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Women's battle against fast fashion: gender equality and fast fashion remain steed-fast enemies

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Fast fashion Supply Chains renowned for unsustainable, unethical practices

The 21st century has become characterised by a capitalist consumer society in which its impacts are inextricably burdensome for women, especially in the global South. Fast fashion has played a contributory role; becoming renowned for its unsustainable, unethical practices that jeopardise women's, namely garment workers, hope for gender parity. In effect, it is paramount that fast fashion brands develop an understanding as to how the industry can break with its feminist problems.

Fast fashion is now dominant. Pioneered by the fashion giant, Zara, the new accessibility of fashion trends 'caught retail in a revolving door of fashion bringing to existence 'the concept of adding 3 to 5 mid-seasons to the existing seasons in a fashion calendar' and requiring suppliers to deliver fashion apparel in smaller batches with reduced lead times. In advocating this 'speed-to-market approach' brands expanded their successive processes across the globe in hell-bent pursuit of achieving economies of scale; with particular emphasis on outsourcing manufacturing and production to countries dependent on rife labour casualisation and informalisation... the global South.

Ultimately, the globally dispersed nature of fast fashion has reduced the level of transparency and traceability down the Supply Chain (SC) – highlighting the fast fashion supply chain as having one of the most unethical and unsustainable practices.

The globalisation of fast fashion supply chains has undoubtedly given rise to gender equality concerns - with the industry irresponsibly amassing social sustainability violations. Fast fashion's negligence has been under media microscope, with unethical practices and violations of social norms seemingly originating from higher tier suppliers in their far-flung supply chains. The Rana Plaza disaster, which led to mass fatalities of garment workers with 1,134 dead and 2,500 injured, was a notorious exemplification of the industry's gross negligence to provide safe working conditions. Demonstrating the corrupt core of fast fashion, in which retailers 'may ignore, or attempt to co-opt, the human rights agenda'.

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Social sustainability remains challenging in fast fashion inherently feminised SC

Further, the fast fashion SC is inherently feminised, with this in mind, social sustainability remains challenging, including violations of human rights and labour rights, child labour, forced labour, discrimination, low wages, poor health and safety, and sexual harassment. For women garment workers gendered inequalities have been seen to manifest across two strains: economic discrimination and gender-based harassment. Thus, women in manufacturing facilities have often cited absolutely low wages as evidence of the exploitation by their employers. Additionally, in the global South countries, such as Bangladesh, steeped in patriarchal attitudes, 'sexual coercion and verbal abuse are part of the general spectrum of traditional methods of labour discipline'. Specifically, research has documented that, 27.8% of female garment workers across 30 Dhaka factories had been raped by male colleagues while in the factory, desperately drawing attention to the inextricable relationship between gender-inequality and women garment workers, in a SC context.

Clearly, gender inequality presents a 'wicked problem' in the sense it is both a symptom and cause of other problems.

Our analysis to critically explore company reports, including the Annual Reports, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Reports, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Reports, Gender Equality Reports, Modern Slavery Reports and Sustainability Reports, of 75 fast fashion companies for the years 2019-2022, based on the renowned Fashion Transparency Index 2021, is critically relevant to fast fashion, as the industry's presence in developing states exacerbates gendered disparities as well as the relative difficulties women face in the environmental crisis.

Gender Inequality

In Dressmann, H&M, Hema, Jack & Jones, Jordan, Nike, Speedo, United Colors of Benetton, and Vero Moda's supply chains, gender construction in culture acts as a structural obstacle to gender equity for women garment workers. This is a particularly pervasive issue in supplier countries steeped in patriarchal attitudes, such as 'Bangladesh, India and Pakistan'; wherein Natural differentiation is the innate consideration that women are innately considered to 'have naturally nimble fingers, are naturally more docile and willing to accept tough work discipline, than men'. And thus, are obliged to undertake 'repetitious, monotonous work' in fast fashion manufacturing facilities.

What also became apparent was the underrepresentation of women holding managerial or leadership positions. In Jordan and Nike's supply chain, women only hold 28% of top management positions. In addition, men advanced to initial leadership roles (team leaders) at 3.5 times the rate of women. Statistically confirming that women are subjugated into

‘inferior labour roles’ within fast fashion despite representing the majority of retailers’ total supply chain workforce.

