

Revolutionary Ideas: Sustainable Fashion and Feminist Societies

A panel discussion hosted by Grabbing Back

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

You're all here for one reason, and that is to talk about fashion and feminism. So I'm really excited to introduce our incredible panel today. So I'm going to give them all a brief introduction, and then we'll dive straight in with the questions. But our first panellist is Paige. Paige is a research master's student and sessional academic, at the Queensland University of Technology in Australia, and a School of Design. Her research looks at the ways that consumers can understand responsibility for injustices in the fashion supply chain. And she particularly looks at Digital fashion activism. I'll be asking her to unpack what that means a little bit later. So thank you very much, Paige. Along with Paige, we have...we're very lucky.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

We've got a duo of researchers calling in from Australia today and we also have Kathy Horton. So Kath is a design educator and a researcher at Queensland University of Technology. And through her teaching and her research, she explores the politics and... *unclear* ...collective in 2010, which is a fashion group that brings communities together to make things and enjoy fashion. We've also got Anvita joining us today from Singapore. She is a sustainability professional and she's really passionate about creating awareness and finding solutions for the societal and environmental challenges that we face, when we examine the fashion industry. We've also got Faith calling in from Copenhagen. She is a consultant who works across the fashion and sustainability areas. She also runs the incredible Instagram page @entrylevelactivist, which I'd encourage all of you to check out where she debunks the jargon around activism, which is something we're also really passionate about -

finding words that are make sense to us all. So we can all really get involved in this important discussion. And finally, but most certainly not least, we've got Nivedita who is the Asia coordinator for labour rights at the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, which is a group that campaigns on the ground with garment workers for labour rights in the fashion industry. She works on labour laws and policies and helps develop legal strategies and campaigns to help garment workers challenge abuses in the workplace and the inequality that we see in supply chains. So thank you all so much for joining us. As Ella said, there will be a time for audience q&a at the end as well. So do feel free to pop any questions in there, as you think of them. Opening up to everybody with a pretty easy question. Feel free to unmute yourselves and answer.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Am I a bad feminist if I shop at ASOS, anyone want to take it away? Am I a bad feminist, if I shop at ASOS?

Faith - she/her

I'll just jump in. Because I absolutely love this question in the way that it sets up the kind of dilemma that lots of people in the spaces I occupy find themselves in, which is, you know, to do with wanting things, buying things, consuming things, but wanting to do it in a way that aligns with your own ethics. And I think that's something that a lot of people here in the global north in Northern Europe, especially, really, really struggle with. And I know from personal experience, the idea as well as a lot of hypocrisy around wanting things, but wanting them in the right way. And, you know, tossing up your values and seeing where it lands doesn't really feel that great. So the way I'd answer that question is to kind of my take on it is more around, seeing if we can get rid of the binary between good and bad, right and wrong when it comes to our values. Maybe there's space for us to be complicated, messy humans trying to try to figure it out. And then there's a lot to learn for everyone. I know I've got a

lot to learn. So I'll just start there. I'm really excited to see what the other panellists think.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

That's such a great answer, Faith. Yeah, I think that's a really, really interesting looking at the space in between. Does anyone have anyone else have any further thoughts on that?

Nivedita - she/her

I think just on echoing what Faith just said, it's also really important to look at where accountability really lays. When you look at the global fashion industry, does it lay with the individual consumer or are we able to identify this as a systemic issue, and when I say systemic, I mean, is it caused directly by the unequal nature of, you know, the supply chains, where, you know, garments are produced. So it's really a question of how much power big fashion brands are able to be, how much of the profits they are able to control. Whereas the workers were actually making the garments are often left without living wages that even pay for minimum standard of living. So it's really about the structure and how power can be redistributed with the structure. And as conscious consumers, I think being aware of these gross violations within supply chains and thinking about how planned accountability for these violations can be talked about, is really important.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

That's such a great answer. Yeah. Thank you very much. Anyone else have any thoughts on that question?

Kath - she/her

I'm happy to jump in with this with the reflection that I think it's really sad and very confronting, particularly for younger people that they're being asked. They're asking themselves these questions all the time. It's

very, I think it's almost impossible for for people, younger people, particularly to be just going about their everyday lives and not being confronted with these questions. And that's not just read the questions of fashion either. So I often reflect on being of a slightly older generation, I can reflect on the fact that I could enjoy my teenage years without worrying about that. And being a feminist is more about her. And its relationship with feminism with fashion was maybe more more about the way I dressed or something like that, not about whether I was exploiting someone in authority, distant place when I bought something. I think that's a it's a it's a burden. Really, for everyone.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thank you, Kath. Yeah, I think that raises a really interesting question around the awareness that we will hold in the fashion industry. Well, if we're thinking about these questions, we're thinking about power up closer, how does the garment industry, uphold the patriarchy at present? Why is it not a feminist industry? How is it upholding patriarchal structures? Perhaps, Paige, you could kick off this one?

Paige - she/her

Yeah. So I think thinking about the patriarchy means also thinking about the different ways that we understand the patriarchy and my perspective of it might be different to many other people, especially women around the world. The way I kind of understand the patriarchy in fashion, particularly considering fashion production, and how it's made, a lot of women, mostly women do make clothes around the world. And this isn't really by accident. It's because they, the fashion industry does seek out women, because they tend to be less timid or more timid and less likely to speak up in the workplace. And so they're kind of still stuck, stuck in this structure and have devalued garment work. So it's not really respected. And also, they're mistreated in their jobs and not given the same opportunities as their early point of access to get a job in the first

place, but also to progress and move on from or just progress in their career. And then in the global north, the patriarchy is upheld in many ways, through consumption and through beauty standards and different ways that women are supposed to be.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Great. Thank you. Yeah, really, really interesting. Anvita, do you have anything to add to that question?

