

# INTRODUCTION

## Preface

Fashion and sustainability might at first sight seem like direct opposites, since fashion is mostly about change and sustainability about durability.

Although fashion is about change, durability can play a large role in it. Fashion influences the way we perceive our body and the clothes which we choose to put on can even affect the way we feel and how we act in our daily lives. Everybody is connected to fashion one way or the other, even those who are not aware of it. We all wear clothes and will usually try to pick the right outfit for a certain occasion. And yet, the production of clothes for global distribution takes place for the most part in non-Western countries, not by robots but by working people, something that most of us seem to forget.

One undisputed fact is that the fashion industry today causes tremendous amounts of pollution that has a direct impact on the lives of many people around the world. Eighty billion kilos worth of textiles are being produced annually on a global scale. This makes the textile industry the second biggest water consumer, after agriculture. It's not just about water though. There have been incidents of cotton farmers dying due to poisoning by dangerous pesticides. In the bottom links of the production chain, alarmingly large numbers of clothing manufacturers are forced to work in inhumane and dangerous conditions. I could comment on the problems and describe them from every possible angle but I'd rather not. This book will focus on suggesting realistic improvements for the industry which are based on effective cooperation. Fashion brands will learn how to create a

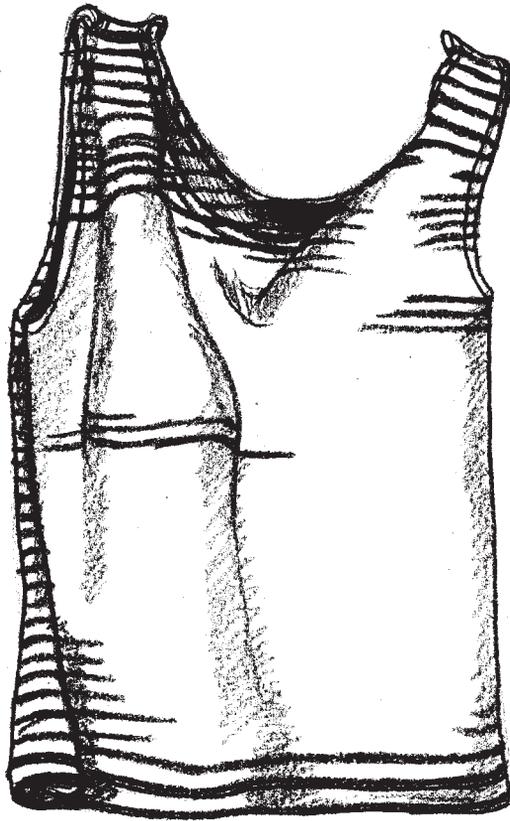
stakeholders' map and calculate for themselves what their impact is, on the environment and on the people working for them. Only by knowing where the brand stands today, will it be able to measure its improvements in the years to come. If you as a reader have recently been slapped in the face by the truth concerning the production, use and disposal of clothes, I would like to recommend some books to you, other than this one, which you should also read. Several notable books have been published on fashion and sustainability and I would highly recommend the ones below.

- *Sustainable Fashion & Textiles: Design Journeys*, Kate Fletcher, 2008
- *Beyond Green*, Artez Press, 2008
- *Talking Dress*, Marieke Eyskoot, 2012
- *Mode voor Morgen*, Lynsey Dubbeld, 2012
- *Fashion and Sustainability: design for change*, Kate Fletcher, 2012

These books give an extensive description of the negative impact of fashion on the environment and the people involved. They also provide an overview of organisations which are specialized in solving one or several of the problems the fashion industry is facing.

### **The focus of this book**

The book you are reading was written for everyone who is already aware of the problems described above, and is searching for major solutions that can be implemented without compromising brand growth and development. In the past four years I've been to numerous events in the Netherlands and Germany which were aimed at raising awareness about these problems. They discuss issues such as pollution due to water, energy and chemical use, child labour, unfair labour, suicides, consumer's ignorance and more. They also showcase inspiring brands as examples to follow. Unfortunately many brands



which want to get to the same place, often don't know how, even after they have recognized the various problems. Clear follow-up steps are necessary for people and companies to start utilizing techniques toward real solutions. I believe awareness is the first step towards searching for solutions and serves as a preface for further improvement. The general flaws were fully realized somewhere in the '90s and since then, many companies and individuals have been doing their best to spread knowledge and raise awareness on the matter. I would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all the companies who do their best to inform and motivate consumers to re-think

their buying behaviour and encourage brands to make smarter production choices toward a better fashion, and subsequently a better world.

