

## **How do slow fashion brands manage to guarantee good working conditions?: The case of shoe manufacturing in remote countries**

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# **HOW DO SLOW FASHION BRANDS MANAGE TO GUARANTEE GOOD WORKING CONDITIONS?: THE CASE OF SHOE MANUFACTURING IN REMOTE COUNTRIES**

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# Introduction

## 1. Context and motivation

The concept of Slow Fashion is a recent topic which has not been researched extensively yet (Domingos et al., 2022).

Slow fashion is a sustainable movement based on the three pillars of sustainability (social, economic and environmental (Purvis et al., 2019). However, people mainly focus on the environmental issues of the fashion industry and neglect the social and economic issues related to the industry (Centobelli et al., 2022). The following work will focus on the **social side** of the slow fashion movement. According to Silva et al. (2022), a socially sustainable system “must achieve fairness in distribution and opportunity, adequate provision of social services, including health and education, gender equity, and political accountability and participation”.

On the social side, one important aspect in the slow fashion movement is the welfare of the workers and all the people involved in the supply chain of a brand (Domingos et al, 2022). This care for the workers contrasts with how workers are being treated in the supply chains of mainstream fashion brands. Mainstream fashion is where most people buy their clothes and shoes: in fast fashion stores.

While human factors and their well being at work are a concern of slow fashion, no paper can be found on how concretely it is achieved by slow fashion brands. Therefore, throughout this thesis we will investigate how slow fashion brands manage to guarantee good working conditions to the workers in their supply chain.

## 2. Structure

The following work will start with a literature review which will answer important questions that might arise when reading the research question:

- **What is slow fashion?**
- **What is the manufacturing process?**
- **What are good working conditions?**
- **What are slow fashion brands doing?**

Once these topics are clarified, we will present the methodology used to conduct our research.

Then, we will present the results and, in the following section, we will discuss these results. The discussion will allow us to answer the research question, explain the surprising answers we received and go over the literature contribution and practical implications.

We will conclude our work with a summary of the key take-aways, the limitations of the present work as well as potential paths for further research.





## Literature review

### What is slow fashion?

#### 1. Literature review about slow fashion

The slow movements started with Slow Food in 1989 (Slow Food Foundation, n.d.). This movement rose to counter the consumption habits that Fast Food chains created. Similarly, the slow fashion movement was prompted by the adverse consequences of the fast fashion movement. Slow fashion is driven by completely different values than mainstream fashion.

The term “slow fashion” was first introduced in 2007 when Kate Fletcher, a teacher and a global expert in sustainability and design, published an article in *The Ecologist*. In this article, she explains that “Slow fashion is about designing, producing, consuming and living better. Slow fashion is not time-based but quality-based” and it is “a different approach in which designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are more aware of the impacts of products on workers, communities and ecosystems”. Then, Fletcher (2007) adds that slow fashion is “a glimpse of a different - and more sustainable - future for the textile and clothing sector and an opportunity for business to be done in a way that respects workers, environment and consumers in equal measure”.

This is an interesting introduction to the concept as it touches on several characteristics of slow fashion. It touches on redefining and improving all the steps of the value chain to strive for better; better for the workers, better for the environment and better for the consumers. With slow fashion, people are aware that the purchases they make have an impact on the environment and all the different people that work to create a piece of garment from the conception to the acquisition.

Slow fashion is becoming more popular because people are increasingly paying more attention to sustainability. Consequently, consumers’ value perceptions and purchasing behavior are changing in order to preserve the environment and safeguard the well-being of individuals (Domingos et al., 2022).

Slow fashion is part of the slow movements. As Fletcher (2010) puts it: “Slow culture is an invitation to think about system change in the fashion sector and to question the role of economic growth, underlying values, and worldviews in fashion that a different and truly “richer” society develops”. Meaning that slow culture aims to change people's view on which values matter and to challenge our current economic system based on growth. Little documentation can be found on the slow fashion concept. For this reason, let us start by looking at the slow food movement to understand the underlying ideology behind slow fashion.

Slow food is based on three interconnected principles: good, clean and fair (Slow Food Foundation, n.d.).

Can these three principles be transposed to the Slow Fashion movement?

The “**good**” criteria refers to the quality of the food, it has to be flavorful and healthy (Slow Food Foundation, n.d.). With regards to clothes, this can be translated as having good quality of product and materials. According to Štefko & Stefek (2018), the creation of a successful slow fashion brand requires using good quality fabrics and encouraging consumers to look into the origin of the fabrics.

The second principle of slow food, “**clean**” refers to having a production that does not harm the environment. Slow clothes and shoes production can allow a production that is more clean, less harmful for the environment and the people that make them.

Lastly, the concept of “**fair**” in Slow Food is two fold. On one side, it touches on having affordable prices for the consumers and on the other side, it refers to having fair conditions and payment for the producers (Slow Food Foundation, n.d.). This principle cannot be applied to the consumers in slow fashion. The goal of the slow fashion movement is not to make clothes as cheap as possible but to “encourage people to buy less but at higher quality that is durable” (Jung & Jin, 2014). This means that people do not buy clothes as often and therefore can pay more for a piece of clothes. Additionally, the price of clothes in slow fashion has the objective to reflect its true ecological and social costs (Fletcher, 2010). Consequently, by selling fewer items at a higher price, companies can still make a profit (Fletcher, 2010). In contrast, on the producer side, this principle is also fundamental for the slow fashion movement and it is also the main focus of our dissertation. Slow fashion aims at taking care of every individual worker and their well-being (Štefko & Steffek, 2018), the workers should be respected and remunerated correctly (Jung & Jin, 2014).

These three principles derived from the Slow Food movement allow us to have a better understanding of the Slow fashion movement. The introduction by Fletcher and the comparison to the slow food movement have allowed us to introduce a lot of concepts applicable to slow fashion. Let us analyse the different characteristics that authors put forward to define slow fashion.

When we examined the meaning of the “fair” concept for consumers, we saw that slow fashion promotes buying less often and buying in better quality. This refers to the concept of **slow consumption**. According to Jung & Jin (2014), slow consumption “entails a longer product lifespan from manufacturing to discarding”. Domingos et al. (2022) found that slow fashion consumers prefer quality over quantity.

Moreover, the pieces are not being produced to follow the trends, they are created with the goal of being worn for a long time. Slow consumption is only possible if the consumers change their mindset by not considering their purchases disposable. When buying a piece from a slow fashion brand, it is because the customer knows that he will make a lot of wear out of the garment. Slow fashion designers have longevity in mind when creating their clothes, they want to offer timeless and long-lasting pieces (Štefko & Steffek, 2018), they do not create the clothes to fit the current trends. By creating timeless pieces, the need for consumption can be reduced (Leslie et al., 2014) and thus overconsumption can be avoided. The designers have an important role to play when designing the pieces in order to achieve this goal.

In addition to creating timeless pieces, they also have to design fashionable clothes that can be worn in different ways (Jung & Jin, 2014). In their paper, Jung & Jin (2014) use the term **sustainable design** to refer to this process of designing clothes. During product design, attention is being paid to make the pieces versatile.

In 2009, Sheena Matheiken launched the Uniform Project. This project was a challenge where she made the commitment to wear the same black dress for a year. Even though she wore the same dress every day, the outfit was different everyday because she would put recycled or donated accessories on the dress. The goal of the project was to raise money for children who could not afford to go to school. This dress is a great example of a designer thinking about versatility when creating the piece. As Sheena explained (O’Connell, 2009), the dress was designed by Eliza Starbuck to be worn both ways, front and back but also to be an open tunic. Furthermore, it was made from durable and breathable cotton so that it was appropriate for the summer, but it could also be layered in the winter.

Sustainable design takes also into account the way in which the materials will be recycled. The materials used have to be recyclable without the need to use sophisticated sorting and recycling technologies (Centobelli et al., 2022). This is called design for recycling or design for disassembly (Fletcher, 2014, 124).

We have talked about slow consumption but **slow production** is also an important characteristic of slow fashion. In their paper, Jung & Jin (2014) explain “Slow production does not exploit natural and human resources to expedite manufacturing speed”. Slow production has several benefits.

Firstly, it allows for the natural fibers to grow naturally (Fletcher, 2007; Silva et al., 2022) and to reduce the use of resources and the amounts of waste because the clothes are produced in smaller batches (Jung & Jin, 2014 ; Silva et al., 2022). At the production stage, the waste is reduced because the brands do not produce in large quantities that will end up unsold (Domingos et al., 2022).

Secondly, the well-being of the workers is enhanced (Silva et al., 2022). Slow production reduces the time pressure and the workload for the workers because they do not have to deal with unpredictable demands (Jung & Jin, 2014) and because they do not have to meet short lead times (Silva et al., 2022).

Thirdly, the quality of the clothes is also improved because the workers can spend more time on each piece (Jung & Jin, 2014) and because the quality of the raw materials used tends to be superior to the ones used in fast fashion, the quality of the stitching is also better (Leslie et al., 2014). The high quality of the products is important because it is a way for slow fashion brands to differentiate themselves from their fast fashion counterparts (Štefko & Steffek, 2018).

In addition to slow production, having a **local production** is found in several analyses of slow fashion (Fletcher, 2010; Jung & Jin (2014); Ertekin & Atik, 2015; Štefko & Steffek, 2018). Garments produced locally do not come from all over the world which, by reducing pollution, is better for the environment (Leslie et al. 2014). In addition to giving competitive advantages, producing locally allows the brands to control the quality more easily and to have more flexibility (Leslie et al., 2014). A slow fashion designer interviewed by Leslie et al. (2014) stated, when talking about the flexibility of local production, that he is just one call away from the producers if he needs a change in a product.

Reducing the **impact of the fashion industry on the environment** is also important in slow fashion. We already saw two ways in which slow fashion protects the environment: less waste, both on the production and the consumption sides and reducing pollution by relying on local production. Environmental awareness is also translated by the use of friendly materials instead of dangerous and unhealthy chemicals (Štefko & Steffek, 2018) and by making sure that the clothes do not finish their lives in landfills (Jung & Jin, 2014). For example, materials are recycled and reused. Lastly, slow fashion uses “less water, eco-friendly dyes and produces fewer emissions in the manufacturing process” (Leslie et al., 2014). Using less water is important because water is a finite resource and using eco-friendly dyes is better for the planet because it pollutes less. Waste waterflow, the release of toxic substances and metals in rivers are usually the result of following a non eco-friendly dyeing process (Centobelli et al., 2022).

It is also important to mention the **price** of slow fashion. Slow fashion brands often sell their products at a high price. This, in order to remain profitable while producing smaller quantities (Silva et al., 2022). People link high prices with quality (Leslie et al., 2014). A high price can have positive and negative consequences.

On the positive side, consumers give a higher value to the pieces and will not discard them as quickly (Silva et al., 2022). Štefko & Steffek (2018) have found that slow fashion consumers are usually willing to pay a higher price when the manufacturing conditions are ethical while Centobelli et al. (2022) states that more and more consumers are willing to pay a higher price for sustainable clothes.

On the negative side, some people might refrain from buying a piece from a slow fashion brand because of the price. Yet, if people view the pieces they buy from a slow fashion brand as an investment and start to buy quality instead of multiplying their purchases, the price of the pieces might not seem as such a barrier.

Thinking of the Cost Per Wear (CPW) might help consumers to view the value of their purchase and to perceive it as an investment. The CPW is a computation that gives you the cost of a purchase based on the number of times it will be worn ( $cost\ per\ wear = \frac{price}{number\ of\ wear}$ ), it allows consumers to compute the lifetime value of a purchase (Lee, n.d.). The initial cost of the purchase might seem high in slow fashion but given the quality, the piece will be kept for a long time, making the Cost Per Wear low.