Anvita - she/her

Yeah, sure. Yes. I think just to add on to what Paige said, I think, to me, if you just look at the history of garment industry, the way they have advertised historically, and the imagery that's put forward to sell their products, it's always mostly women as the audience and a very patriarchal standard of beauty, skin colour, body size, you know, you should wear this to look better to be adopted to adjust and to be to be accepted, you need to wear this latest trend. I mean, it's all a perpetuation of the patriarchal standards that society holds. And it's still reflected in the way things are still marketed to us. And then if we look at the leadership roles that the fashion industry has, it's even forget about the garment workers where the situation is so dire. We look at top 50 you know, fashion brands, and I think less than 14% of them are held by women. That speaks a lot like why is an industry where the 80% target audience is other Men 80% of garment workers of women 70% of workforce managerial work was of women do you notice in 14% of them are in leadership roles. So that speaks a lot. We have the numbers, but we don't have the power. So we need to start asking why.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

And that's a brilliant question to leave us on to it. Yeah, exactly. Why, why that's not being reflected. Thank you so much. Yeah. Last year, a lot of us watched major fashion brands, H&M, Primark, ASOS, and so on, failed to

pay their workers appropriately when the COVID pandemic hit in early 2020. We're now about a year on from that. And something that's been, at least on my newsfeed a lot is which brands been paying up and which now a lot of brands including Primark and h&m have been honouring the promises that they made to pay the garment workers for their orders. But a lot of other brands, including designer brands, like Oscar de la Renta, Batman, as well as many high street brands haven't paid up. And they're reportedly refusing requests for comment from activist groups, after brands who have paid up, gone far enough. And what do you make of the brands that haven't done? So? Perhaps Nivedita, could you kick us off on this one?

Nivedita - she/her

yeah. So at the beginning of the pandemic, a lot of the brands began cancelling their orders refusing to pay for, you know, orders that were in process, refusing to pay for the orders that were delivered to them. And this really shows really shows the lack of accountability that these brands have towards their supplier factories towards the workers making their products. It took the fact that it took a lot of campaigning over several months to make dance pay for existing orders, and the payments came very late in September. And you know, in the months leading up to that, that really created a huge humanitarian crisis for workers like between March to September, where they simply didn't have, you know, they were being told by their factory management that there aren't orders were not being paid, we don't have the liquidity to pay workers right now, we don't have the means to pay. And there was really nobody being held accountable at that point for workers wages, and there was so much uncertainty in terms of, you know, the precarity of like, life on an everyday basis, during a crisis where you know, health care access was so important, there was very little access to credit, or debt at that point. And it really led to a huge humanitarian crisis. So this was really the very bare minimum that brands can have done was to pay for existing orders.

But the impact of the pandemic is seen even now, even though they've paid up because order volumes have reduced, it's still fluctuating based on your demand, it's still fluctuating based on the impact of the pandemic on the stock markets. So really, even the impact of brands having paid up for the existing orders during the first phase of the pandemic, is very much the bare minimum. And brands can do a lot more to ensure that, through these months, comment workers are being paid wages, whether production is happening or not. And that will take only a very miniscule amount of you know, the revenue of these huge brands to be able to pay workers. In fact, afa did a calculation and what we realise is that even if brands paid 5% of the value of their orders down their supply chains, that would be enough to pay workers for the wages that they lost during the pandemic.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

AFWA, of course, being the Asia Floor Wage Alliance. Yeah, that's really interesting. Thank you. Faith, I could see you taking notes there, seeming very interested. Do you want to follow up on that?

Faith - she/her

I'd love to I'm I'm really in awe of this panel group of amazing humans that have such you know, in depth knowledge and experience around the world on this and I feel like the perspective I can bring to this comes more from I guess, like a pop culture, consumers perspective, from where I am in the world. think that there's, there was two things I was just writing down there as I was listening. The first is that, you know, like, I think we can find inspiration and hope and joy in the shift that has happened in these few months. It's it's devastating that this campaigning has had to happen in order for the bare minimum to have been acted upon. But at the same time, it shows a really exciting cultural shift that makes me gives me energy around awareness. If people in large groups grassroots or even just friendship groups start to care and know more

about the effect that they have is is very empowering and it brings a level of optimism to the movements that these groups of people can make. And that the power that people in large groups around the world can have. So well, it's it's been devastating. It's also been, it's made me feel very proud of the people that have been committed to to campaigning on this. So that was one of the things I wrote down like, in this in this work. And in this space, I, I really get a lot of energy from finding the the rays of light and really like basking in them. And the second point is to sort of like, try to really interrogate where this lack of justice comes from, where this the supply chain responsibility here, in this kind of situation over the past few months, just kind of like, hasn't been recognised. And I've been thinking a lot about why, you know, leadership, brand leadership roles, these individuals really do lack a basic sense of sort of, like love and empathy for other people in places that they, you know, haven't been, and I really spend a lot of time thinking about where does that lack of empathy come from? How can that human connection, be? You know, like, reignited, somehow, and sometimes I feel like it can't. And sometimes I, I feel like that's sort of my role in this conversation that I work a lot with, with leadership roles in fashion brands. And it's, it's very sad sometimes to see the lack of justice and care. But But part of my work is trying to educate people in leadership positions around what it is to just act from a place of love, which is like such a human thing to do. But for some reason, here in the spaces I'm in, it's extremely difficult. Yeah, I could run on about this forever. But what does everyone else think? Yeah,

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

just to follow up on that Faith, actually, because that's really, really interesting answer, and especially reflecting on your work. And just just want to bring the human perspective. from it, right. It's all about find justice and equality. And there's a lot a lot of your work is also focused

around this idea of creating a circular economy of clothes and picking up with what Nivedita said before about, you know, orders aren't coming in at present, there's there needs to be some more creation of work. I know, some of your work is focused around how we can close that gap, and how we can link up topics around environment, as well as garment workers rights.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

And how do you how do you link those two? up? And what does it mean to look for a circular economy in the fashion industry?