It is unfortunate that, despite all the aforementioned efforts, massive ignorance still prevails today. Major follow-up actions are required as well as awareness. Those actions should not only solve just one of the many problems, but revolutionize fashion from the inside out. Those follow-up actions are the focus in this book.

The first chapter, 'Fashion Today', offers the reader an overview of the fashion chain today. Then, it discusses what needs to change and who is responsible for taking action.

The chapter 'Stakeholders' map' asks questions for every step of the process, grouped with their respective departments in the fashion chain. Its target is to enable fashion brands to visualize their own stakeholders' map in a better way and gather information about the current practices and possible opportunities for improvement.

The chapter on 'Contribution Design' zooms in on the role of a fashion brand in enhancing the fashion system by employing intelligent practices and creating desirable clothes of high quality, produced in an ethical way. The subchapters include general know-how on the physical and psychological reasoning behind the consumer's purchasing decisions.

The chapter 'New Design System' focuses on the relationship between the fashion brands and consumers by suggesting the use of practical tools. A case study and tips from an expert reveal how a fashion brand can design clothes in a smart way which provide the customer, the partner stakeholders in the fashion chain and the environment with a positive contribution.

The chapter 'New investments and savings' helps the readers to take a step back and rearrange the role of retailers, re-think the used business model and encourage cooperation between several fashion partners throughout the stakeholders' map. The result will not only be financial profit, but also faster communication, satisfied customers and a contribution to a positive environmental footprint. This chapter is aimed at igniting the imagination toward understanding how decisions made today can influence the future of fashion. Last but not least, 'Future Vision' explains my personal motivation in the publication of this book.

### **Who is this book for?**

This book was written primarily for fashion designers and brands, but also for retailers who already know about the dark side of the fashion industry and are in search of a solution.

The following pages are intended to aid fashion designers, brands and retailers in gaining a better understanding of their customers, by sharing information on the physical and psychological needs which are associated with wearing clothes. It will also present a system which contributes to building a high quality relationship with the customers, resulting in more satisfied, recurring visitors.

The reader will learn how to contribute to the lives of their customers and stakeholders while at the same time ensuring economic gains, through the pages of this book.

At the end, I will suggest a new vision for the future which will make it possible to sell or borrow clothes in different ways for varying prices. Two case studies of how a clothing library operates, will offer insight on how loaning clothes can be beneficial for fashion brands and retailers. These libraries, for example, can help separate the fast from the slow moving items in a collection, prior to a full scaled production.

The information introduced in this book is based on both theoretical and field research. It shows steps which can be implemented by the reader so they can improve their practices in fashion, while increasing profit margin, contributing to a more positive environmental footprint and gaining happy and committed customers.

Let's take big steps toward a better fashion!

Hasmik Matevosyan

# FASHION TODAY

## Dilemmas and challenges

A journalist recently asked me: “Why is there a need for change in this fashion system that already exists for almost two hundred years? Shouldn’t we just accept the fact that this is simply how fashion works?”

The answer is: no. Everything being designed, bought or used, and all the subsequent consequences are a by-product of people’s choices. Choices are based on knowledge, emotions, dreams, fears, peer pressure, time pressure and so on. I believe that if better options were presented to people, they would choose them instead of old, potentially destructive habits. I told the journalist that the Middle Ages also lasted for quite a long time, but now look at our lives which are the outcome of a major shift. Today, we have more freedom and more resources than we did in the past. The majority of the population is educated and, for better or worse, a growing number of people have the power to influence more than just their own lives. Society has gone through tremendous changes, some of which have had a positive impact, and some negative. It’s up to us to keep accepting the declining aspects of society, or act to bring about change. Judging by the growing attention on the matter, I think we are ready for the transition. People just don’t always know which steps to take and what the consequences might be.