On the social side, the **welfare of the workers** is a major concern of slow fashion and consumers are paying more and more attention to the working conditions of the workers (Domingos et al., 2022). We have already seen that having a slow production puts less pressure on the workers and increases their well-being. Explanations regarding what (good) working conditions entails can be found in the later part of this literature review. Briefly, good working conditions encompasses a lot of different elements such as the working time, the remuneration, the environment, etc. which have to correspond to certain standards to be considered “good”.

All of these elements explained above can be viewed as elements that shape the slow fashion movement. But how is it possible to recognize a brand as part of the slow fashion movement? Jung & Jin (2014) have identified five dimensions for a brand to be considered a slow fashion one. The different dimensions are the following: **equity** (respect and good compensation of the workers), **localism** (support local business and using local resources), **authenticity** (hand craftsmanship), **exclusivity** (not having mass production) and **functionality** (longevity and versatility of the clothes). These five dimensions show that both environmental and social sustainability are important in slow fashion (Jung & Jin, 2014).

Let us examine each criteria to see if they shed light on new elements regarding slow fashion or if they allow us to consider the previously mentioned elements from another point of view.

The first dimension is **equity**. Equity relates to treating the workers with respect and making sure they are earning a living wage (Jung & Jin, 2014). It also relates to having acceptable workloads and good working conditions (Jung & Jin, 2014). The way in which slow fashion brands manage the treatment of their workers during the manufacturing process is what is going to be investigated throughout this thesis, it seems normal that equity is a criteria of the movement’s brands. We saw before that equity for the workers can be achieved through a slower production where the workers are not under loads of pressure.

The second dimension is **localism** which relates to supporting local business and using local resources (Jung & Jin, 2014). Being local is often mentioned when talking about slow fashion because it can offer the brands a competitive advantage and it can serve as a marketing strategy (Leslie et al., 2014). However, workers need to be respected and have good working conditions regardless of their location. It could therefore be interesting to investigate brands that do not use local resources and workers to see how they manage to control the working conditions of their workers to make sure that they are respected during the process of making the products. For this reason, we believe that a slow fashion brand can still be considered as one regardless of the localism criteria, as long as workers are treated correctly.

The third dimension is **authenticity**. This dimension includes the hand craftsmanship of the clothes. Workers should have the opportunity to spend more time on each piece and use traditional techniques (Jung & Jin, 2014). This dimension is important as it relates to the labour of the workers. Workers should not be under the pressure to produce a lot of clothes in little time, they should be able to focus on each garment and put their skills into practice.

The fourth dimension, **exclusivity**, is about selling clothes that are not mass-produced, that are unique so that they can express the style of the consumer (Jung & Jin, 2014). The exclusivity of the

products sold in slow fashion stores is also a differentiation strategy from fast fashion stores (Leslie et al., 2014). Offering unique and personalized garments gives a competitive advantage to slow fashion brands as it is impossible to make the same offer when doing mass-production (Štefko & Steffek, 2018). This dimension is related to the previous one as exclusivity means having a smaller scale production which allows workers to spend more time on each piece.

The last dimension is **functionality**. The goal of the brands should be to sell high quality products that people will wear for a long time and in different ways (Jung & Jin, 2014). This dimension can be linked to the notions of slow consumption and sustainable design that we have seen before. If a piece is versatile, people have more opportunities to wear it and will need to purchase less.

These five dimensions further confirms what has been seen so far about slow fashion: offering unique pieces that are produced with respect to the people and the environment.

Lastly, **thrift shops and second hand stores** such as Goodwill, Les Petits Riens... are stores that sell already worn clothes to give them a second life. These stores are an alternative to fast fashion stores and can be included in the slow fashion movement.

## 2. Definition

Thanks to this literature review, it is now possible to give a concise definition of the slow fashion movement.

Slow fashion is a sustainable and slow movement in the fashion industry where the environment and the well-being of people are a concern throughout the whole supply chain, from the creation to the end of life of the product. Slow consumption and slow production are key characteristics of slow fashion, they allow people to value quality over quantity.

Figure 1 shows a summary of the key characteristics of slow fashion.



Figure 1 - Key characteristics of the slow fashion movement (Misukami, 2023)

### 3. Comparison with fast fashion

Nowadays, most people buy their clothes in fast fashion stores and the fast fashion brands are amongst the most popular fashion brands. For example, brands such as Nike, Zara and H&M were in the top 10 most valuable apparel brands in 2022 (Brandirectory, 2023). Fast fashion stores can be defined as stores that sell mass-produced, standardized pieces of clothing that are cheap, easy and rapid to produce (Fletcher, 2010). These fast-paced production methods allow the fast fashion stores to produce a new collection every few weeks sold at a cheap price.

In recent years, awareness has grown towards the social and environmental impacts of fast fashion. On the social side, we can mention forced and child labour, low wages, unpaid overtime and bad working conditions (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). While on the environmental side, we can mention the use of harmful chemicals and non-renewable natural resources, the high and frequent transportation mileage by air (Turker & Altuntas, 2014) and the high volume of waste (Centobelli et al., 2022). The fashion industry is ranked second among the most polluting industries (after the oil and gas industry) (GENeco, n.d.)

The Rana Plaza disaster of 2013 (a clothing factory collapsed in Bangladesh, killing over 2,000 people), followed by the release of the investigative documentary "The True Cost" in 2015 shed light on the bad conditions of the workers and ignited awareness in the general public about this issue. Unfortunately, the public knowing about these problems is not enough. As Ertekin and Atik (2015) demonstrate, the desire for comfort, convenience and practicality lead people to ignore the bad treatments to which workers are exposed. Trying to change their customer habits would require investing time and effort (Ertekin & Atik, 2015). Nonetheless, awareness is growing and some companies are trying to be more socially responsible (Domingos et al., 2022).

Let us now do a quick comparison between slow fashion and the movement that prompted it, fast fashion.

Fletcher (2007) wrote about fast fashion that "short lead times and cheap clothes are only made possible by exploitation of labour and natural resources.". While we have seen that in slow fashion, workers and the environment are seen as precious resources. Workers can take the time to create each piece with care and the slow production allows for the raw materials to grow naturally (Silva et al., 2022).

Fast fashion promotes overconsumption and quick disposal. New pieces are brought in the store every few weeks (Domingos et al., 2022) and the low prices offered by fast fashion brands have led to changes in consumers' habits, they give little value to their clothes because they are seen as disposable (Fletcher, 2010). Additionally, the quality of the fabrics is bad which promotes rapid renewal (Fletcher, 2010). In 2015, the British charity Banado's conducted a study and found that people only wore a new piece seven times before getting rid of it (Thomas, 2019). This is a big contrast to slow fashion where clothes are seen as an investment, people will buy fewer products which are of better quality and will be kept for a longer period of time.

Besides the cheap quality of the fabrics, the manufacturing process also leads to the poor quality of the products because of mass-production. Workers often have to work on tight deadlines and are subject to a heavy workload which not only puts pressure on them and decreases their wellbeing but also means that the stitching, the seams and other aspects of the products will not be manufactured properly by the workers.

While eco-friendly materials are used in slow fashion, the norm in the textile and clothing industry is to use chemicals and dyes that are dangerous and harmful for humans as well as for the environment (Štefko & Steffek, 2018; Silva et al., 2022).

The production of fast fashion brands is often located in low-cost labour countries where the legislations on workers' safety and health protection are not strict (Centobelli et al., 2022). In contrast, we have seen that a lot of slow fashion brands promote having a local production. Some slow fashion brands, we will see in the next sections, have decided to manufacture their products in the same low-cost labour countries as fast fashion brands. However, it should be noted that they produce with a completely different mentality, which does not make them comparable.



## What is the manufacturing process?

In this section, we will give a definition of the manufacturing process and examine the steps it includes. To do so, we first have to explain the framework in which the manufacturing process takes place. The manufacturing process is one of the steps in the fashion supply chain.

Consequently, it is now important to first determine what the supply chain in the fashion industry looks like and then dive deeper into the topic of the manufacturing process.

### 1. Definitions

We will begin by clarifying two concepts: the fashion industry and the supply chain.

The **fashion industry** includes the businesses of clothing, headwear, footwear and accessories (Solinger, n.d.).

Taking the definition given by Sadler (2007), **supply chains** are “groups of companies which work together to source, produce and deliver goods and services to end customers”. A basic supply chain is composed of (Sadler, 2007):

- “a focal company, which forms goods or services for a set of consumers,
- a range of suppliers of raw materials and components,
- distributors, which deliver the goods to consumers, and
- modes of transport which move products between each location in the chain.”

In the fashion industry, **supply chains** are often very **long and complex** because many different stakeholders are involved. The **focal company** is the **brand** that will sell the products online and/or in their stores to the end-customers. **Behind the brand**, there are **a lot of suppliers** which supply the company with the end-products but these suppliers also have different suppliers that provide them with the raw materials or that perform some transforming operations.

## 2. A deeper dive in the fashion supply chain

Now that we have a basic understanding of what a fashion supply chain is, let us investigate the different steps and stakeholders it includes.

Jasiulewicz-Kaczmarek & Saniuk (2015) identified the different steps of the product life cycle for any product: design, implementation of the project, production, exploitation, liquidation. The process described by Jasiulewicz-Kaczmarek & Saniuk (2015) was specifically applied to the fashion industry by dividing the fashion supply chain into five steps: designing the clothes, producing the materials, producing the clothes, distribution and retail and reaching the customer (Good On You, 2022). We could add a sixth step to this fashion supply chain in order to close the cycle highlighted in the original model: the disposal of the products.

With the help of these explanations, of different representations of the fashion supply chain made by Human Rights Watch (2017), Oxfam Australia (2019) and H&M (n.d.), and of the book “Sustainable Fashion and Textile” written by Fletcher (2014), we were able to draw out a complete overview of the fashion supply chain (Figure 2). The different representations that helped us can be found in Appendix 1.

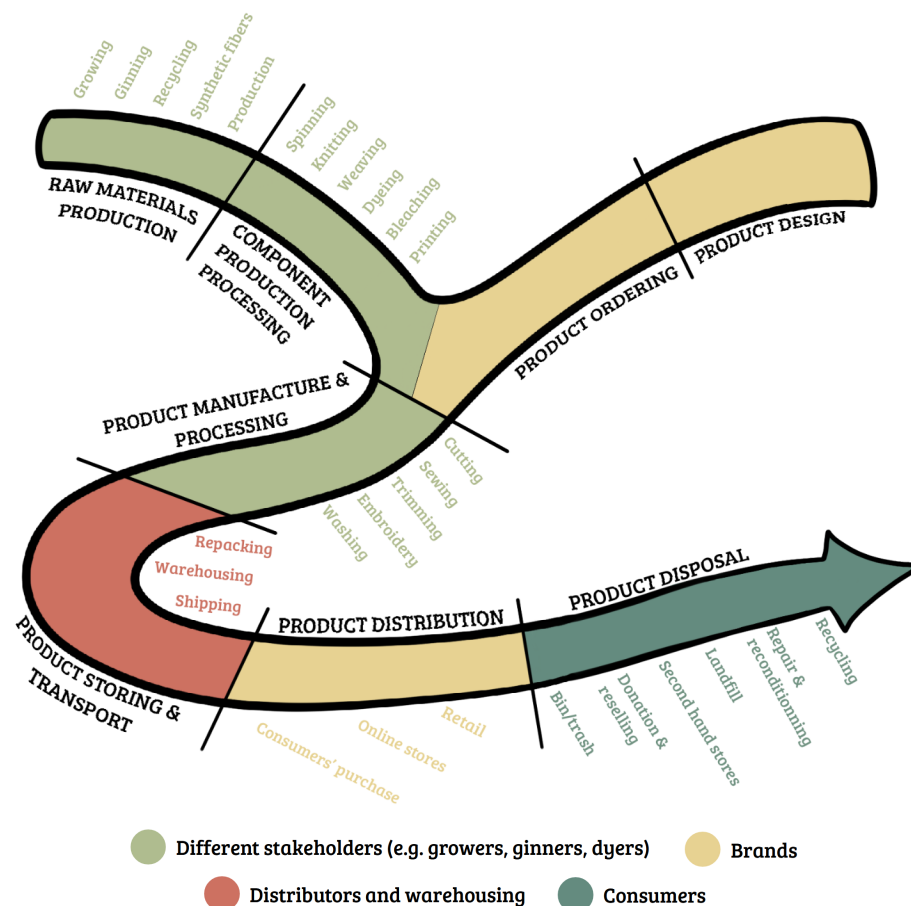


Figure 2 - Fashion Supply Chain (Misukami & Delforge, 2023)

We are going to briefly explain each step. The “product manufacturing and processing” step will be explained in a separate point as it is a focal topic of this thesis.