Faith - she/her

Well, I think when we're using the word patriarchy as page so that people have different experience, like people, we all have wield interpret language in different ways. They mean, in this conversation, we're speaking English, but people in the group speak or all sorts of languages and words mean different things. But for me when I think of that word, and it's not really you know, that's why grabbing back is such a great place for me because I'm really getting into the, the discourse around feminist debate. For me, that word is like, you know, we've used the word system systemic. And patriarchy makes me think of the growth logic around how we define success here in in the global north, more and more, more, always operating in a really linear way end to end rather than endlessly. So that's where I'd, I guess I'd segue or intersect ideas of circularity, to kind of, you know, you can draw a picture, I much prefer a nice circle or a wiggly line connecting and spreading in different distributed ways than one straight line. So for me that the patriarchy is just that straight line that offers no other options, blindly moving in a direction that is not sustainable. So that's where I'd start thinking about circularity. And we can go into a bit more later in the chat.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Yeah, absolutely. That sounds great. And of course, that kind of idea, that picture of the circle, the wiggly line, and then the straight line being that idea of where we create clothes, and if they end up presumably in a landfill or if they're able to get recycled. That's great. Yeah, so we've talked a lot about activism here. People have kind of thought about both, you know, the onus being both on people within the industry, and also on people, activists, who I presume many of you listening are definitely I would identify as, I think most of our panel would. Kath and Paige, you've both written a paper that's due to come out soon looking at this idea of digital fashion activism, could you break down for us what that means? And what you found in your research?

Paige - she/her

Yeah, definitely. So we kind of use digital fashion activism as a bit of a transition from political consumerism, and activism in the marketplace, or, you know, like shop shopping as a political act and things like that. We use it to contextualise how fashion is communicated online with an activist lens. And we kind of think about it as often happens, or the way we research it is on Instagram and on social media. And digital fashion activism both contributes to and critiques the discourse of the fashion industry. So it's very much still in a digital fashion culture, but it also critiques it. So we have things like call out culture and cancelled culture related to fashion brands. But the way we use it is from political political consumerism. So using selfies or hashtags for an activist intention. So we use the term fashion because there is often something so fashionable about it. And perhaps this is because activism is kind of trending right now. But also, because of the visual nature of social media and Instagram. It's it happens through selfies and through personal expression of what you're wearing, who you're with. And it happens within your own little circle. And as well as you're able to contact brands and industry leaders through that. So it's fashionable, because it's visual,

but also because it's popular, and because it can spread so easily online. Yeah, so our paper examines just how from, you know, from political consumerism, to using hashtags as activism and how fashion kind of translates through that online.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thank you, that sounds definitely like something to keep an eye out for. And to follow up on that. And how does this kind of link with the idea of fashion as fashion and activism being so it's kind of fashionable now? does that leave you optimistic for the impact this activism can have in the long term? Or do you have some potential concerns?

Paige - she/her

Yeah, I mean, I think when something becomes fashionable and popular, you get this word of trending and becoming trendy, and therefore, it's probably going to go away soon. But I, I do think that, as faith has demonstrated through her work, that it does give a lot of people access to activism. And so maybe this is just an entry point. But an entry point is a point that we can access it. And so maybe this type of activism won't be around forever, but it is spreading awareness and giving a lot more people a lot more access to political, feminist, ethical discourses. Yeah,

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

I know definitely, when, when we were thinking, at Grabbing Back, about putting this panel together, one of the ideas of the link between fashion, the feminist - feminist -feminism was this idea of equity, and getting everyone involved in making it really a kind of democratic process where everyone can be really involved in the process, and everyone receives fair and equal treatment. I know that in your previous work, you've looked into and made the argument that our current fashions supply chains are unethical. And after you've gone further than that, and you've said, it's an idea that goes against global democracy. Could you expound a little bit on what that means and why you've argued?

Kath - she/her

I was, in fact, I was always sort of looking at the word democracy in a couple of ways, because actually, it's it's used a lot in fashion speak. So one of the arguments about fashion and one of the arguments that might be made to explain why we have so much fashion in the world at the moment and why, why we've come to this state of fast fashion. We could explain it through ideas about capitalism, but another way there are kind of political ways of explaining fashion that have to do with understanding fashion as a right. In, in certainly in Western cultures, and there's, there's been an understanding, you know, it's more to do with people's identity. And that maybe profession is experienced as a right everyone has a right to be fashionable. And that the more access people have to fashion and being fashionable is thought to also signal a more democratic society. And that that's really got to do with things like hair long and analysis of the history of fashion where in the past, the most fashionable people were the wealthy, right? So it's just this kind of trickling down. And we live in an era where we like to think that we can all be fashionable, and that that's accessible to all. And part of the argument, like, if you look at some of the arguments that say h&m made, what if they would be talking about their business model from day one would be when making fashion fashion available to everyone? So it's actually it's actually helping democracy, it's, it's, it's helping helping level out society. So the the kind of irony of it is that the more that people of all incomes have had access to fashion, the system itself has become less and less democratic. So it's, it's the, you know, the injustices along the supply chain are, I believe, worse than they've ever been. So I think it's this sort of strange thing where fashion is being held up and experienced by everyone as a right. But it's also causing injustice.

Faith - she/her

Can I add one thing to that is, I completely agree, and the irony is just like, crazy, obvious and incredibly problematic. I've, in the last few

months found quite a lot of function in differentiating between the garment industry, the clothing, industry, and the fashion industry. And I think it's really helpful to think about fabrics, and to think about garments, in a different way to thinking about something like couture, it's really obvious. And I just thought I would add that, because it's just helped helped me in the last few months, so anyone in the audience can, can understand the difference there as well. There's different quantities involved, so it helps.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

That's really interesting. Could you break down a bit more what you mean, when you say kind of garment, clothing and fashion and how they are separate?

Faith - she/her

I think that Kath's point around identity is really at the heart of the answer to that I work, or at least I've been in conversation with people who are non binary, and, for example, and, therefore struggle to find clothing that represents their identity. And that's very frustrating for them. And, and in the culture. I mean, everyone does feel entitled to have clothing that represents their identity. But everyone needs clothes, everyone in on the country, whereas everyone in the world wears clothes, but I would argue that not everyone has access to fashion.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

That's a really, really interesting way of looking at it. Yeah. So thinking about these small ideas, right? fashion, justice, democracy, and how to make that system. What would a feminist fashion industry look like? Perhaps Nivedita, you could kick us off with that and think about what that would look like on the ground.