## In need of change

One of the great outcomes of fashion today is that clothes which look beautiful are affordable to everyone, regardless of the wearer’s

income. This enables people to act confidently and feel good about themselves at social gatherings and in public places. Before the industrial revolution, owning nice clothes was unusual, as most people couldn't afford colourful materials or a visit to the dress-maker. This situation promoted social inequality and poor people were discriminated for wearing worn out clothes more often than not. Wealthier people usually had one or two outfits for special occasions. They would cherish them and only wear them to church and to special occasions. The elite society did have the resources for numerous amounts of luxurious dresses.

Today this unequal distribution of clothes is less visible in many countries of the world, which is great for the psychology of the wearers. However, as the quality of cheap clothing is low, it usually stops looking good after a few washes. The quality is low because the manufacturers decide to economize on the quality of the fabric and on the amount of stitches. Samples aren't being tested properly either, due to time pressure.

Once the garments look worn out, lose shape or become discoloured they are usually thrown away. In the best case scenario they are donated for re-use or recycling. Individuals then go back to the shop to purchase new clothes, which in turn are also bound to end up in the trash. Consumers don't seem to understand the consequences of their actions. To them, the only measure is often monetary. Somebody predictably said to me once while discussing the matter: "I don't mind if the dress doesn't last for too long, since it's so cheap to buy." Another time I asked a friend why she would buy cheap/bad quality clothing when she knew they had an 'expiration date'. She replied that the clothes will last for as long as she feels like wearing them. When they are out of style or worn out she will simply throw them away and buy new ones. These are two examples of how ignorance is a part of the problem. Each year consumers in

the Netherlands throw away two hundred million kilos of textiles. About a hundred and thirty five million of those kilos of clothes end up in a furnace to be burnt.

Apart from the fact that these actions cause a waste of water, electricity, chemicals, packaging and gas which is needed for production and transportation, we forget that it was actual human beings who worked towards fulfilling the production of these items. The seamstresses have been working overtime to finish everything and send the batch to the shops on time. Keeping in mind how the fashion industry's pace has always been ever increasing to the point of requiring new items at shops on a weekly basis, one could only imagine the pressure these workers are constantly put under. There are several reasons which have led to this acceleration.

One of the reasons, already mentioned above, is that clothes do not last due to inferior quality fabrics and a not-so-optimal process in general. Not many people are willing to leave their homes in ragged clothes though. This comes in accordance with one of the psychological motives of why we wear clothes in the first place. I will speak more on the motivations behind wearing clothes later on. The fact of the matter is that everybody wants to look and feel good while wearing their clothes. Since clothing which has lost shape or has become discoloured doesn't offer that, people will naturally search for new ones. This cycle of buying clothes, wearing them out and buying new ones picks up most of its speed due to the production of clothing of lesser quality.

Another reason is that retailers compete with each other on turnover time and low costs. The sooner clothes get sold, the sooner the shop space can be used for displaying new clothes which will hopefully catch the eye of the visitors and leave the store as new purchases. Once the clothes get sold, the retailer gets the investment money

