn worth of sales**.<sup>1</sup> The evidence garnered showed increasing pressure to cut prices in order to save money and the unscrupulous practice of amending prices after the stock had already been made. The investigation also exposed a number of occasions where suppliers were left out of pocket due to discounts being applied which were not initially agreed.

**Dominique Muller**, UK Policy Lead at **Labour Behind the Label**, told us:

“The Panorama programme exposed what suppliers and workers have been telling us for years – that poor working conditions and wage theft are not solely because of supplier exploitation, but come directly as a result of fashion brands exploitative bullying and unethical purchasing practices.

“It is clear that the fast-fashion industry model is based on the exploitation of supply-chain workers in order to extract as much profit as possible for fashion brands and their owners.

“This is not just an issue for Boohoo but is found throughout the fashion industry, in the UK and everywhere garments are manufactured.”

As Labour Behind the Label highlights, this is not just an issue for Boohoo but can be found throughout the fashion sector. The Covid-19 pandemic readily highlighted labour rights issues within the supply chain and in 2020 data by **Bloomberg** reported that around 1,089 garment factories in Bangladesh had orders cancelled equating to around \$1.5 billion due to the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>2</sup> Closer to home, in the East Midlands, where a range of clothes are manufactured, **hundreds of garment businesses** have shut in recent years. In Leicester in **2020 there were around 1,000 factories** and this number is close to half today.<sup>3</sup> One of the

<sup>1</sup> BBC Panorama Team (2023). *Fast fashion: Boohoo breaks promises on ethical overhaul*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-67218916>

<sup>2</sup> Devnath, A. (2020). *European Retailers Scrap \$1.5 Billion of Bangladesh Orders*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-23/europe-retailers-cancel-1-billion-of-bangladesh-garment-orders>

<sup>3</sup> Marsh, S. (2023). *Leicester garment makers warn of crisis as fast-fashion brands squeeze suppliers*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/jun/05/leicester-garment-makers-manufacturers-fast-fashion-brands>

reasons cited for this is that fast-fashion brands are forcing this crisis through unethical purchasing practices.

## Can localised supply chains help?

Post growth is defined by Jackson as the dismantling of consumerism, requiring viable alternatives, such as those which strengthen communities and enrich human life without encroaching on environmental limits.<sup>4</sup> In light of this, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that valuing localised ways of working within the craft and textiles sector, can allow for power to be transferred back to local communities—who are most familiar with the infrastructure of their communities and its specific geographical knowledge. Burgess offers that, “it is place-based textile sovereignty, which aims to include rather than exclude all the people, plants, animals, and cultural practices that compose and define”, a specific place.<sup>5</sup> Fletcher and Grose suggest that this requires, “developing knowledge of local traditions, mythologies and symbolism, and [...] draws on regionally available materials of local people who contribute an innate cultural knowledge to the product itself.”<sup>6</sup> Felcey et al., echo this complexity:

“Many materials have a discernible place of origin which can motivate makers to pool knowledge, skills and resources in ways that challenge, extend or retain this provenance.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea that localising a supply chain drives grassroots initiatives is cited by a number of authors. Mazzarella and Black offer that, “heritage craftsmanship has underpinned the local [...] textile industry since the 14th century and drives grassroots making initiatives.”<sup>8</sup> Burgess suggests that Fibreshed’s approach may offer an alternative model of working which transfers power back to communities.<sup>9</sup> This could be seen through the means in which Fibreshed were founded as a place-based textile system, sourcing raw materials transparently and therefore connecting to communities of farmers and makers at a local level—all whilst providing fair prices throughout the value chain.<sup>10</sup>

This is also argued in research commissioned by the AHRC-funded Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) and produced by Julie’s Bicycle with BOP Consulting. The research recognised the contribution that arts and culture could make to encouraging sustainability, particularly when localism is utilised,

“the shortening of supply chains and reduction in transportation could have significant impacts, especially in terms of nearshoring, and the relocation of manufacturing associated with the UK’s Creative Industries.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jackson, T., 2017. *Prosperity without growth: Foundations for the economy of tomorrow* 2nd ed. Abingdon, Oxon : Routledge. pp 204