Nivedita - she/her

I think feminist fashion industry would be one that where living wages are accessible to women workers who make the garments. Very often, wages in the garments industry in production countries are extremely suppressed. Because primarily because it relies on women workers. And women aren't considered, you know, primary breadwinners in their households. And not having access to living wages means that a woman's wage doesn't account for the dependence in her family. So if you have single women, if you have your, you know, women who have children who have who they have to take care of their wage just simply doesn't account for the entire household. And having lower wages means that women put in a lot more time and a lot more effort into social reproduction, into basically converting, you know, other goods.

Nivedita - she/her

Basically converting the labour into goods and services for the household to consume. In the absence of wages, it means that they don't have time and labour saving implements, like you know, basic like household appliances which they could use to save their labour in the household. So living wages, I think would be number one, you know, feminist fashion industry. And second is where women would have the right to organise and demand better conditions. for themselves in the garment industry in Asia, you know, there's a lot of retaliation. And there's a lot of threat of like, if you ask for better conditions, the business might relocate. And the capital might, you know, there might be capital flight. So there's very little bargaining ability for workers, even during the pandemic, when workers were left with nothing, the response that they got was if they if you ask for more, the industry will kind of relocate. So there's a lot of silencing of workers and, you know, barriers to their freedom of association, basically. So, I think addressing that would also be a primary concern for the fashion industry. And I think really bringing women and their unions and their organisations to the core of

monitoring and of you know, creating the change, and enabling the shifts that are required for making garment supply chains more just, there are a lot of voluntary mechanisms, a lot of you know, audits for compliance, which workers have no access to or control over, it's very easy for garment suppliers to kind of, you know, evade these mechanisms. That's because really, workers and unions are not at the centre of these processes. So we're really looking at how women workers can take charge at the factory floor, be able to resolve issues in the supply chains, promoting freedom of association. Yeah, and making living wages possible.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Yeah, they are very straightforward, very common sense, what are the main barriers to change right now?

Nivedita - she/her

I think the business model of, you know, fast fashion brands is the barrier to change because when you look at how the supply chain is structured, the supplier factories in production countries have extremely razor thin margins, which means, you know, they cannot increase wages, it's all a competitive pricing model where the brand gets a sector margin and suppliers have to operate on you know, 10% or less margins. And it's very difficult than for workers to bargain for better conditions in these factories, because the fashion industry operates an extremely fluctuating demand. So, basically, all of the risk of that demand is passed on to supplier factories in production countries, who are engaged in a race to the bottom, you know, to give competitive pricing to provide cheap and flexible labour to extract labour extract their own production capacity to be able to get hold of this business, common industry export garment industry and employment and wages through it has become a development strategy for a lot of, you know, Asian countries, which means that even even even governments are really you know,

competing in and are in a race to the bottom to remove labour legislations, you know, to have more labour flexibility to be able to attract capital into these countries. And even though it was, you know, subscribe to as a development strategy is become a trap now, because, you know, you have to keep pushing wages lower, you have to keep taking away labour rights to be able to hold on to these orders and hold on to the business. So, yeah, it's, it's this race to the bottom, that is the barrier. And until, you know, power is redistributed back to, you know, production and back to workers who produce these garments, it's going to be very difficult to have the *unclear*

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thank you. Anvita I could see you have some some ideas there, certainly follow up. I'm sure you're going to tell us some one of the things about how we can, you know, make a feminist fashion industry? Who do I ask also, in your answer, as in your work as a sustainability consultant? You work not just in the fashion industry, but in other areas as well. So what lessons could we perhaps also learn from other sectors when looking to create a fairer feminist fashion world?

Anvita - she/her

Yeah, definitely. I think, yeah, it's a very important question. I think that that has covered all the key points in terms of what's happening on ground. To me as a consumer, I feel what a feminist industry fashion industry would look like is, you know, the fate of a 20 year old girl and Bangladesh should not depend on the purchasing power of a 20 year old girl across the world in very simple words. So, I think what we need is a very dynamic shift in the way we purchase things. Because if we look broadly, why this is happening, why this fast fashion culture is happening, because of the constant demand of, you know, massive chunks of garments at such a fast pace, and such as, you know, profit margin and somebody has to pay the price, and it's ultimately the

garment workers at the bottom 80% of whom are women. So as consumers Yes, activism is important as Paige had mentioned, you know, the question brands where my fabric is coming from our clothes are making up be made. But also I think we need to shift towards a more conscious consumerism in terms of what we are purchasing, and how long it is lasting, and the rate at which we are purchasing each year. So I think once we make that question, conscious choice, that's when we shift towards slower fashion. And we can also shift the dynamics in which this fashion industry works. I think you were asked about what we can learn from some other industry. So in Asia, palm oil industry is something that's been spoken about a lot. So for those who are not aware, palm oil is used in everything from your food products like peanut butter to your shampoo, toothpaste, and it's been produced in Indonesia and Malaysia. And it causes a lot of environmental destruction in terms of deforestation, water pollution, and also has a lot of social issues like labour issues, human rights issues, land grabbing issues. So it's been under media spotlight. And because of which a lot of it has been done, there has been NGOs and other third party audit bodies being set up, which makes sure that brands like Nestle, Unilever, they're using certified palm oil. So they have made all these commitments that Okay, now I'll only use 100% certified palm oil. So I think we're all familiar with the brand Mars. So Mars has gone one step ahead. And I think it's a really brilliant example. So they achieved 100% Palmer's certification. And they also did traceability study to make sure they can identify each and every Mills where their farm is coming from, but they still felt they were not able to take a lot of action because of the complex nature of the supply chain. So what they have done is they have reduced their suppliers from 1400 to 100. This year, so that they have long term supply relationships, stronger bonds, and more focused activism so that they don't only disclose this, what's going wrong, they can also take action. So I think one of the key issues, like I mentioned, is just the complex and

this convoluted nature of supply chain, but it's up to the brands to break it down, make it easier and work individually with suppliers to make a change.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Amazing. Well, thank you. Yeah, so many ideas in that indefinitely, topics of supply chains, and working with suppliers. I wonder, Is there anything other sectors could learn from the fashion industry in turn? Or is the fashion industry very far from being able to provide lessons just yet, and it just needs to improve?