#### a. Raw materials production

The production of the raw materials covers the production of the fibers that will be used to make the different pieces (clothes, shoes, etc.).

Two different types of fibers can be used: natural (e.g. cotton) and synthetic fibers (e.g. nylon, polyester)(Oxfam Australia, 2019). Growers grow **natural fibers** which are then ginned (by ginners) while **synthetic fibers** are chemically produced (Oxfam Australia, 2019). **Ginning** is the process of separating the seeds and the hull in order to clean the cotton fibers (ScienceDirect, 2022). Raw materials can also come from **recycled components** (H&M, n.d.).

#### b. Component production processing

This second step entails the process of transformation of the fibers from raw materials to yarns or fabrics that can be used. Different transformation processes are performed: fibers are spinned into yarns or they are knitted or weaved to create fabrics (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Then, the fabric finishing is performed which includes the processes of bleaching, dyeing and printing (Fletcher, 2014, 60-66).

**Bleaching** is performed either in order to have white fabrics or as a preliminary step for fabrics that will be dyed or printed to pale colours (Fletcher, 2014, 61). **Printing** is “the process of applying colour to fabric in definite patterns or designs” while the **dyeing** process involves applying only one colour to the entire fabric (Textile Vlog, 2020).

After the finishing processes, the fabrics are ready to be used in the manufacturing process.

#### c. Product design

While the two previous processes are happening, brands are designing their products. They decide what the pieces will look like. They can also influence the component production processing by requiring specific patterns for their products.

As previously explained, designers play an important role because they have the power to create versatile and timeless pieces that will be worn for a long time or create pieces that will fit the trends and will be discarded after a few wears. Their impact is even greater as they can also take into account the end of life of the products by designing a product with components and materials that will be easier to recycle.

#### d. Product order

Once the brands have their designs, they send their orders to factories which will start producing. Product order triggers the start of the manufacturing process.

#### e. Product storing and transport

After the manufacturing process, the pieces are finalized and ready to be shipped to the brand that had placed the order (Oxfam Australia, 2019). The pieces are then stored in different warehouses waiting to be shipped to retailers or ordered by an online customer.

#### f. Product distribution

Products have two ways to reach customers: retail or online purchase.

#### g. Product disposal

Lastly, when the product no longer serves the customer, it will be disposed of. Traditionally, products will be **thrown away**. However with the increased awareness towards sustainability, implementation of waste management strategies are more popular (Fletcher, 2014, 117).

Several waste management strategies exist, let us investigate three that Fletcher (2014, 117) describes:

- **Reuse** the products with the same utility. This is possible through donation to family, friends and acquaintances or to second-hands organisms. Reselling the products is also a possibility.

It is important to mention that not all donated clothes will end up in second-hand shops, most of them will be sent overseas and sold to local traders (Fletcher, 2014, 119) or will end up in **landfills**. In 2018 in the US, 9 070 thousand tons of clothing and footwear items were landfilled (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2022).

- **Repairing and reconditioning** the products so that it is still wearable (e.g. patching a trouser).
- **Recycling** the products that is, disposing of the used fabrics or used items in order to be able to reuse them to make another product.

### 3. Fashion manufacturing process

Humans are involved in every step of the fashion supply chain but we chose to focus on the workers in the "Product manufacturing and processing" step. This step will be referred to as the **manufacturing process**.

We decided to concentrate on this part of the supply chain because as Fletcher (2014, 58) states it perfectly: "The key social challenges are to protect workers, provide more secure employment, pay living wages, and respect workers' rights to freedom of association. These challenges lie mainly in the cut-make-trim processing stage, where labour is employed most intensively". In the next section, the working conditions of the workers in the manufacturing process will be investigated and we will be able to understand the social challenges Fletcher mentioned.

Based on the decided design, the manufacturing process transforms the different fabrics into the desired product (e.g. t-shirt, scarf, sneaker). As it has been explained, the manufacturing process takes place after "Component production processing" is done and is triggered by an order. The process ends when the final product is created and ready for "Product storing and transport".

The process takes place in **cut-make-trim (CMT) factories** and when these factories lack in-house capacity, they will subcontract some parts of the process to another factory (Human Right Watch, 2017; Oxfam Australia, 2019). Different operations are performed in order to create the pieces including: cutting and sewing the fabrics, trimming the pieces, adding embroidery and finishing touches. The garments are also washed. These operations are mainly used to create products such as clothes, accessories and household linen. We are going to see that manufacturing shoes involves other types of operations.

#### 4. Particularities of the shoe making process

We saw that the fashion industry encompasses different businesses including the clothing and footwear businesses. Although clothing brands and footwear brands have similar supply chains, the manufacturing processes within these are different based on the manufactured product.

The main difference is that shoe manufacturing is based on a shoe last (Luximon, 2013, 177).

A **shoe last** is a tool used by shoemakers for shoe molding and is used through the entire shoemaking process (Kletina, 2019). A shoe last can be made of different materials and can be shaped in different forms (Kletina, 2019). The design of the last will determine the shape of the shoe and of each element needed to make a shoe (Luximon, 2017, 177). For example, the bottom pattern of the last will determine the shape of the outsole (Luximon, 2017, 177). Determining what the shoe last will look like and creating it is the first step to manufacture a shoe.

There are many types of shoes (e.g. boots, sneakers, sandals), based on the type, the process will be adapted. Nonetheless, any shoe includes the following components (Luximon, 2017, 200): an **upper part** (everything above the shoe's sole), a **lower part** (insole, sole and outsole) and **grindery** (any additional items such as eyelets and toe puffs).

Based on the shoe last, the shoemaker will then be able to **create patterns** of the different pieces needed to create the shoes (Van Rothen, 2015). Then, the patterns are used to cut the materials and fabrics used for the shoe which will then be **assembled** (or *stitched*)(Chuenyindee et al., 2022). The shoe last will be used to join the different parts of the shoe together (Luximon, 2013, 117). In shoe making, the **finishing touches** include the laying of eyelets, the placing of permanent laces, the burning of protruding wires, the tinting of the sole, etc. (Van Rothen, 2015).

## What are good working conditions?

For us, respecting the workers of the manufacturing process means that they have good working conditions. Having good working conditions depends on the job quality. We will see that there are 7 dimensions to determine the quality of a job: physical environment, work intensity, working time quality, social environment, skills and discretion, prospect and earnings.

Therefore, the next big part of this thesis will focus on the working conditions. We are first going to research what the term “working conditions” means and what good working conditions should encompass. Then, we will look into the working conditions in mainstream fashion and explain why it is a problem.

### 1. Definition

The term **working conditions** is wide, it covers “a broad range of topics and issues, from working time (hours of work, rest periods, and work schedules) to remuneration, as well as the physical conditions and mental demands that exist in the workplace” (ILO, n.d.).

To determine what **good** working conditions look like, it should be noted that several legislations exist and set the minimum standards that should be respected.

In a collaborative report about working conditions, Eurofound and the International Labour Organization, (2019) have stated that good working conditions are important as they contribute to the well-being of workers and the success of enterprises.

Eurofound is an EU agency fighting for the improvement of living and working conditions in Europe and the International Labour Organization (ILO) is a UN agency also fighting to improve the working conditions by setting international labour standards. When joining the ILO, Member States commit to respect the **Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Right at Work** (ILO, 2022). This declaration sets five different fundamental principles or rights that all workers should enjoy:

- (a) “Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- (b) the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- (c) the effective abolition of child labour;
- (d) the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation; and
- (e) a safe and healthy working environment.”

The declaration was amended in June 2022 to add the fifth principle. Considering the number of member states that have adhered to the ILO’s constitution (187 member states), we consider that the ILO set the standard framework for what good working conditions should include.

In addition to this framework, more specific rules are also established at the European level. They make up the European framework.

The European Union (EU) adopted several directives regarding the treatment of the workers. These standards are minimums that must be respected in each Member State of the EU, nonetheless any member states can set higher standards. Additionally, sectoral agreements can also strengthen these minimum standards for specific sectors. The directives touch on matters such as health and safety, working time, work-life balance, etc.

In their collaborative report, Eurofound & ILO (2019) use seven dimensions of job quality (Figure 3) in order to compare the different levels of job quality around the world. The dimensions are related to

the health and well-being, financial security and other important characteristics that we find important to consider to establish that a worker has good working conditions. Therefore, having a high level job quality is likely to mean that the working conditions are good.



Figure 3 - Seven dimensions of job quality (Eurofound & ILO, 2019)

In this work, we will use the same seven dimensions to go into details about what good working conditions must entail. The focus will be on EU Member States as they have common minimum **standards set by the EU** on several topics. The purpose is not to compare the different legislations around the world but rather to see what is considered as good working conditions by some countries where legislations are put in place. During the explanation, we will also come back on the five fundamental principles defined by the ILO.

It is also important to mention that goal 8 of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is named “Decent work and economic growth”. Decent work is also a term that encompasses several important elements that a job must entail to be considered decent.

The ILO (n.d.) states that **decent work** “involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”

Goal 8 has several different targets, some of which are associated with having decent work and good working conditions. The related targets are (The Global Goals, n.d.): full employment and decent work with equal pay, end modern slavery, trafficking and child labour, and protect labour rights and promote safe working environments.

Based on the definition of decent work, we can understand that a decent work equals a work with good working conditions. For this reason, the two terms will be used interchangeably in the rest of this work.

## 2. Good working conditions in general

### a. Physical environment

The dimension “physical environment” relates to the physical conditions and risks that the work is performed under. Injuries, accidents and health consequences can be the results of a risky work environment (Eurofound & ILO, 2019).

This dimension is related to **health and safety** at work. According to Hughes & Ferret (2011, p.21), every business has different corporate social responsibilities including guaranteeing the health and safety of the workers at work. A safe and healthy working environment is also the fifth fundamental principle and right that workers must have at work based on the declaration from the ILO (ILO, 2022).

Let us use the definition of health and safety given by Hughes & Ferret (2011, p.22):

- **Health** is “the protection of the bodies and minds of people from illness resulting from the materials, processes or procedures used in the workplace”.
- **Safety** is “the protection of people from physical injury.”
- and “The borderline between health and safety is ill defined and the two words are normally used together to indicate concern for the physical and mental well-being of the individual at the place of work”.

What we can understand from these definitions is that health and safety at work ensures the well-being of workers from a mental and physical point of view.

The “Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Framework Directive” is a European directive which lays down the minimum rules regarding health and safety at work (EEC, 1989).

Article 5 of this directive requires that employers guarantee the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to their work and Article 6 stipulates the obligations employers must follow. For example, the employers have to take the appropriate measures to assure the health and safety of the workers and assure that the design of the workplace and the production methods are chosen in order to reduce the negative effects of work on health (EEC, 1989).

Additionally, the directive also states that the employers must evaluate and mitigate the risks linked to the work. Eurofound & ILO (2019) identify three physical risks for workers:

- **Posture-related risks** are risks caused by the positions and repetitive movement performed during the work but also due to the lifting of people or loads and vibrations from tools or machinery.
- **Ambient risks** are risks caused by noise and extreme temperature.
- **Biological and chemical risks** are risks caused by the exposure to smoke, dust pollution and the handling of chemical products.