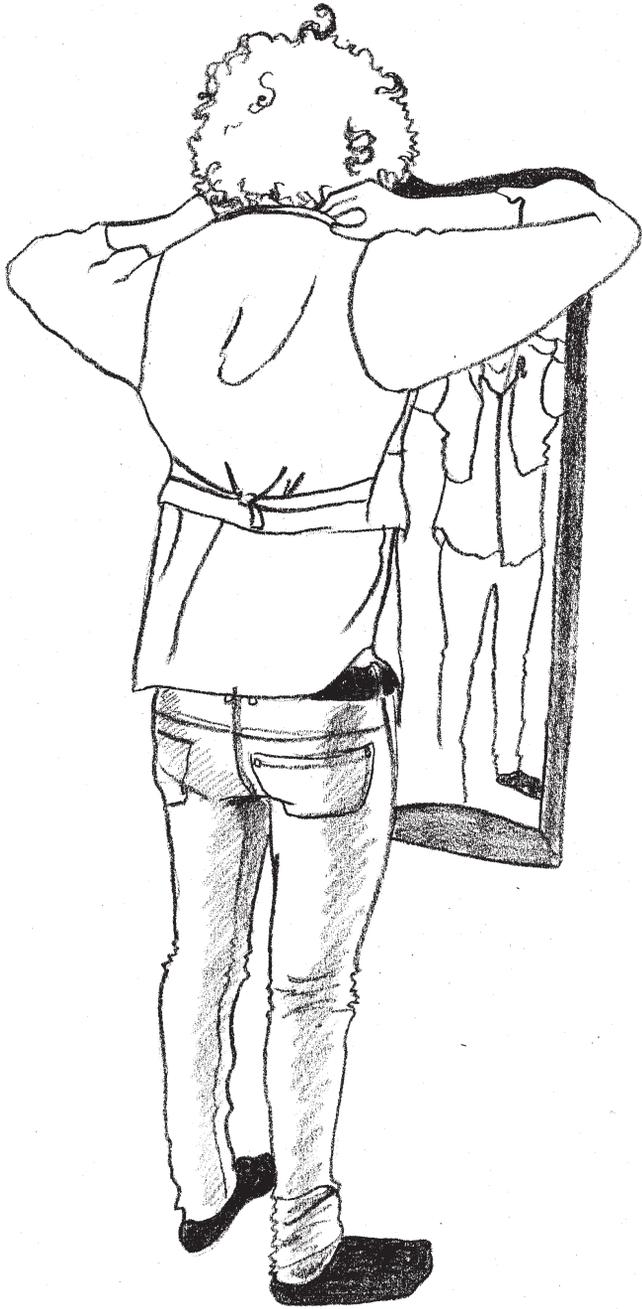
back so they can pay for shop expenses and staff salaries, plus make profit. A short turnover ensures maximum profit. Generally speaking, thirty percent of the clothing which are being displayed in the shop are fast movers. They sell the fastest and bring in most of the profit. About forty percent are average movers that remain on the clothing hangers for longer, occupying space that could be utilized for showcasing new pieces. The last thirty percent are slow movers and end up on sale in order to be sold. Different sources argue whether this thirty percent ends up on sale or is shredded and burned. This 30-40-30 calculation seems to be accepted as a fact and is one of the main things that needs to be changed. The chapter 'New investments and savings' suggests a future vision which will break this pattern.

Today, it's profitable for retailers to sell clothes as fast as possible and renew the displayed collection with new items that in turn, will hopefully sell quickly. Fast turnover time saves space and staff expenses while keeping the attention of customers by stocking new items roughly every two weeks. This raises the pressure for faster designing and production. Since staff and space expenses (fixed charges) are things which change very slowly over time, more profit can be ensured by adjusting the flexible costs, which come in the form of the collection. By purchasing the collection batches for the lowest possible price the retailer is able to expand the income margin and subsequently the profit. This adds not only time pressure, but also financial pressure to the rest of the fashion chain. Designers don't get paid enough to find the time to spend on designing and testing the samples. To ensure short production time per item they design simpler models with less stitches. Agents then compromise the design again by choosing cheaper textiles to be used for the collection. Seamstresses are pressured to sew at a very fast pace so that the full sewn batch can be transported to the retailer in due time. Investments in safer and more pleasant workspaces for clothing producers, cleaner production practices and fair wages, are seen as a taboo because they would increase the costs and nobody wants that.

There is a third reason for this uncontrollable acceleration of fashion and it comes from the consumer's perspective. This is something I found out after many contextual interviews and talks with a number of consumers. It's fun to be able to wear something different every day and receive compliments about the choices you have made in clothing. Receiving compliments after spending a minimum amount on the whole outfit makes some wearers feel like they are doing it right. Many people feel the sense of accomplishment when they succeed in purchasing brand name clothing with a huge discount, during sample sales and in outlet stores. This feeling of accomplishment and success can lead to shopping addiction and result in frequently returning customers who keep buying more than they could ever wear. Considering the fact that the only communication between consumers and fashion retailers/brands is based on transactions, it's not hard to imagine that the only clear message fashion creators get is that consumers want cheap prices. This assumption only increases the time/economical pressure described above.