Faith - she/her

I think that fashion, from my experience is one of those industries that gets people going, like people love it, it's inspiring, you see things like visually that can inform your identity and, you know, clothing is inspiring, and it makes you go Oh, that's, that's interesting, for if you are consumer, in the part of the world where I am, I think that there is an opportunity to turn that energy inside itself and send more, you know, beings in a solidarity economy, because there's a lot of energy around this industry. It is majority made up of women who can be in solidarity with each other, you know, we know how instinctually we, we intuitively we know how to do that. So I think that it's this it's this, like topic of attention for me. I don't always love hearing that. As a consumer you can. What like, like, dollar activism, or I don't know what the phrase is, but you know, like, the choices you make with things you buy is your activism. That's cool. What the way I see it is more like the things you pay attention to actually can drive change more than things you spent money on. I think it's deeply restrictive. To label people as a consumer in the first place. And fashion is so good at labelling people in boxing people in whether they're a garment worker or a consumer, you're just a human. So I think there's loads of there's like a million ways that fashion

can redirect the attention and therefore redirect power. I am very optimistic that this can and will happen.

Anvita - she/her

I agree. I think also the fashion just feels so personal. It's how defines you, which is why I think people are researching so much about reading about it. And just getting more awareness and starting these comments. And it just goes beyond as you were saying labelling as comment workers and brands and consumers is just about these are my clothes, what's happening? Where are they coming from? I just want to know about it, I want to talk about it. And if I'm wearing them, it defines who I am as a person. So I think if we get that energy everywhere else as well, that can really start a movement.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thank you. So I've just got one more question for the panel. And then we're going to move over to audience q&a. In the meantime, can I encourage everybody to submit some questions to the link in the brilliant thing in the link? The link in the chat, I can see some people have already been getting some great questions. So we'll get onto those in just a minute. In the meantime, just to sum up slightly for perhaps going on further on what what has been said? What is the link between fashion in the fashion industry and feminism? How do we link up our ideas of creating feminist societies with sustainable fashion? I'm going to open this question up to anybody that wants to answer.

Paige - she/her

I might just start by saying that I think the relationship between fashion and feminism is very complicated. And kind of intersects in many ways. It's so much about the body about identity, about power about being yourself about being a woman and, and it's also social feminism and social. And so it's fashion. But it's also about, like you said, I'm beater about thinking about where what you have connected to other people

around the world. And especially as a female consumer, thinking about 80% of the population of garment workers are female as well. So thinking about our solidarity, or just even just basic connection through our clothing to other women around the world. So it has this kind of transnational, global solidarity, gender based connection, but it also is about empowerment and about being visible and about being yourself and connected to who you are through your, through your clothing and being able to express that. So I always see these kind of two different sections in one is very personal and one is social.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Great, thanks page. Does anyone else want to jump in? And there's not such an eloquent answer? Does anyone want to jump in and expand on that, or perhaps see it in a slightly different way?

Kath - she/her

I might just add that, I think it's really interesting that these things are happening at once. Feminism is so much more popular, it is so much more fashionable, the last, you know, five to 10 years, and activism and an interest in ethics and interesting caring. And once again, you just need to look towards you know, look generationally at what is happening. So I think it's it's I feel like things are just coming together at the moment, for whatever reason. It's one is reinforcing the other. So I think it's it's kind of...*unclear*

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

amazing, great. Well, in that case, I'm going to Oh, yes, please, Faith.

Faith - she/her

I can't exactly remember the question. But I just wanted to add also that the way that the way that activism has become more accessible and popular through social media. It's really good because it makes us all more literate. In terms of having conversations like this, and being able

to confront, you know, the deeply colonial constructs of capitalism, the deeply patriarchal system is actually Being I think like, personally, I find, like a lot of energy. And in simply being able to converse about it, my literacy has improved so much the last five, six years, especially during, you know, following pay up campaigns, I have learned so much. So there's a point around educating, learning learning while we educate each other, getting rid of the hierarchy of teacher student, but just listening and exchanging is like, wonderful because as soon as we can be literate about the systems that aren't serving everyone, we can then start to work out how to dismantle them. So I just think conversations like this are brilliant. And you know, there's so much learning to do and unlearning.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thank you, I think unlearning is definitely something we've found unpacking what we already know. And that leads us really, really nicely into one of our first questions from the audience, which is to ask, we've been talking about feminism and fashion, but definitely at grabbing back. And I'm sure many, many of you on the planet would identify as intersectional feminists looking at all the areas and topics that can intersect in terms of equality. So this is a question for Nivedita, but other panellists may want to join in, what role does colonialism play in the current fashion industry?

Nivedita - she/her

Yeah, the fashion industry has been called Neo colonial Neo Imperial. And what's interesting is that, you know, the production countries are very much the countries which were, you know, colonial countries in the past, and you can sort of see a continuity there, you know, production capacity continues to be extracted from these countries and labour continues to be extracted from these countries with, you know, brands that have been been called, you know, like, similar to Colonial masters

from the past. So that continuity does exist. And really, when thinking of feminism in the fashion industry, just linking it up to the last question, I think, at the core of feminism, also lays, like the redistribution of power. So I think in our responses also, you know, to the fashion industry and to its practices, it's really important to talk about intersectionality, it's really important to look at where, you know, like digital campaigning in the West, or, you know, like, global north led campaigns really intersect with efforts by workers and the unions in production countries as well. They've been a lot of top down approaches, to solving issues in garment supply chains, but how much of this is representative of the voices of workers in the efforts, you know, that they are reading in their own countries using, you know, their own unions and organisations? And how do we make sure that these campaigns learn from each other reinforce and strengthen each other's I think that's a really important way forward when talking about feminism in the fashion industry.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Absolutely, yes, definitely. Thank you so much, Nivedita. So does anyone else want to jump in on that?