The goal for employers should be to avoid these risks and accidents at work. An **accident at work** is a distinct event happening during work that results in physical or mental harm (Statistics Explained, 2022).

Having healthy and safe working conditions, where the risks are known and measures are in place to make sure the risks are mitigated, are included in the definition of a decent work.



### b. Work intensity

For a good job quality, the work intensity should not be too high because it would enable the workers to perform the work in an effective and healthy way. Having a high work intensity means that the work has a high workload, that it demands a lot of mental and physical energy or that it requires to deal with several different demands (Eurofound & ILO, 2019). Additionally, high intensity work can put a lot of stress and pressure on the workers which could decrease their well-being.

Having an appropriate workload is included in the definition of a decent work.

### c. Working time quality

The working time includes the hours of work, the rest period and the work schedule.

Article 31 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union is named “Fair and just working conditions” and states that “Every worker has the right to limitation of maximum working hours, to daily and weekly rest periods and to an annual period of paid leave” (EU, 2000). This means there are limits to the time a worker can work in the EU. Indeed, there are minimum standards that must be respected throughout the EU which can be found in the “Directive 2003/88/EC concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time”. This directive is important to ensure that workers do not work too much and have enough time to rest.

The time of a worker can be divided into two: the **working time** and the **rest period**. Taking the definition from the directive, the rest period is “any period which is not working time” and the working time is “any period during which the worker is working, at the employer's disposal and carrying out his activity or duties” (European Parliament, 2003). This means that the times where a worker is not actively working but must be available for the employers is still considered as working time. Let us take the example of a firefighter, while he is waiting for a call, he is not necessarily working but as soon as an emergency arrives, he must be available. The waiting time between calls is still considered working time.

The directive gives the following rules for workers within the EU (European Parliament, 2003):

- The average weekly working hours is 48 hours per week, including overtime,
- a rest break is allowed during the working hours if the workers is on duty for more than 6 hours,
- 11 consecutive hours of rest minimum is a daily requirement,
- at least 4 weeks of paid annual leave is a yearly requirement.

Also, there are additional rules for certain categories of workers and night work. In Belgium, night work is work that is performed between 8 pm and 6 am (Service public fédéral Emploi, Travail et Concertation sociale, n.d.).

In addition to the duration of the work, the working time arrangement and flexibility should also be talked about in this dimension.

It is important for workers to have a schedule so that they can have a work-life balance. In addition, workers might sometimes need accommodation to the schedule to take care of unplanned events or obligations they have to attend to. Having an organised schedule that allows some flexibility has a positive impact on worker well-being and their work-life balance (Eurofound & ILO, 2019).

Having an appropriate working time is part of a decent work.

#### d. Social environment

The social environment relates to the social relations that the workers have in the context of their work with their colleagues or with the management. As workers spend a large amount of time at their workplace, it is normal that the environment will affect them.

Social relations influence the atmosphere at work. Feeling integrated and accepted in the community is important for employees' well-being (Eurofound & ILO, 2019). Additionally, when workers feel comfortable at work, they are able to focus on doing their job properly which will increase their motivation, productivity and performance (Hafeez et al., 2019). This increased performance by individual workers will in turn lead to improvement for the organisation's productivity (Hafeez et al., 2019).

Workers need social support from their colleagues and from the management which plays an important role in workers' perception of the working environment (Eurofound & ILO, 2019).

A bad social environment can cause mental depression and anxiety, it can also increase turnover (Eurofound & ILO, 2019) and increase absenteeism (Hafeez et al., 2019). Moreover, a manager working for the Fair Wear Foundation states that "Violence and harassment affect productivity, competitiveness and company reputation, as well as women's integrity, health and wellbeing" (Hodal, 2019).

A fulfilling social environment at work is part of a decent work.

#### e. Skills and discretion

Skills and discretion is about whether or not workers are able to develop and grow through their work experience (Eurofound & ILO, 2019). Different elements are included in this dimension (Eurofound & ILO, 2019):

- The **cognitive dimension** encompasses three elements: learning new things, performing some complex tasks that need some reflection and solving unexpected problems. Learning new things and having task variation is important, it helps with motivation and engagement of workers.
- The **decision latitude (or discretion)** means workers are able to make some decisions in their work, they can choose how they are going to perform their job, everything is not controlled tightly with procedures. The higher the decision latitude, the more the employee will be engaged in his work.
- Having **organisational participation**, which means that workers are involved in organisational decisions, is also important to increase employee's motivation and engagement.
- Workers must have **training** to progress in their work and to adapt to new technologies. When training is provided by the employers, it shows that the company cares and invests in its employees.

Being able to develop one's skills on the job and making decisions on one's job and organisational decisions is part of a decent job.

#### f. Prospects

This dimension also includes different elements. The concept of "prospects" is not only about having a **stable employment**, it is also about the **type of contract** the workers have, the possibility for **professional advancement** and the **job security** (Eurofound & ILO, 2019).

Downsizing can create job insecurity for all workers: those who get fired as a result of the downsizing as well as the workers who stay on the job. Having a secure job where the workers do not feel like they can become unemployed easily is good because job insecurity can cause a lot of stress (Eurofound & ILO, 2019).

Having good job prospects and all the elements associated with them is part of a decent work.

#### g. Earnings

The earning is the remuneration, the amount of money a worker receives in exchange for the work performed. A distinction should be drawn between a **minimum wage** and a **living wage** because these two terms define the wage differently.

The minimum wage is “the minimum amount of remuneration that an employer is required to pay wage earners for the work performed during a given period, which cannot be reduced by collective agreement or an individual contract ”(ILO, n.d.). The ILO (n.d.) also mentions that the goal of the minimum wage is to protect workers against low pay and that it can help to overcome poverty and reduce inequality. The minimum wage is a requirement given to all the companies most often given by the country's government. Only five Member States in the EU do not have a minimum wage (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Italy).

Nonetheless paying the minimum wage is not always enough to ensure a decent life, this is why the United Nations encourages companies to pay their employees a **living wage** (United Nations, 2021).

A living wage must enable the worker and its family to have a decent standard of living and live a life in dignity. It must be sufficient to afford all necessities such as food, water, housing, transportation, education, health care, clothing, taxes and be able to save for emergencies or unexpected events (Global Living Wage Coalition, n.d.; WageIndicator, 2022). We can understand that there is not one value of living wage, it depends on the location of the workers and his living and family situations.

The first SDG is called “No poverty” (The Global Goals, n.d.), it relates to the payment of a living wage because to end poverty, workers must receive enough money in order to be able to satisfy their basic needs.

Additionally, if overtime hours are required, these should be voluntary and paid.

Earning a living wage and being paid for overtime hours are parts of having a decent work.

### 3. Working conditions in the fashion industry

Now that we know what good working conditions (or decent work) should look like, let us examine the situation in the fashion industry. We will mostly focus on the situation in the fast fashion industry because that is where the majority of people are buying their clothes (Brandirectory, 2023). Fast fashion brands' production is often located in countries where labour costs are cheap and where there is not much legislation regarding workers' rights and the environment (Silva et al., 2022). For example, the majority of shoes are produced in Asian countries (Public Eye, n.d.)

In fast fashion, the working conditions are not good. The root cause is that fast fashion brands have an agile supply chain in order to quickly answer to the demand. This has multiple consequences such as short lead-times, high order fulfillment rate and a lot of competition to offer the newest possible trend and at the lowest cost to the customers (Turker & Altuntas, 2014). In their paper, Turker & Altuntas (2014) mention that this responsiveness is unsustainable because it creates ethical, employment and environmental issues. This section will investigate the employment issues as they are the ones related to the working conditions.

Fletcher (2014, 68) gives another reason for the bad working conditions when she explains that the manufacturing process is relocated to countries with cheap labour costs where manufacturers compete on price with each other in order to be part of big brands' supply chain. This issue is voiced by a managing director in a factory interviewed by Oxfam Australia (2019): "There are several vendors, for example 10 vendors, of a single buyer. Who offers lowest price gets the order." Manufacturing companies manage to be competitive and offer low prices by violating labour and union rights and offering bad working conditions (Fletcher, 2014, 68).

As we explained previously, the welfare of workers and their working conditions is important in slow fashion. The working conditions that are going to be described is what slow fashion brands try to mitigate.

Let us introduce an important term: sweatshops. A **sweatshop** is "a workplace characterized by extended or intense physical labour, poor and unsafe working conditions, and low wages" (Oxford Reference, 2018). Low wages, unsustainable working time (high daily hours, few days off, forced and unpaid overtime hours) and no job security (no social protection or union) characterise the working conditions in sweatshops (Oxfam France, 2020). These characteristics already introduce us to the conditions in the fashion industry.

Before diving into the different dimensions of working conditions in the fashion industry, let us be reminded that it is not because there are rules that they are respected.

For example, in the UK they have the Ethical Trading Initiatives's Base Code (ETI) and the modern slavery act. The former is a code of labor practice with ten different minimum standards that the member brands have to follow in order to assure good working conditions for the workers (Ethical Trading Initiative, 2018). While the latter is a legislation created to tackle modern slavery in the UK by having companies reporting on the efforts they make to identify and avoid the occurrence of human rights related risks within their supply chain (*Modern Slavery Act 2015*, 2015). Although these laws exist, there have still been incidents regarding bad treatment of the workers in the garment industry by companies in the UK. Wages of £2-3 per hour are being paid to factory workers in the UK while the national minimum wage is £8.72 per hour (Labour Behind the Label, n.d.). Workers do not report these illegal work practices for different reasons, one of them being the language barrier as a majority of factory workers are part of minority ethnic groups (Labour Behind the Label, n.d.).

#### a. Physical environment

Thanks to the Rana Plaza disaster, the world was able to see what the working conditions were like in what people call sweatshops. More specifically, the disaster made the safety hazards of these workplaces more apparent. Indeed, the collapse could have been avoided because large cracks had been found in the walls making a lot of workers worry about the safety of the building. But the managers forced the workers to work in the building anyway (HRW, 2013; Jacoby, 2018; Goodwin, 2021). The building was not safe to work in and people were still forced to work, this shows that the safety of the workers was less important than making the clothes to fulfill orders.

This happened in 2013, we can thus ask ourselves if safety has become a more important concern in the recent years.

Soon after the tragedy, the “Accord on Fire and Building Safety” saw the light of day in 2013 in order to put safety measures in place in Bangladesh. This accord was updated in 2018 and was in effect until 2021. As of 2021, there is a new accord in place, called the “**International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry**”, which 198 brands have signed as of December 15, 2022. The goal of this accord is to promote “workplace safety through independent inspections, remediation, and training programs and recognises the rights of workers to organise, refuse unsafe work and raise health and safety concerns” (International Accord, 2021). Article 27 of the accord provides the workers a complaint process to make sure that they can raise their concerns about health and safety of their workplace appropriately (International Accord, 2021).

Asma Khatun, a garment worker who survived the Rana Plaza collapse, says that things have changed where she works, that managers take actions when they have a complaint or concern (Safi et al., 2018).

This shows an improvement for Bangladesh but in other countries such as Pakistan, the situation was still bad in 2022. For example in Pakistan, workers’ safety, health and wellbeing is not guaranteed according to a survey done by researchers at WISERD and Cardiff Business School (Davies & Jenkins, 2022). No access to clean toilets, safe drinking water and regular scheduled rest breaks are some of the characteristics of the working conditions in the garment factories of Pakistan (Davies & Jenkins, 2022). On January 1, 2023, the Pakistan Accord on Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry saw the light of day and it has the same purpose as the one active in Bangladesh.