### **Taking responsibility**

I feel that the problems described in the previous chapter are mostly the result of ignorance but are also due to a lack of empathy. Fashion brands and retailers keep on working like this because of entrenched, obsolete standards set long ago in the making and selling of clothes. Decisions are being made based on time pressure that is caused, not by the consumer, but by the fashion brands and retailers themselves. In one of the interviews I've held with Stefan Niethammer from 3FREUNDE, a German based ethical clothing brand, I asked a question about the role of brands in the fashion chain. The answer is so spot on that I would like to share it below:



- *In your opinion, what is the role/ the responsibility of a brand in the fashion cycle?*

- "The brand (if it is a quality brand) is responsible for the whole cycle, from locating and purchasing the raw material, to showcasing in the shop. A brand does not have to do everything by itself, but must carefully select partners who share the same morals, ensuring the job at hand is performed in an optimal way."

A brand should know:

- Where their raw material is coming from
- What it is actually made of (GMO-cotton, organic, etc.)
- What their dyeing-partner is doing with the waste water
- What the working conditions of the tailors are

Being aware of all these aspects is the first step towards detecting what's wrong. The next step is making the right decisions to solving the missteps. Most brands hire an agency to help them find the cheapest factories that are able to produce their clothes, remaining ignorant about the working conditions, wages and safety measures employed at the workspace.

Customers don't usually expect or realize that their choice in blue jeans or a T-shirt (price is irrelevant):

- partly affects the rate in mass suicides by the cotton farmers. This happens because the fixed price for cotton is so low that the farmers are unable to pay their loans and their expenses practically override their earnings.
- can affect the water supply by diminishing ground water reserves through the heavy use of water in the dyeing process.
- can accelerate pollution in rivers due to the wastewater.
- can worsen the tailors' quality of life due to diminishing wages which are not enough to sustain the workers.

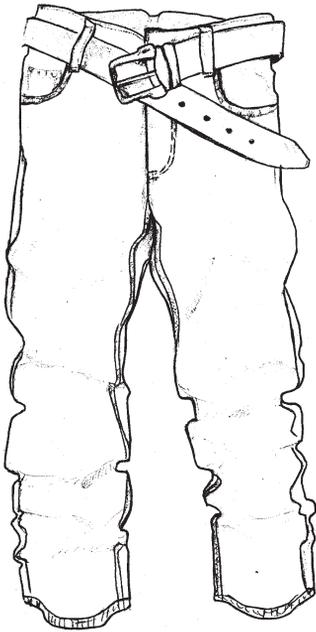
The brand has the responsibility (for example) to tell the customer: you have a choice between paying €7,00 per T-shirt and causing all the points mentioned above or paying €13,00 and not cause any harm. Especially those high priced brands are playing dirty; they charge prices that could easily pay all the workers in the supply chain a decent living wage- but they don't. Why don't they?

Being a conscious brand means knowing what you are doing, what the conditions are during the production and most importantly being transparent about it. In plain words, tell your customers what you are doing and why.

If the offending brands stepped up to their customers and explained their malpractices, giving people a choice in adding to the evil or stopping it, I would be okay with it. They could say: "We are offering a €3,00 T-shirt but we don't know anything about the product. However you can be sure that nobody apart from us is able to live from the making of such a T-shirt. We are also sure, that there won't be any water treatment in the dyeing unit after the dyeing process."

This way, customers have the information and can decide for themselves if they want to buy it or save the money to buy a 'good' T-shirt.

It is easier for smaller fashion brands, with a relatively short and less complicated fashion chain, to change their practices, than for global ones cooperating with a chain of hundreds of stakeholders' worldwide. Next to the complexity of the chain, there is yet another challenge regarding the mentality of the deciding parties. Changing the business model of an international retailer along with their production practices demands a shift in mentality from the company's CEO, managers, buyers and designers. This shift can only be successful when the involved parties benefit from the change while



maintaining their competitive position. Seemingly, fashion companies keep making decisions based on fear, survival instincts and lack of trust in being financially successful while choosing for ethical and sustainable ways of clothing production. The only reward is the cold hard profit gained from the sold pieces. Does it really compensate for all the harm done?

Would you believe it if someone told you that it is possible to have profit and work ethically at the same time?

The steps presented in this book are not only meant as a guide in generating financial profit, but also in attracting committed customers and forming new cooperations with stakeholders based on trust and commitment. The suggested steps will additionally inform you of ways to contribute to the lives of the production workers and achieving a positive environmental impact.