Faith - she/her

Yeah, I think that a lot of people who buy clothes, or even work in brands don't really know what colonialism is or means. And I think that there's a lot of accountability towards the education systems in places where, you know, the brand headquarter is it's very immoral to me that understanding colonial history isn't a part of prerequisite of operating in the fashion industry. So maybe the solution is to Yeah, re re re energise the education system in places like Denmark, where I am or the UK where I'm from. I mean, I'm only just learning how to speak about colonialism, honestly, in a way that I think is helpful. And that's wrong. Because I've been around fashion in a court in a corporate sense for

many years. So I think that's part of it too. Same answer. Again, educating and learning.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Completely. Yeah, I think education definitely, very, very key. educate, educate, educate, read, read, read, attend more of our panels, folks. You'll find out more. amazing. Well, I'm gonna use that to go on into our next question from the audience, which has had quite a few votes. And somebody asked that. It was mentioned that responsibility for sustainability and creating a sustainable fashion industry is with brands and not with individuals goes, however, people are keen to know how much does our individual buying and our choices to purchase things affect those structures. Anvita, perhaps you want to start with this one?

Anvita - she/her

Yeah, sure. Of course, I mean, the power rests with brands to make the ultimate change. But in my opinion, as consumers, we do have the power to change the paradigm and make the change from fast to slow fashion, as I was mentioning earlier, it's the choices that we make. Because ultimately, it's again, the huge demand that pushing these massive manufacturing and production processes and countries with with razor thin profit margins, and then the whole vicious cycle of poverty and taking advantage of vulnerable people at the bottom of the supply chain. So I would say, yes, we do have power, it's not just the brands, we can push brands, as the primary audience would be women being the primary audience to slow down and just focus on, you know, quality pieces, ensuring living wages, which are about just the bare minimum and safe working conditions. So I think it does rest with consumers as well, and not primarily with brands.

Paige - she/her

I might just add on to that. And I think, as well as economic power, and

you know, there are so many consumers in the world, and even the people at the top of brands also consume clothes. So I think in some ways, everyone, we do all wear clothes, we don't do all consumed clothes in some way. And so we do have this economic and, and just sense of mass, because there are so many consumers to have that power. But there's also the power in consciousness and our and the way we think about fashion. And just going back to face point, as having conversations about this and, and asking where our clothes come from as being a normal part of purchasing clothes, or going shopping with your friends and talking about it there. I think there's definitely this social consciousness that does come from in the consumers mind, as you know, beyond economic and then that kind of no matter how much you can afford fashion, or whatever price point you're at, you do have a consciousness to raise or to make them more responsible.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thank You Paige, I think a lot of this question comes back to our first question that we opened up with, which is, am I a bad feminist if I shop at a sauce, and I know definitely, at least in my own experience, I can really feel a pressure or a wish to be absolutely 100% ethical whenever I shop, and try and research things. But I know that that also takes time and money. And a lot of the brands that I find that do that aren't always say size inclusive, for example, and they might not cater to all sizes, or they're not very style inclusive. And I definitely when sustainable brands were, were starting out, there would be the kind of typical smock and sandals, which is great, if that's your personal style doesn't happen to be. But I think that's a really interesting question in terms of what individuals. And so our next question is, how can we as individuals show solidarity with international labour unions? Perhaps Nivedita, I think you're best placed to answer this question.

Nivedita - she/her

I think clearly listening to unions in production countries and thinking about how we can create space within your campaigns in the West, within work in the west for unions and workers voices and how they can really feature at the centre of any efforts to restructure supply chains. So I think it's just it has to be a collective effort with the voices of those impacted the most being at the centre of it. And I think conscious effort to be able to do that has to be taken. Because very, I feel like a lot of movements in the sustainability space are happening in silos, you have the environment movement, there are brands pumping in a lot of money into what's called greenwashing now. To say that their products are sustainable when they really aren't sustainable given like the labour conditions in their factories. And the labour movement on the other side is operating in silos, the you know, the environmental movement and even within the global labour movement in what's happening in the global south is not really intersecting with what's happening in the global north. So I think for all of these movements to speak to each other and really redefine sustainability keeping you know those affected communities at the centre of these conversations is really important.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

And just to follow up on that people are very keen to find out actually. Nivedita, could you tell us a bit more about what is happening at the moment with factory worker labour unions and and what is the effect that they're currently able to have on the supply chain?

Nivedita - she/her

Yeah, so the crisis. Since March, the crisis has been really bad. And what we've learned is, you know, wage is really a human rights issue. And I think what we've realised is that basic plays a huge socio economic function, and without one month of wages, workers can be pushed into,

like, really to the brink of survival. And it's really a question that, you know, if a worker has been employed in such the modern capitalist sector for like, 15 to 20 years, why is it that they don't have enough money to pay for a month of not low production? So I think we're really grappling with those questions now and things, you know, I mean, it's been things improved a little bit in around August or September, where it's gone back and wages have remained depressed, work days have reduced, it's really a crisis, because debt has doubled. And you're looking at even the intergenerational kind of impacts of it with children dropping out of school with no health care access for, especially for women and children in the garment industry. So what is really like the long term impact of this of you're finding garment workers who are heavily indebted, who have literally no plan of how they're going to pay back their debts. and Europe, and the children who are being pushed into similar circumstances now, with breaks in education with no access to health care. So these are really, this is really the situation on the ground. We also know that gender based violence and harassment has kind of increased in this period. Because it's so tied into production and profits, like what happens to women at the factory floor. If you know like, after, like many of the lockdowns in many of these countries, production targets really rose, which means that in one production line in a factory, if there were 10, women before, there would be like fewer women now, and you know, fewer people to do like the same amount of work. And this is really tied into like, you know, a lot of verbal harassment against women, physical abuse of women. So we really need to also be thinking of how gender based violence and harassment has also aggravated during this period.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Yeah, I mean, that's it. Yeah. Really, really interesting. Thank you so much for that overview. I know when I first found out about actually, Anvita wanting to bring you on board, it was because you'd written a brilliant

article on gender based violence in denim factories in the city, which I would definitely encourage people to check out and perhaps we could put in chat rewards, for the attendees, if anyone listening wants to explore that. I'm moving over then from looking on the ground, what's happening with garment workers. Our next question is looking at brands themselves. And this is a question for Anvita, but perhaps faith, you might be able to speak to this as well in your work as a consultant. And that is are there tensions in working with brands. And they think there's a preference of brands to be green, rather than focusing on labour rights. Anvita, perhaps you could start us off

Anvita - she/her

sorry, you kind of broke up on my end. Could you please repeat the question?