While it would be beneficial for companies to have a healthy and safe workplace environment since it can increase productivity, a majority of employers see the adjustments that would be needed to make the workplace better as extra cost and do not take action (Hafeez et al., 2019). Additionally, we believe that the manufacturing companies do not have much leverage and power to improve the situation by themselves because they are subcontractors dependent on external orders from brands for fundings.

Creating the Accord in Bangladesh and Pakistan already shows progress but the end goal would be to have accords in every country where there are unsafe factories as incidents are still reported in manufacturing factories (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2023).

#### b. Work intensity

Workers have to work fast because they have a daily target to hit. For example, the wages are linked to performance and productivity in some factories in Vietnam in order to make workers produce more (Oxfam Australia, 2019).

This dependency between the income and productivity puts pressure on the workers, they have to work at high intensity in order to meet the target product rate because their earnings depend on it.

In some factories in Bangladesh, the Rana Plaza disaster also caused an increase in intensity (Kabeer, 2020). The law became stricter on the working hours and as a result, many factories have increased the hourly target production of the workers (e.g. produce 150 - 200 pieces per hour while they had to produce 120 pieces per hour before)(Kabeer, 2020).

#### c. Working time quality

Long working days are common in manufacturing factories, two instances in two different countries are going to be explained.

*Public eye* is an independent organisation from Switzerland which investigates and campaigns about the impact of its country and its enterprises on disadvantaged countries in order to document it (Public Eye, n.d.). In 2021, Public Eye did a study on the working conditions inside Shein's factories. Shein is a popular Chinese online retailer, which sells fast-fashion items at an extremely low price. Approximately 2 000 new items are added every day on Shein and the brand made \$30 billion in revenue in 2022 (Curry, 2023). The Public Eye researcher was able to speak with three different employees working in a Chinese factory and he asked them about their working time. They gave similar answers and the amount of time they communicated was over 75 working hours per week, which is much more than what Chinese law provides (Kollbrunner, 2021). Additionally, they mentioned working after dinner six out of seven days of the week and only having one day off per month (Kollbrunner, 2021).

In Thailand, a manufacturing worker states that they are often forced to work until 2 or 3 am during peak season. They cannot refuse because they need the money the overtime hours will provide as their basic wage is too low (Clean Clothes Campaign, n.d.). Some factories do not even pay overtime but workers do not complain out of fear of losing their job (Clean Clothes Campaign, n.d.).

With these two examples, we can see that work schedules are not fixed and workers often have to do overtime which most certainly impacts and causes a bad work-life balance.

#### d. Social environment

Sexual, physical and verbal abuses are common in Asian factories where most fast fashion brands produce. Violence and harassment seem to be linked with overtime, which we have seen is very common in factories (Hodal, 2019).

An example of these abuses happened in January 2021 and is explained in an article in the Guardian (Kelly, 2022): a 20 years old Indian woman was working in a local factory, manufacturing clothes for well known fast fashion brands. One day after a shift, she never returned home and was found dead four days later. Her supervisor was arrested for her murder. Her family and coworkers stated that the young lady was sexually harassed by him but she felt powerless to report or to stop because she was afraid to lose her job. It seems that the management knew what was happening but did not take any action. Other women working in the factory came forward to report harassment and assault. Also, it appears that she was not the first woman to be killed in this factory.

The abuses in this factory are not isolated occurrences (Kelly, 2022). Such abuses happen in many factories in India and in other countries. Women, who are the most targeted by assaults, do not speak up about the abuses they face because they are afraid to be dismissed. Additionally, they do not have any support and managers threaten them that if they speak publicly, brands will stop working with their factory which in turn will have to close and they will lose their job.

Researchers at Sheffield University have carried a survey across 302 factories in Ethiopia, Honduras, India and Myanmar where more than 1 000 workers were interviewed (LeBaron et al., 2021). One of their findings is linked to the topic of assault and harassment: they found that in 2020, 35% of the respondents reported verbal abuse and 24% reported threats and intimidation (LeBaron et al., 2021).

Likewise, in another study, 763 Vietnamese women workers were asked whether they had suffered any violence or harassment in the previous year; 43,1% answered that they had (Hodal, 2019).

These examples help us understand that the welfare and respect of the workers is not the focus in a lot of factories. Workers do not work in a comfortable environment, they are afraid to speak up and are not supported by the management.

#### e. Skills and discretion

Let us review two elements included in this dimension:

- The **cognitive dimension** is all about learning new things and having task variation to keep the workers engaged. Given that the manufacturing process is a repetitive process, once the workers have learned the task they have to perform in the process, they will repeat it over and over and will not get to learn new things.
- The **decision latitude (or discretion)** is about the level of decisions the workers have in their job. For manufacturing workers, the decision latitude is pretty low given that they have to follow procedures to make a product which fits the requirements. Additionally, they do not choose what the product they manufacture will look like. The workers have to comply with the design they have received.

These two elements explain that the skills and discretion dimension is not engaging for workers in the manufacturing process. Unfortunately, these above-mentioned characteristics are linked to the nature of the job which is repetitive.

#### f. Prospects

We mentioned before that fast fashion brands have **short lead times**. Having short lead times means that there is little time between the placement of the order from the customer and the delivery of his order. Consequently, manufacturers have to deal with unpredictable orders that have to be fulfilled quickly, which makes it hard to plan the number of workers that will be needed in the long run and increases the need for temporary or subcontracted workers or overtime (Ertekin & Atik, 2015). This characteristic means that workers do not have stable employment nor job security which as we have seen are elements needed for a decent work.

On the topic of job insecurity, in a study made by Oxfam (2019), they found that 80% of interviewed workers in Bangladesh constantly fear losing their job because management can fire anyone at any time. While in Vietnam, 25% of interviewed workers have this constant fear. The fact that workers are afraid of being terminated explains why the workers accept the working conditions.

#### g. Earnings

In countries where most companies manufacture their clothes, the minimum wage is lower than the living wage (Fashion Checker, n.d.). For instance, the minimum wage in Bangladesh in 2014 for workers was \$65 a month when the living wage was estimated to be triple that number (Jacoby, 2018). This means that workers cannot provide for their and their family's fundamental needs. However, receiving a proper remuneration is important, as Asian Floor Wage Alliance (2022) expresses it: "Workers' wage determine the ability of their household to survive".

Oxfam Australia (2019) explains really well the consequences of earning a low wage on the workers. It is a vicious circle: you gain a low wage which makes workers work a lot and do overtime which leads to a lot of negative consequences both at the workplace and in their personal lives as can be seen on figure 4.

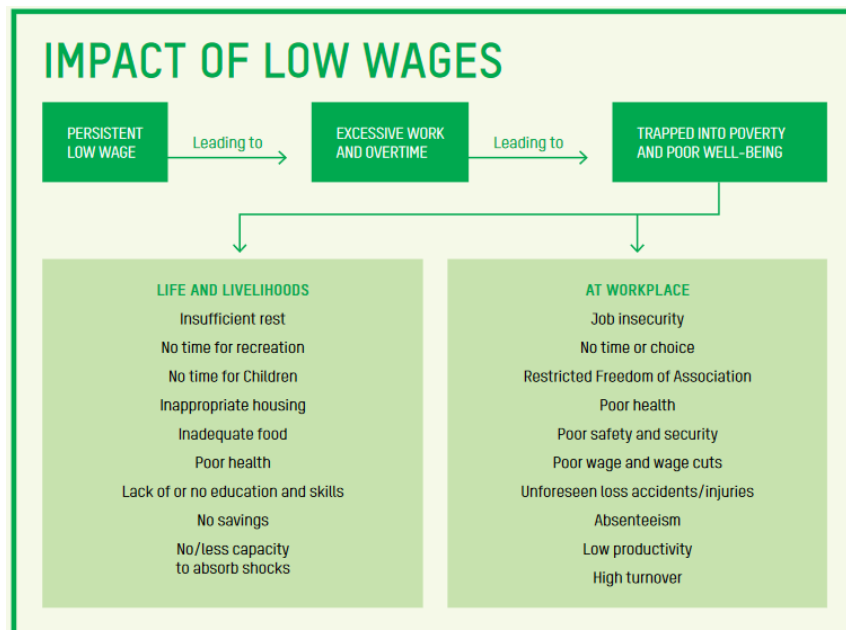


Figure 4 - Impact of low wages on workers (Oxfam, 2019, p.32)

On top of that, the workers are not always paid for their whole working time or they are paid based on a productivity wage payment making their wage dependent on the productivity and speed at which they can make the garment (Oxfam, 2019).

In 2017, Oxfam asked *Deloitte Access Economics* to make an analysis of Australia's garment industry. In the process of making this report, they found that workers' wage was 4% of the retail price and that increasing the wage to a living wage would increase the final garment price by 1% (Deloitte, 2017). A similar number has been found by Sasja Beslik, if H&M increased the price of their t-shirts by 12 to 25 cents, it would be enough for them to pay the production workers a living wage (Jacoby, 2018).

However, H&M who is trying to be more socially and environmentally sustainable, says that increasing the price of clothes is not automatically reflected as an increase of the wages of the workers (H&M, n.d.). Also, they do not pay the production workers themselves but they make sure that they are paid a fair wage by monitoring them. The company has been monitoring the wages paid by all their direct suppliers and they share the data on their website. As of September 2022, the gross average wage of the workers in their nine key production markets was well above the minimum wage for each country (H&M, n.d.). However, the claims of the company should be taken carefully as H&M has been accused of greenwashing in recent years (Wicker, 2022). H&M was also implicated in the non-payment of wages of the garment workers during the coronavirus crisis (Clean Clothes Campaign, n.d.).

During the recent pandemic, a lot of garment workers were required to work in unsafe conditions and they have not been remunerated for their work. How did this happen? During the pandemic, a lot of brands have delayed payments or they canceled billions worth of orders while a lot of these orders had already been produced. In the end, this impacted the garment workers' wage (Asian Floor Wage Alliance, 2022; Clean Clothes Campaign, n.d.; Labour Behind the Label, n.d.).



Some brands have committed to pay in full for orders completed and in production while others have not (Worker Rights Consortium, n.d.). This situation shows that proper remuneration is still not an acquired right for a lot of workers.

h. Freedom of association, forced labour and child labour, discrimination

We have talked about the fifth fundamental principle from the ILO directive in the section about health and safety. However, we have not yet talked about the first four principles in practice in the fashion industry. As a reminder, these principles are applicable in the signatory member states (including countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Vietnam, etc.). The four principles include that workers have the right to freedom of association, there is no forced labour nor child labour and there is no discrimination.

While it is a fundamental right, **freedom of association** is still not a right totally acquired by the workers who still face discrimination because they stand up for themselves (AchACT, n.d.).

As for **forced and child labour**, both should be abolished but evidence shows they are still present in the manufacturing sector (ILO & IOM, 2022). Approximately 3 million people are in forced labour in the manufacturing process (from raw material collection to transformation)(ILO & IMO, 2022).

Lastly, the gender pay gap still exists and is prominent in countries such as Pakistan or Bangladesh (ILO, 2022). The gender gap is a form of **discrimination**.

These examples are evidence that the fundamental rights and principles are not respected for every worker while they are fundamental to a decent job.

#### 4. Transparency

Awareness towards the working conditions of the workers in the garment industry is growing but most brands lack transparency so we do not have a clear picture of the actual working conditions. Having transparency is a key element in order to improve the working conditions (Labour Behind the Label, n.d.), to have workplace safety (International Accord, n.d.) and to have a systemic change in the industry (Fashion Revolution, 2022). For example, on the social side, transparency is needed on where brands manufacture their products, what the wages of the workers are and if they are paid a living wage.