From an ideological perspective, women are subjugated to these patterns of inequality as dominant groups use patriarchal beliefs to justify social arrangements; allowing gendered inequalities to persist, unchallenged, in socio-political systems, such as fast fashion.

Economic Discrimination

Fast fashion retailers still insist on building their capitalist empires upon the ‘bedrock of inexpensive female labour’. Specifically, in Mammut’s SC, the pregnancy testing of new recruits was found during one audit in Myanmar in 2016. This discriminatory practice underlined the precarious terms of employment women are subjected to, whilst highlighting how employers’ preference for hiring women stems from a preference for a compliant and dispensable workforce that comes at a low cost.

Far more disturbing was the reverberated effects of last-minute changes in design, production, or delivery timings. Styles renew and revive to suit preferences, but if the fashion consumer knew retailers like New Look, pressurised suppliers to meet intangible production targets, leading to excessive overtime, failure to pay wages, unauthorised subcontracting, and increased use of temporary labour to which, women garment workers bore the cost without receiving fair economic compensation...would they buy that new winter coat?

Omitting and preventing women’s labour contribution to the economic system routinely denies them economic empowerment, harming women’s resilience and compounding negative social impacts.

Gender-Based Harassment

Gender-based harassment (GBH) remains a severe human rights abuse facing women garment workers across the fast fashion industry as a whole. Our findings found women working in Banana Republic, Dressmann, Gap, Kathmandu, Mango, and Primark’s supplier factories to be routinely subjected to verbal abuse and high levels of physical violence. In general, cases of ‘verbal harassment by male production floor management’ (Primark) were found in greater prominence; for instance, The North Face reported ‘201 allegations of discrimination/harassment’ in their SC in 2019. The gruesomely demanding nature of fast fashion is to blame; tight, unattainable deadlines and production targets set by the retailers (e.g. Mammut) prompted supervisors to shout at workers; indirectly heightening the risk of GBH.

Interestingly, another plausible explanation is the long-established hierarchy of power in fast fashion; the majority of leadership roles in manufacturing facilities are held by men, and thus they configure the dominant group. As theory suggests, male-dominating groups are likely to instil power strategies that reflect their patriarchal worldview, ‘subjugating the feminine’.

In supplier countries gender-based harassment may also be symptomatic of underlying cultural gender inequities; verbal abuses are part of the traditional methods of labour discipline found in Bangladesh, creating a hostile, intimidating, and sexually charged environment. From a theoretical perspective, women are most strongly backgrounded in their traditional roles within the 'private sphere' (Patel, et al., 2020). In the context of fast fashion, this behaviour translates into methods of verbal discipline on the factory floor, employed to reinforce women's marginalisation, and preserve their backgrounding.

Fast fashion SC: a socially unsustainable system, sustained by invisible women garment workers

Fast fashion is undoubtedly a socially unsustainable system, sustained by invisible and vulnerable women garment workers. Fast fashion companies operate in a 'dynamic competitive environment' and the intensification of sustainability pressures, has revealed how economic goals take precedence over social issues in supply chains. Within the realm of supply chain CSR many initiatives are weighted to satisfy corporate stakeholders (*top executives and board directors*), and 'do so while ignoring or actively harming women'. In effect they are obtusely 'gender-blind'.

In addition, it appears that fast fashion's 'domination of women' cannot continue the same trajectory. Currently women's resources are being depleted at an unsustainable rate, creating forms of poverty for women. Managerial bodies must 'find new ways of being sustainable along the chain', either by 'introducing more stringent procurement policies' or engaging fashion consumers in the 'circular economy'.

While the industry remains relatively silent on the topic of sexual harassment; with discussions of sexual harassment in scholarship (e.g., feminist, and legal) taking harassment to be a workplace phenomenon, we should move beyond this to fill the withstanding knowledge gap; showing that products of Western capitalism and globalisation, such as fast fashion, create 'enabling environments' for gender inequality, economic discrimination, and gender-based harassment.