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Yes. So the question was, are there tensions in working with brands? And do you think there's a preference for brands to be green rather than to focus on labour rights?

Anvita - she/her

Ah, no, I think. So I think it goes, we have to look at several aspects of it. Number one, is, of course, brands, traceability, and their transparency. So that's one way to look at it. But also, as consumers, I think we need to look at what's happening in the brand itself, you know, what person - What's the gender diversity in their top management? Who are the women leaders? Is it still being led by men, whereas the middle management is made of women, and they're not the main decision making personnels. So I think those aspects also speak a lot of where the brand is coming from and what kind of actions they take and whether their actions are purely coming from greenwashing point of view or their genuine activism where they're trying to make a difference. So I think

when we choose brands, we need to look at two-three things like number one is what's happening within the brand, whether they are upholding those values. Second, whether their transparency is genuine, up until what level of the supply chain are they being transparent? And thirdly, I think the marketing campaign as well, whether they're using feminism as just a prop to target women, or are they actually doing anything about it? And I think as consumers we can look at all of these three criterias and read up and really question them by making our choices.

Faith - she/her

Yeah, I'll follow up, I totally agree. And like, I've been involved with working with brands on things like, you know, commitments and pledges and plans and 2030, this and carbon offsetting that. And what has struck me is that some of some of the people I've worked with to try and outline what this plan could look like, or how it could operate. Even though it's all in the context of a flawed system, there's still some really genuine individuals, you know, whatever gender, whatever background, some people have done the internal work to recognise that some of the things their comp they've contributed to, or, you know, basically recognising, they're complicit in this in all of this. And that's incredible to see. But then, you know, they're operating within the context of a brand that has, you know, shareholders, and it's a situation, I constantly find myself within, which is like, people asking me what the business case for all this is. And it's just devastating to reduce everything we're talking about in this conversation to a margin, you know, on this side of the partnership, you know, and then the western side. So I think like people, in leaders in brands come from a place of fear. And that's why a lot of this greenwashing stuff happens, because they really only care about the sentiment that the consumer has of them, rather than the impact that they're making, at all intersections of their work. So comes to that accountability part as well. It's like, you know, it's pretty devastating for

all of us to have to be asked questions like, what's the business case for giving someone a living wage, it's just like, wild. But where I see the solution is to make- back to what you're saying, Anvita, like, - make the communications around these sorts of topics. Amazing. Make them really engaging, make them really inspiring. Research things, you know, spend marketing budget on projects that aren't just about driving a product. People want to be educated. Were going into shops, asking questions, and the people who work in those shops don't know the answers, who made my clothes, you know, like people want to know more and more. And I think that if we can get amazing energy from the fashion industry, into making messaging around all of the amazing topics we're talking about, like way more like, cool, I think there's a really good solution. And that's why I'm so happy to be in a group of people from all different parts of this. There's messy network, we call it, we call fashion where you have to collaborate. And that's what we're doing here. And it's awesome.

Anvita - she/her

I think maybe just to add on to that. So in my work, I do come across a lot of clients, across different industries who are being pushed by investors and boards, because now there's so much conversation around climate change, especially, and Hey, what are you doing, you know, now banks will start to stop giving me loans, if you don't disclose this. They will, you know, start excluding us and they're demanding this. So that actually you're writing coming from a place of fear, rather than genuine concern. So they will start talking about sustainability development goals, and you know, how I can align to it without really doing anything about it. So unfortunately, that's happening a lot, which is leading to greenwashing. And as much I mean, as hopeful as I am, I think the push has to come from outside the organised organisation from consumers, to get them to act and question whatever they're putting out

actually, like, even if they say, I'm reducing my emissions by 15% 15%. From what what was your initial emissions? What are you taking into account? What if you just reduced 50 factories and now you're saying, you know, it went down 15% because now you're not have 50 factories anymore. So question each and everything that they're putting out and just have these conversations like this. discussion today, just sit around with your friends and discuss what's happening, what are they putting out, I think that's where the change will actually come. Because unfortunately, the big brands are mostly concerned with money. They're very handful of them who are coming from a place of genuine concern. So unless pushed by consumers, subsequently investors, only then the action will be taken.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Okay, so make the brand's fear the fear the consumers make the feminists scary, again, is what I'm hearing a lot of get on the streets get get activists get protesting is a brilliant answers. That topic of consumers wanting to know more is actually getting us into our final question from the audience. We've talked about brands, we've talked about consumer and about garment workers. But our final question said, Could we start applying pressure to governments, to label clothes, showing information like the garment workers, or things like that, as we currently have labels on our food showing ingredients, calorie sugar content, and so on? I think the question is kind of, could we do that? Is that a good solution? How would we get about doing that? And I can see a lot of nods, Kath, perhaps you could kick us off with that one?

Kath - she/her

I can I'm really just nodding as in Yes, this should happen. I honestly, did. I have no idea. I'm sure that there are other panel members who have better idea about this, but I've often absolutely, governments are

complicit in this, governments of the global multiple governments of the global south are complicit in this system. And, you know, I do wonder whether it has something to do with the patriarchy, that it's it's a it's a part of government interference, which is almost scoffed at or, it's, you know, I'm sure it's not very high on very many agendas of any levels of government. So, I do think, I do think it's connected to the patriarchy, I do think it's connected to this, you know, this also the, the image of fashion and the business models that fashion does have for the way they are, they are particularly free marketplace, they are incredibly based on this. Most, you know, the pushing down the bottom line all the time, so I think it can only do good get get, of course governments have to get involved in this would be just my answer, but without actually knowing how it's gonna happen. Yeah.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thanks, I can see many more nods and smiles Faith, do you want to jump in?