*Fashion Revolution*, a fashion activism movement whose aim is to change the fashion industry by raising awareness and other actions (Fashion Revolution, 2022), has created a tool called the **Fashion Transparency Index**. The goal of this tool is to increase brands' transparency about their social and environmental efforts and it achieves this goal by reviewing the level of transparency on human rights and environmental policies, practices and impacts in the operations and in the supply chains of the 250 world's largest fashion brands and retailers (Fashion Revolution, 2022). A report has been published every year since 2016 to review the actions taken by the different brands. The findings show (Fashion Revolution, 2022):

- Only 48% of the brands publish their first-tier manufacturers which means that 50% of the brands do not communicate on their supply chains. The final stage of production such as cutting, sewing and finishing products occurs at the first-tier manufacturers.
- Only 4% of the brands publish the number of workers paid a living wage in their supply chain.

The lack of transparency is also caused by the lack of knowledge from the brands. Some brands do not even know where they produce because they subcontract the production (Labour Behind the Label, n.d.). This means that brands do not control the subcontractors. After the Rana Plaza disaster, some brands denied having production in the building while evidence of clothes with their label were found in the rubble (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2021). As Clean Clothes Campaign (2021) states this lack of transparency and the failing of companies to take responsibility means that all the victims of the disaster did not receive the compensation they were entitled to.

For instance, on their website H&M (n.d.) states that they are in business with more than 602 commercial product suppliers who produce the products for their brands in more than 1519 factories across Europe, Asia and Africa. These numbers are only for the manufacturing of the products, there are many other companies who work for them in the production of the raw materials and the components for example. The supplier factories they work with employ approximately one million people (H&M, n.d.). This shows that their supply chain is really large, and they cannot know everything that is happening at every companies' site.

As consumers are becoming more aware of the issue in fashion supply chains, they are expecting brands to be more transparent and to share information about the people and materials that were affected in the making of the items (Silva et al., 2022).

There is a gap between what brands say they are doing, the reality and what people believe. This is why transparency is important in the fashion industry. This thesis aims to bring more transparency by examining how slow fashion brands manage to have good working conditions.

## What are slow fashion brands doing?

Not much literature can be found on slow fashion, as Domingos et al. (2022) mentioned in their paper: “Slow Fashion is a relatively recent topic in academic studies, and in fact the first article to address the concept dates back to 2008”. Therefore, the current literature on the topic is not extensive. Nonetheless, it is known that slow fashion cares about the social aspect throughout the whole supply chain, including during the manufacturing process. But slow fashion does not necessarily mean that the working conditions are good for the production workers.

Let us now review what can be found on **what slow brands are doing in order to respect the workers of the manufacturing process in the supply chain**. The goal is to see what is done, find out the different practices that are put in place. Afterwards, semi-structured interviews with different slow fashion brands will allow us to have a better understanding of how they respect their production workers because we will see that not much documentation can be found on this topic.

To do this review, information given on different brands’ websites is going to be used.

### 1. Place of production

When investigating where the manufacturing process of slow fashion brands takes place, we can see that there are two different tendencies followed by the brands who decide to subcontract the production: the production is outsourced to “close” workshops or it is outsourced to “far” workshops. Let us explain the difference between these two tendencies and the reasons for choosing either one of these approaches.

#### a. Local production

The first approach concerns brands who choose to outsource the production to “close” workshops. Within this approach the factories are located in the same country as the headquarters of the brand or within a close or neighbouring country from the headquarters where managers can easily access and visit the production site. For example, a French company producing in Belgium, Spain, Italy or Portugal.

Brands using this approach will be referred to as having a **local production**. There are two main reasons for choosing to produce in local workshops.

Firstly, we will work with brands that are located within the EU, the reasons for this choice will be explained later. As a result of investigating brands located within the EU, the brands choosing to have local production means that the factory will be located within a country where there are **social laws**. Even though we saw that there can still be some bad working conditions in countries with social laws, it could be interesting to hear from the brand how they make sure that the social laws are respected.

Secondly, choosing a local production allows the brands’ teams to **easily visit the factories** where they choose to produce. It is easy because they can either go by car or with a short flight as in the EU, the distances are often short between cities and countries.

A slow fashion brand has chosen to work only with small workshops with experienced craftsmen whom they meet regularly (Jules & Jenn, n.d.). These frequent meetings are possible because the brand’s headquarters are located in France while the workshops they work with are in France, Spain, Portugal and Italy.

Another brand states that it pays attention to the date of their last visit because it is really important for them that they see by themselves where the workers are working and in what conditions (Loom,

n.d.). By visiting the workshops often, they can be guaranteed that a good environment is ensured for the workers. Furthermore, this same brand chooses to work with smaller factories because based on their experience, they found that the bigger the factory is, the worse the working conditions are.

Lastly, it is important to highlight that producing in Europe does not immediately equate to producing in factories with good working conditions. In a collaborative report between the Fair Trade Advocacy Office and the Clean Clothes Campaign, these two organisations found that there are bad working conditions in the fashion industry in Europe (no written contracts, low wages, short lead time, etc.)(FTAO & CCC, 2023). In the same way, Public Eye (n.d.) found that having an European production does not guarantee having good working conditions.

#### b. Remote production

The second approach concerns brands who choose to outsource the production to “far” workshops. Within this approach the factories are located in countries that are located in a country that is far from the headquarters’ country of the brands. Meaning that the countries are not accessible by car, to visit the factories, travelling by plane is necessary. For example, a French company producing in Vietnam, Brazil or India.

Brands using this approach will be referred to as having a **remote production**. The brand *Loom* (2021) mentions three main reasons for choosing a remote production:

Firstly, the **price of the labour** (Loom, 2021). This is probably the biggest reason for choosing this approach. A majority of the clothes people wear have been made in Asia, it is not a surprise when we know the price of the labour. The cost of living is lower in Asian countries than in European countries (Numbeo, n.d.). Therefore, the cost of labour is also lower in Asian countries. Nonetheless, we have seen that workers of the fashion industry are often not paid enough for their work and that they do not earn enough to live a life in dignity. It would be interesting to see how slow fashion brands which choose to produce in the same countries as the brands which are known for having bad working conditions, manage to have a different treatment towards the workers.

Secondly, the **access to better expertise**. By outsourcing the textile industry in countries such as China or Bangladesh, you get access to a lot of know-how that has been lost in European countries (Loom, 2021). This means that it can be difficult to find good quality factories in countries such as Belgium or France.

Thirdly, they are more **available**. This point is related to the previous one, by having lost a lot of expertise, there are less factories in Europe. However, the existing factories are not always available because as it becomes more popular to produce in Europe, factories have a lot of orders and it makes it difficult for brands to find a factory that will produce in reasonable delay (Loom, 2021).

Additionally, choosing a remote production can also be beneficial for the people there. A slow fashion brand, whose products are made in Vietnam, states that they choose to produce there to preserve the cultural heritage of minorities in the country (N'go Shoes, n.d.).

#### c. Ranking

By looking at the countries where remote production takes place, we can see that the countries are considered at risk of workers’ exploitation according to the **International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Global Rights Index**. The ITUC is an organisation whose aim is to defend workers’ rights through international cooperation, global campaigning and advocacy (ITUC, n.d.).

The ITUC Global Rights Index gives information about workers’ rights violations in the world and also gives a ranking of the worst countries for workers based on if different elements are respected such

as the freedom of association, the right to engage in trade union activities, the right to justice, etc. In 2022, 148 countries were **ranked on a scale from 1 to 5+ according to their level of right at work** (ITUC, 2022). Countries ranked in categories 3 to 5+ are at risk of workers' exploitations, here is a description of the different categories (ITUC, 2022):

- In category **5+**, there are countries where the rights are not guaranteed because there is **no rule of law** (e.g. Afghanistan, Myanmar, Libye),
- In category **5**, there are countries where the **rights are not guaranteed** (e.g. Bangladesh, Brazil, India),
- In category **4**, there are countries where **rights' violations are systematic** (e.g. Peru, USA, Vietnam) and,
- In category **3**, there are countries where **rights' violation are frequent** (e.g. Belgium, Morocco, UK).

We can see that even Belgium, a country with social law where producing there would be considered as local production, is ranked in the risky countries for workers. Local production or remote production both have advantages and disadvantages. There is no right choice, it depends on what brands value the most.

## 2. Remuneration

Not much can be found regarding the remuneration of the workers by the brands. This lack of information can lead us to wonder about the positive impact of brands on the remuneration of the workers. Do they know if the workers earn a living wage? Do they know the proportion of the price they pay to the workers? Is overtime paid?

Information regarding the remuneration was found on one brand's website. It mentions that the brands ensures living wage and security of the workers by setting a wage for the workers that guarantees them a salary regardless of the market price (VEJA, n.d.).

## 3. Intermediaries

While having a local production allows one to easily meet with the workers regularly, living far from the producers would make it difficult to ensure that the working conditions are good. Two slow fashion brands have found their own solution to this problem. The first brand has opened an office close to the factory to monitor and develop their brand on the site (N'go Shoes, 2019). While the second brand chooses to do a lot of travelling to meet with the producers regularly because it is important for them to maintain good relationships (Jyoti, n.d.). This latter brand mentions that a lot of actions are put in place to ensure good working conditions such as making sure that working hours are adapted to the worker's family situation and that there is break time, health checks, permanent employment, payment of a fair salary...

Several brands mention having no intermediaries between them and the manufacturers. This seems to be a technique to develop and maintain a good relationship between a brand and its factories and it helps in the monitoring of the working environment of the factories. Centobelli et al. (2022) states that when a supply chain is long and complex, there is less contact between stakeholders and monitoring, assuring the respect of a code of conduct is more difficult.

#### 4. Ordering system

Some slow fashion brands have a different system regarding the treatment of orders. They start by taking the orders from the customers and then they start producing the amount that was pre-ordered. Amongst the benefits of this technique, we can mention the fact that the company does not have to stock the garments and that it avoids waste because unsold items are avoided as each piece that is produced will go to a customer. And as potential drawbacks, we can mention late deliveries.

It could be interesting to see how this technique affects the manufacturing workers for example regarding their job security, how it affects their wages, etc. As for brands who do not use this technique, it would be interesting to see if they know this system and the reasons for not using this technique.

#### 5. Transparency

As we have seen before, transparency is important. On their website, slow fashion brands try to be transparent by sharing information on all sorts of topics regarding their products. One way to share information is to publish a **sustainability report**. Such reports increase awareness and the stakeholders' trust in the brand (Centobelli et al., 2022). These reports include information on elements such as their supply chain, the environmental and social impacts, the materials used, the labels and certifications they have, etc.

Some brands even share their limits because they know that they do not do everything perfectly but with the aim to be as transparent as possible. For example, one brand shares only their tier 1 producers but does not have information about the earlier stages of their supply chain (Loom, n.d.). The brand is in the process of researching this information and sharing it on their website.

#### 6. Code of Conducts

Many brands state that they have a Code of Conducts and/or Ethics that the partner factories have to sign and comply with. According to Fletcher (2014, 69), **codes of conduct** "outline basic workers rights and minimum standards pledged by a company, and can help raise awareness, put pressure on fashion companies and factories to meet basic standards, and provide guidance for law making."

Each brand can create its own CoC based on the values and behaviours it wants its partners to follow. For example, brands can set rules on the working conditions of the workers inside the factories.

Implementing monitoring and verification mechanisms is important to make sure that codes of conduct are respected (Fletcher, 2014, 70).

#### 7. Labels and certifications

Many brands rely on labels and certifications and refer to those when explaining that the workers have good working conditions.

Different labels and certifications exist, some certify brands while others certify factories. Additionally, different elements can be certified: the materials used (e.g. Standard 100 Oeko-Tex® certifies that the textiles used are not harmful for people's health and the environment (OEKO-TEX®, n.d.)) or the practices of the company (e.g. the B Corp certification attests the companies' social and environmental impact (B Corporation, n.d.)).