<sup>5</sup> Burgess, R., & White, C. 2019. *Fibreshed: Growing a movement of farmers, fashion activists, and makers for a new textile economy*. Chelsea Green Publishing. pp. 7

<sup>6</sup> Fletcher, K., & Grose, L., 2021. *Fashion & Sustainability: Design for Change*. 1st ed. London: CPI Group (UK) Ltd. pp. 108

<sup>7</sup> Felcey, H., Ravetz, A. & Kettle, A., 2017. (ed.) *Collaboration through craft*, London: Bloomsbury Academic. pp. 5

<sup>8</sup> Mazzarella, F. & Black, S., 2022. Fashioning change: Fashion activism and its outcomes on local communities. *Taylor and Francis*, pp.1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17569370.2022.2095729> [Accessed August 15, 2022]. pp. 3

<sup>9</sup> Burgess, R., & White, C. 2019. *Fibreshed: Growing a movement of farmers, fashion activists, and makers for a new textile economy*. Chelsea Green Publishing. pp. 2

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.8

<sup>11</sup> Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (2022) *Creative Industries and the Climate Emergency The path to Net Zero*. ISBN: 978-1-913095-06-2. Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre.

Nonetheless, while the examples discussed offer a positive position on valuing culture in a localised supply chain, there are many practical issues and challenges to working at this level, one of which is cited as a local industry needing to be in place. This is particularly challenging in an ever industrialised system, where economics have driven production away to low-cost countries.<sup>12</sup> Grose suggests a solution could be for social agency to be resituated into the structure of the business itself and offers the example of mutually agreeable fibre prices and co-ownerships of spinning mills as small and manageable solutions.<sup>13</sup>

This strategically links capacity with local need and offers the potential for deviation from globalised routes to something of value to culture and knowledge, at a slower pace. Thereby making a case for textiles and fashion within localised markets, if social agency were embedded into the practice.

Long-term policy should therefore develop this line of enquiry, and consider whether localised means of working can boost not only the local economy, but also offer the ability for greater transparency and due diligence. This requires an interconnecting and interdisciplinary approach, including those peoples which know the most about the land in their communities and is as much about integrating fibre-growing areas within surrounding ecosystems, as creating localised supply chains.

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<sup>12</sup> Thakara, J., 2015. 'Politics and the Fashion System', in Fletcher, K. and Tham, M., (ed.) in *Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion*. 1st ed. Oxfordshire: Routledge. pp. 49.

<sup>13</sup> Grose, L., 2015. 'Fashion as Material', in Fletcher, K. and Tham, M., (ed.) in *Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion*. 1st ed. Oxfordshire: Routledge. pp 229



Image credit: HERD

Photographer: Stephanie Sian Smith

## Case Study: HERD

[HERD](#) is a mindset. Their philosophy goes beyond sustainability to have a positive impact on the environment and those they work with. Rooted in profound respect for the land and soil, they have a place-based materials-first approach. It's where elegant age-old tradition meets uncompromising planetary values, how they make modern heirlooms with heritage sensibilities.

They honour native locality, collaborating with craftspeople that have honed expertise in their trades over generations. Their unique approach strengthens existing ecosystems, creating positive and impactful structure, gently building webs of connection – and mutual support – that benefit stakeholders at every stage of the process.

By sourcing fibres directly from a collective of farmers and harvesters they maintain control of creating superior wool and fabric. Their signature Upland Yarn is made from 100% Bluefaced Leicester fleeces within just 150 miles of the farms in Yorkshire, North West England, where the climate provides perfect conditions and abundant rich green grass. The result rivals cashmere in quality.

HERD is additive free and each hand-finished piece is made without toxicity. This means organic detergents, naturally occurring plant dyes, and water, are the only ingredients, along with trimmings made purely from plants and nuts. Their collections are 100% naturally biodegradable when returned to the soil; a truly circular, regenerative ethos.

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