Faith - she/her

I was just agreeing with, with Kath. I feel like this is always you know, like, one of the... I don't know, I think it's interesting how, whenever this question is asked, everyone is like, yes, but no one really knows how, and I'm one of those people also, why aren't we more like aligned with our government? Why don't we make? Like, maybe there could be a way for us to like, you know, just like, get out of our echo chambers more and, and like, really, I don't even really understand how, where I would start with that. And, you know, just seems like a big challenge. But like, polit policy is where so much of this starts, and I agree with what had said, I really feel like patriarchy kind of like is integrated in policy decisions and structures and voices here. So I'm not sure either, basically.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you. I think that's Yeah, I think a lot of us are kind of unsure where to go and always looking for things to do. And that perhaps feeds into this idea of it not being down to any individuals, but it's all coming together to find the solution. And so, I'm sure we could all go on much, much longer and talk about many more things. But I'm just going to ask each of you individually, if you have any quick final thoughts on any of the topics we've covered today, anywhere that you want to direct people to where maybe they can follow your work a little bit more, or find out more or do things or any final ideas that you wanted to share with anybody. So I'm gonna go across my screen and start with Anvita. Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share?

Anvita - she/her

I think Finally, I would say there's no such thing. Personally, I believe as a perfect feminist. It's a journey of constant learning and engaging with women and men around you honestly. And when it comes to fashion, it is very complex and very complicated and even I'm learning every day. More and more issues around again, the challenges surrounding it. What we can do is just keep ourself educated, engaged in these conversations, make small choices, be it supporting brands, women centric brands, brands, which are ethical, or maybe stop or choosing from brands, which are clearly greenwashing. And, you know, just trying to mislead you with false ad feminist advertisement, make decisions towards purchasing items, which are long lasting, just those tiny changes and not get persuaded by the messaging that has historically been directed at us, as women from the fashion industry and start making your own small conscious decisions. I think, yeah, that's what I would say. But yeah, keep learning. Keep talking. Keep. That's the main point.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Amazing, thank you. Nivedita, Do you have any final thoughts?

Nivedita - she/her

I think I'm just gonna agree with Anvita, I think, you know, creating these spaces and making them as representative as possible. I think that's really important and keep keeping the conversation going.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Wonderful. Thank you, Paige?

Paige - she/her

Um, yeah, I'm sure we're all gonna end up saying the same thing. But I do think like, these conversations appear hard at first. And it is hard to acknowledge your your complicit in this in this system, as a consumer, but also whether you work in the industry, anything. But I think like you said, fake, this also isn't really engaging space to be in. So I think you can make it exciting, and you can make it fun. And you can do it with your friends. And this is a space that is going to actually make the change and it is the future. So get excited about it.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Absolutely incredible, incredible. Faith, similar message? anything extra to add? ideas?

Faith - she/her

Yeah, I just I think for me, it's like, I always think about being intentional. With like, the things you say and the words you choose, and the things you buy and the way you treat people. And to interrogate everything, much like we've talked about here. For me, I have to interrogate myself as well, like really looking into the face of my, you know, my privilege as a non disabled, white cisgendered, neurotypical woman, I have my body holds privilege. And I think I can use that in good ways. And I thank everyone here for contributing to that. So yeah, echoing what the others

said.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Beautiful, thank you. And finally, Kath, get the final word here. *unclear*

Kath - she/her

I find these conversations, first of all, when people are coming from very different perspectives, but we've all got some skin in the game here. I find them really rewarding. But I think also conversations about ethics in the fashion industry sustainable in the fashion industry. If they don't centre a gender-argument, I feel like something is missing. So I feel it's really exciting. And what I think is exciting at the moment is because feminism has is having a moment. And it I think, in a way, it can act as a bit of a connector that deepens these conversations, rather than just what is ethical, what's sustainable. Because feminism has such a long history of activism, and it brings a whole new language to things. I think it's such an important perspective. And I'm just super excited that there's so many people now, globally, who are kind of bringing those threads together. Yeah. So I think it's, it's awesome. So good work for you for bringing us all together. Amazing.

Cyara (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Thank you so so much. I'd like to thank all of our wonderful panellists. It's been such a joy to have you. And I'm just going to hand over to Ella who's gonna gonna see us out. Over to you.

Ella (Grabbing Back) - she/her

Yeah, again, as Cyara said, thank you so so much to our panellists, and to Cyara herself for hosting the discussion. And thank you for everyone that joined us. It's been a really enjoyable event. And that was such an interesting discussion. I know that I've definitely learned a lot. I'm sure everyone else has too. Just very quickly before we bring the event to a

close, I wanted to encourage everyone to check out our website, which is grabbingback.com and there you can find out more about us about future events, and read some of the pieces that have already been written. Do you also have listened to our podcast, which is called Discourse, the Grabbing Back podcast. And our first episode is up there. You can also keep up to date with us on Facebook, where we're grabbing back. I think a lot of people found out about the event via that. And we're also on Twitter and Instagram at [grabbing_back](https://www.instagram.com/grabbing_back). finally do get in touch to pitch any pieces to us as well. We're always looking for new ideas and thoughts on theory and also creative pieces. And the website has more details about how to do this. I feel like I've said "finally" about three times but the actual final thing is that this event was free. Some people did make her donation when there was that that ticket and we wanted to just know that those donations won't be going to ask they'll be going to Fashion Revolution, the LA Garment Workers Myanmar and the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, and they'll be split evenly between those charities and organisations. And for anyone that hasn't already made a donation, we'd really encourage you to donate the amount you might have paid for a ticket to one of these organisations if you can. I think we've included the links in the chat box and they're also on the Facebook event. They're doing such brilliant work and any donations will go a long way. Well thank you again for joining us and enjoy the rest of your Saturday.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>

This transcription is approximate, we apologise for any errors. If you notice any clear mistakes, we would love you to email us at anna@grabbingback.com to let us know. Thank you!