Let us review some popular labels and certifications used by brands to certify the good working conditions in the factories they work with.

a. GOTS certification

The **Global Organic Textile standard (GOTS)** is a label that aims to confirm the organic quality of textile (Global Standard, 2020). The label requires criteria regarding the production of the textile (quality of the materials and environmental management) and the social responsibility of the brands.

The social criteria applies to all the transformation steps that employ workers, from the sourcing to the manufacturing, to reaching the customers (Global Standard, 2020). The five principles and rights at work from the ILO are included in the social criteria but other requirements are also needed such as the absence of harassment and violence, the payment of a living wage, the provision of stable employment, etc. (Global Standard, 2020).

To be GOTS certified, the brands must respect all the criteria and pass an on-site annual inspection, with possible occasional additional unannounced inspections based on a risk assessment of the activities (Global Standard, 2020).

b. Fair Trade USA Factory Production Standard (FPS)

Here we do not want to focus on the widely-known label Fairtrade which guarantees the fair character and traceability of a product (Fairtrade International, n.d.). We want to focus on the label **Factory Production Standard (FPS)** created by Fair Trade USA in order to bring more transparency to factory workers (Fair Trade USA, 2022). The standard is set up around seven different modules related to production and facility management, namely (Fair Trade USA, 2022):

1. Empowerment
2. Fundamental Rights at Work (this module includes the five fundamental principles from the ILO)
3. Conditions of Employment of Workers
4. Occupational Health & Safety
5. Environmental Responsibility and Management
6. Traceability & Transparency
7. Internal Management system

In each module, there are several compliance criteria that must be met. An initial audit is made at the beginning of the certification process, several minimum criteria are assessed and must be fulfilled at this stage (Fair Trade USA, 2022). After that, an audit is performed every three years, with an audit after the first year. Other criteria must be fulfilled, either by the first, third or sixth year of the certification (Fair Trade USA, 2022). Simply put, there is an initial inspection and then the following inspections take place after the first, third and sixth year.

The modules touch on several topics including the treatment of the workers. Every component of good working conditions are included in the certification process. There are rules for workers in general but there are also specific criteria for specific categories of workers (e.g. migrant workers, temporary workers, etc.).

This certification was created in 2009 and the number of certified factories and brands has been growing since then (Fair Trade Certified, 2021). As of 2023, there are 113 certified factories located in several different countries at risk of workers' exploitation (e.g. India, Pakistan, Vietnam)(Fair Trade Certified, 2022). Even though this is a certification from an American organism, clothes certified by this standard can be found in Belgium stores (Appendix 2).

### c. B-Corp certification

The **B Corp certification** is an all-round certification that measures companies' social and environmental impact as well the legal commitment, made by the company to be accountable for all their stakeholders, and the transparency it demonstrates (B Corporation, n.d.). This certification is not specific to the fashion industry but many clothes and footwear brands are certified by this one.

It shows that the certified company is acting for society and the environment (Delubac, 2022) and measures the company's impact across five pillars: governance, workers, community, the environment, and customers (B Corporation, n.d.).

Here are the different steps to follow in order to acquire the certification (Delubac, 2022):

1. To be admitted into the certification, the company must first answer a questionnaire called the "**Business Impact Assessment (BIA)**" and get a score of 80 out of 200 points. The BIA is a free online questionnaire which measures the company's impact over the five B Corp's pillars.
2. Then, the company must be audited to make sure it fulfills the different requirements. This can be a long or short process depending on the size and complexity of the company.
3. After that, the company can be considered "B Certified" and must publish information about their organization, their BIA score and their impact report. Additionally, the statutes of the company must be amended to include the social, environmental and societal impacts in their mission.
4. The company must be audited every three years to keep the certification.

The pillar "workers" relates to the working conditions of the workers, and companies must ensure decent work to them. However, a critic can be raised as the certification only requires a score of 80/200, this means that a company could fare really well on some of the pillars and lack commitment in the other pillars but still be certified.

We decided to detail three certifications/labels to understand how these work but many other exist such as the **Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI)** certification which aims to improve social performance in companies supply chain (amfori, n.d.) and the **Smeta audit** by Sedex which audits working conditions and environmental performance in companies' supply chain (Sedex, n.d.).

Every certification has its own specificities but we can understand that every certification has different requirements including regular audits (every one or three years most frequently).

We would also like to add that certifications rely on audits which are not necessarily frequent and only give an "image" of a workshop at a given instant. Even if an audit certifies that the working conditions are good at the audited moment, it does not mean that the conditions are always good.

It would be interesting to see if brands only rely on their Code of Conducts as well as the factories' certifications (and the associated audits) to claim that the factories they work with have good working conditions or if they have additional control mechanisms in place.



## Research question

Let us be reminded of the research question: “How do **slow fashion** brands manage to guarantee **good working conditions**?: The case of shoe **manufacturing in remote countries**”.

Thanks to the literature review, we now have a deeper understanding of important concepts included in this question: what is slow fashion, what is the manufacturing process and what are good working conditions? We also searched the available information about what slow fashion brands explain they do with regards to the working conditions of the workers of the manufacturing process. This allowed us to find out that there were two approaches regarding the location of the production: having a local or a remote production.

Even though a lot of brands mention that having fair and respectful working conditions for the workers is important. Not much information can be found on how exactly this goal is achieved. Consequently, in the next part of this work, the goal is to find more information about what mechanisms are put in place by brands to ensure a decent work to the workers of the manufacturing process.



# Methodology

## 1. Method used

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative design seems to be the right approach to use and more specifically the use of **semi-structured interviews**. A semi-structured interview is a conversation that is not entirely prepared in advance where the researcher has a set of questions and topics that he wants to cover, but the conversation can vary between the different participants of the sample (Fylan, 2005). By having a conversation, the researcher can ask open questions to the participants who will be able to express their answer freely. The use of semi-structured interviews means that the flow of the conversation is not fixed and will depend on the participants' answers.

The major advantages of semi-structured interviews is that they are flexible (Fylan, 2005) and that you get the information directly from the participants, they can share with no limitation their experiences and interpretation of a topic (Dufays, 2022). On the side of the interviewees, the technique allows them to share and explain thoroughly their point of view and reasoning. While on the researcher side, it allows the researcher to ask more questions whether it is to clarify an explanation that was not understood or to gather more information about the topic at hand in order to have a complete understanding.

Semi-structured interviews have three main disadvantages. Firstly, the accessibility and availability of the subjects might be an issue (Dufays, 2022). This means that finding participants that agree to give their time to take part in an interview might be an issue. Secondly, the information that will be collected will be limited to the actors' discourse (Dufays, 2022). This means that the information will be limited to the knowledge of the interviewees. Thirdly, the research might influence or introduce a bias during the interview by asking leading questions (Fylan, 2005). This third drawback should be mitigated because we have drawn an interview protocol in which we have avoided the use of leading questions.

Semi-structured interviews are the method that will be used because this research aims to study the way in which slow fashion brands monitor the working conditions of the workers producing their products. Using semi-structured interviews over a questionnaire allows us to fully grasp the method used by the brands and to ask follow-up questions if we want to have more information on a topic mentioned by the interviewee.

## 2. Interview protocol

Preparing an interview protocol (or interview schedule (Fylan, 2005)) is needed to successfully conduct semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol includes the main questions that will be asked and the different topics or themes that will have to be covered.

For this specific research, each meeting required a specific preparation. A generic structure with general questions and more specific questions (on the selected topics) had been drawn beforehand (see Appendix 3). However, this structure needed to be adapted for each brand according to the information that was found online.

For example, one brand mentioned that the CEO often visited the workshops on their website. Instead of asking the generic question "Do you know the workers who manufacture the shoes?", the question was adapted to "How often do you visit the different workshops?" during the interview.

This allowed us to collect deeper and new information about the information that was found online and it avoided redundancy as the interviewee did not have to explain something that is already available by doing a little research.

### 3. Sample selection

Unfortunately, it is impossible to focus on every kind of slow fashion brand and every aspect of working conditions. Choices need to be made in order to gather comparable data between the different brands. To determine the sample of brands, three main criteria were decided.

Evidently, all the selected brands will have to be involved in the slow fashion movement and the population for the research will only include brands whose **headquarters are located in a member state of the European Union**. As we have seen in the description of working conditions, companies located within the EU have to follow a common set of legislation regarding the working conditions of the workers. By choosing brands with this criteria in mind, it will allow us to compare brands that have the same minimum standard rules to comply with.

As we have seen in the literature review, there are two possibilities regarding the location of the production that brands can choose: a local production or a remote production. For this work, we have chosen to work with brands who have a **remote production**. As we have seen before, the factories of remote production are located within countries which are classified in categories 3, 4 and 5 of the ranking made by the ITUC regarding the worst countries for workers. For this research, we find it more interesting to see how these brands manage to monitor the working conditions when they decide to work with factories that are basically on the other side of the world from their headquarters, with totally different time zones, cultures, etc. Additionally, it could show to other brands which also have a remote production that it is possible to make sure that the workers are treated with respect without having a local production.

As we have seen, manufacturing clothes and shoes is not the same process so it would not make sense to compare both manufacturing processes as if they were similar. We have chosen as the last criteria that the sampled brand will have to be active in the **footwear industry**.

Regarding the size of the brands that will be selected, small brands where the manufacturing is done by the creator of the brands will not be considered. These small brands are part of the slow fashion movement and they are important because they emphasize hand craftsmanship and local production. Nonetheless, these small brands will not be selected because the goal within this research is to understand how brands manage to make sure that the working conditions are respected when they are outsourcing the production of the garments to other people.

Furthermore, thrift shops will also not be included in the sampled brands even though they are part of the slow fashion movement. The reasoning behind this decision is that these stores sell clothes that have already been produced, they do not have anything to do with the production of the clothes and therefore, the treatment of the workers who have made the clothes.

11 brands that fitted the criteria were found, 2 accepted while the other brands declined or did not respond. A summary of the characteristics of the brands can be found below (Figure 5).

Brand identification	Headquarters	Production Place and ITUC risk category (2022)	Interviewed person	Interview duration
<b>Brand A</b> <i>[Respondent A]</i>	France	Vietnam (4)	Co-founder and production manager	40 minutes (via Google Meet) in French
<b>Brand B</b> <i>[Respondent B]</i>	Germany	Pakistan (5), Sri Lanka (4), Vietnam (4)	CEO	40 minutes (via Teams) in English
<b>Brand C</b>	France	Bolivia (3), Peru (4), Portugal (2)	Refused	-
<b>Brand D</b>	France	Brazil (5; in top 10 worst country)	Refused	-
<b>Brand E</b>	Sweden	China (5), Taiwan (2), Vietnam (4)	Refused	-
<b>Brand F</b>	Denmark	Spain (2), Vietnam (4)	Refused	-
<b>Brand G</b>	France	Morocco (3)	No answer	-
<b>Brand H</b>	France	Vietnam (4)	No answer	-
<b>Brand I</b>	Denmark	Vietnam (4)	No answer	-
<b>Brand J</b>	Spain	Bangladesh (5; in top 10 worst country), China (5), India (5), Morocco (3), Turkey (5), Spain (2), Portugal (2)	No answer	-
<b>Brand K</b>	Denmark	Spain (2), Vietnam (4)	No answer	-

*Figure 5 - Characteristics of the brands and interviews*

The meetings were recorded which allowed us to do an intelligent verbatim transcription of the interviews. In the later parts of this work, excerpts from the interviews will be used. We will make as accurate a translation as possible for the French respondents.

#### 4. Topics under investigation

In the same way, it is impossible to focus on all the aspects of good working conditions. Therefore, We have chosen three aspects of good working conditions that we will concentrate on during the research and semi-structured interviews.

The first aspect that will be put under investigation is how the **health and safety** of the workers is assured. How do brands make sure that the workers work in a safe physical environment, that their health will not be negatively impacted due to their work environment and what is put in place to avoid accidents. This topic is important to investigate because we have seen in the literature review that working in a safe environment is still not an acquired right in every country.

The **payment of a living wage** is also an issue that we would like to look into throughout deeper interviews with the brands. With issues such as how do they determine the price paid to the factories, if and how they can influence the wage paid to the workers, how the payment of a living wage impacts the price of the shoes, if and how making promotions impacts the wages, if overtime is paid...

And lastly, we will focus on the **reliance from the brands on the labels or certifications** that the factories have. We have seen that a lot of brands mention the fact the factories they work with are certified or have a certain label, it would be interesting to see how the certifications or lack thereof impacts the relationship between the brand and the factory.

During the semi-structured interviews, we had to keep in mind that these three selected topics needed to be discussed.

## Results

This section will present the responses we got on different topics. The answers of the respondents will be set side by side to compare their opinions. In the following section, we will discuss what we can learn from these interviews.

### What are good working conditions?

The first question that was asked to the respondents was their definition of good working conditions. This allowed us to obtain their opinion regarding the topic of working conditions without influencing them into mentioning something in particular.

Here are the answers received to this question:

Respondent A: “Good working conditions means that my workers can **work safely**, that their **health** is not negatively impacted, that **labour rights** and laws are respected (e.g. they have the right to be **unionised**, to **develop in their career**, to have a sustainable relationship with their employer and to be paid what they are worth, and that they have **enough income** to support themselves and live with dignity.”

Respondent B: “For me, there is no general definition for good working conditions, it is **individual to each person and workers**. It depends on the country, the living circumstances. But there are three main elements that any individual must have when working around the world:

- (1) The people **earn a living wage**, they don't have to struggle and they have options for the future and for their children.
- (2) They have a **regular working time** and are not forced to work maybe 18 to 20 hours every day. They need relaxing time.
- (3) They have **chosen the job** that they perform and don't have to work for a company that they don't like.”

These answers allowed us to understand that we had a common understanding of what good working conditions must encompass, as they have both highlighted important elements that need to be included in the definition of a decent work. And respondent B also explains that the vision of good working conditions is specific to each individual.

After receiving their answers, the respondents were informed that we will focus on three aspects of good working conditions during the rest of the discussion, namely, health and safety (1), payment of a living wage (2) and the reliance on labels and certifications (3).

## Production place selection

The next set of questions was designed to understand the reasons of the brands for choosing to produce in the different chosen countries and factories.

Let us review the answers regarding the country of production to understand the motivations for manufacturing in a remote country:

**Respondent A** explained that he was working in Vietnam when he fell in love with the country and wanted to prove that it was possible to produce in a decent manner in Vietnam. This desire combined with his passion for fashion gave him the will to create shoes using Vietnamese crafts.

Brand A's motivation is about wanting to prove that it is **possible to produce the right way in a risky country**.

Respondent A: "**What matters is not where you make but how you make it, by whom and under what conditions**. This is very important because Asia is often criticised, sometimes with good reason, because things have happened and are still happening, but it is not only in Asia."

**Brand B** shares this motivation but they also mention on their website that it makes more sense **ecologically** to manufacture in factories close to where their raw materials are growing.

And he also criticises the practices of some brands.

"Some brands manufacture in Europe but the raw materials continue to come from Asia or Africa and these have **no traceability on the supply** of these raw materials which involves a lot of human rights violations. We have to be careful about this. Just because it is produced next door, it doesn't mean that it is better produced. [...] In France, the legislation doesn't punish the fact that **some brands claim to be « Made In France » when they only have ten percent of the process done in France**. It is common in the shoe industry, all the sewing of the upper (the top part of the shoe) is done in third world countries where labour is cheap, because sewing the upper is the most expensive part. They import the upper and the sole and then, they will do the assembly in France which costs basically nothing and is only a small percentage of the work but they can brand « Made In France ». I think it is dishonest and there are a lot of bad practices like this but people just think that because it is made in Europe, it is good but it is also important to know how it is made in Europe."

**Respondent A** also talked about the **loss of craftsmanship** in Europe:

"I have visited factories in Europe and unfortunately the employees are in their fifties and sixties and there are **not many young people who want to take over** because it's safe to say that working on an assembly line is not a job you want to do long term because it's redundant, it's tiring and it's boring. Once you've learned, you don't want to do it for long. [...] Yes, « **Made In Europe » is coming back but in reality, we don't have the capacity**, we have outsourced too much for it to come back like it used to."

Regarding the selection of workshops, there were motivations were diverse:

**Respondent A**: "We only work with one production workshop in Vietnam and we choose to work with them because when we started, it was a **small human-sized** workshop. The idea was that we were a small brand and they were a small workshop so we would work together, **grow together** and export for the first time. It was the first time that the workshop would



export products abroad. It was all based on a **relationship of trust and collaboration** rather than a basic client relationship.”

“We have been working together for five years now and they have grown a lot in that time frame but we still have a close relationship with the staff of the factory. [...] We also work with several **cooperatives of Vietnamese minority women artisans**. They weave traditional ethnic patterns that will decorate the shoes.”

**Respondent B:** “We work with one workshop in Vietnam, one in Sri Lanka and one in Pakistan. [...] For Pakistan, it was a heritage because I jumped into a Fairtrade project which was already existing but then we built more relationships with the company. In Vietnam, this is a recent collaboration. We got a **recommendation** from a company that there was a factory that would make sense to work with. We visited the factory and we were satisfied so we started to work with them. [...] Additionally, when making a decision for a production partner, we want that they fit with us. We want to work with **well minded management**.”

**Respondent B** also stated that the low price of labour did not influence their choice.

The topic of intermediaries also came up. Prior to the interviews, we had seen that some brands did not have intermediaries between them and the workshops and we wanted to understand how they managed this situation when working with people on the other side of the world.

**Respondent A:** “There is no middleman between us and the factory. We work directly with them and we have an **employee who is based in the factory**. His office is inside the factory and he works there everyday. [...] I have **lived and worked for three and a half years** in Vietnam for our brand and I plan to move back there soon in order to develop our activity from there.”

**Respondent B:** “We work directly with the different workshops which make the final products. We don’t meet with every supplier who provides the components to make the complete sneakers. For example, we don’t meet with the eyelet supplier, we are a small company, we don’t have the power to track everything. We **visit and work directly** with the supplier who makes most of the value of the work (e.g. the assembly of the shoes, the weaving of the cotton). [...] Before coronavirus, I would visit the production companies approximately five or six times a year. And at the moment, I go two or three times a year.”

What we really wanted to understand was the reason for choosing to have no intermediary.

**Respondent A:** “We make it a point to work directly with all suppliers. We don’t use any intermediaries because we want to have **transparency on our entire supply chain**, we want to **work with people we know** and **be aware of the conditions**.”

**Respondent B:** “We don’t just know the management, we **know the individual workers** (who stitch, who glue, etc.). We have **personal contact** with them. I think that it makes a difference because you get **direct feedback** from the workers instead of from the management or from paperwork. [...] From my point of view and experience, you **cannot only trust the paperwork**, you should also go directly and get your own impressions of the circumstances.”

## Health and safety

On the topic of health and safety, we started by asking the brands if they knew the workers who produced the shoes and their working conditions.

As was explained previously, **brand A** has a worker inside the factory and one of the founders has lived close to the factory for a long time. This means that they have **seen the reality on the ground**.

**Respondent A** explains:

“Workers work under permanent contracts and I still see the same workers who were there at the beginning. They have the right to stop their job and go to the competition or somewhere else. I still see the same face as five years ago but now they are ten times as many. [...] The factory we work with has a **family atmosphere** and therefore a lot of people want to leave the big factories they work for and come work for this factory. Unfortunately, they have to refuse some people because they do not have the capacity to accommodate them yet.”

**Respond B** visits the factories often and explains that:

“**We know the conditions inside the factories** and we know that there are fire rescue and medical care in place, we know the wage, etc.”

We also asked if there were any mechanisms put in place in order to avoid problems associated with the repetitive motions involved in shoes production.

**Respondent A** explained that the manufacturing process is an assembly job where there are a lot of different manufacturing steps from the beginning of the process to the end and that people rotate and will not do the same step forever.

“They are **trained each time on a skill and they rotate**. At the beginning of our collaboration, some workers were working on the assembly line and now they are managers in the company. There is a very **interesting career path** for people who stay and who want to progress.”

We were a bit confused as to the time of rotation because in Belgium, workers sometimes rotate on the assembly line every 30 minutes to an hour, this point was thus clarified by respondent A.

“No, they do not rotate on the same day, they have to get into a rhythm. For example, if a worker is sewing, he gets into a rhythm and if he changes every half hour, he would have to set up the machines again and get used to the new step he is doing. Sewing is not the same process as putting glue on a sole. Some tasks are really different from one another. They do rotate but on a longer time basis.”

**Respondent B** agrees that people need to be trained to a specific task and a possible short-term rotation would not be possible. However, he agrees that it is not ideal but this way of functioning is imposed by the fact that there is no other option.

“In the manufacturing process, **every shoe is an individual product and each station requires a specialist of the task**. You cannot change them, for example, you need the right man for the lasting. Of course, you have to make sure he is not doing the same movement all the time, you have to **give him time to relax**. But you cannot avoid that people stay working on their specialties because some people are skilled to a specific machine and they have to handle that machine. It should be clear that somebody should not do the same thing all the time but to be honest, it’s not possible to avoid that.”

After our discussion with brand A, we thought that it would be interesting to ask the following brands if there were any mechanisms put in place in order to avoid accidents. To this question, **respondent B** explains that the security of the workshops is checked during audits to make sure that accidents will be avoided.

“There are mechanisms put in place because you have **audits** made by control unions or other institutions. There has been a strong move forward in the last five years because audits are becoming harder for companies. During the audits they **check if protection is given to the workers**, for example at the sewing machine.”

Something that we were also interested in was how the coronavirus crisis was handled in the factory.

For **brand B**, the situation was a bit difficult during coronavirus because the fabrication in Pakistan and in Vietnam stopped for a couple of months. This means that they had delays in deliveries and shipments. Brand B also works with one workshop in Sri Lanka where **respondent B** explains that there are problems:

“They reduced the production in Sri Lanka but I don’t think that it was because of coronavirus. They have other problems there, with the fuel and with electricity for example.”

When the workshops reopened, **respondent B** stated that the conditions were adapted but he did not know exactly what had been put in place.

Comparatively, **brand A’s** workshop stopped the production for only two weeks during the crisis. **Respondent A** explained that they kept ordering and the workshop kept producing. Workers had to do a **PCR test every day** before entering the factory and if they tested positive they were quarantined.

“Our supplier decided to pay for PCR tests every day, at their own expenses. This cost a lot of money, which also explains why the rates went up.”

**Respondent A** states that the crisis was well handled, especially when comparing with other suppliers:

“We saw some suppliers having conditions that we thought were completely ludicrous. For example, there were suppliers who gave workers a choice:

(1) Either the workers stayed at the factory with their families. Houses/camps were set up in the factory and children attended school from the factory while workers kept working. This made factories with more than 40 000 people.

(2) Otherwise, the workers went out of the factory and would not be allowed to go back in.

There is a supplier who invested in lots of huge tents for families to come in, they built a swimming pool, football fields, volleyball courts and they had a canteen system in place. Families stayed inside the factory for two months.”

**Respondent A** raises an important point when talking about the working conditions in Asia. He explains that the conditions are necessarily bad because they are produced in Asia, some people want to treat the workers with respect.

“From my personal experience, the conditions are not as bad as people believe them to be in Asia. It is not like that at all, they want to respect the workers and their health and safety. It is in their interest to do so if they want to develop their business, they don’t have the interest to exploit people. It doesn’t mean that there aren’t any [people who want to exploit workers]

but in Vietnam it's very controlled unlike Africa or other countries like Bangladesh or China. Even in China, there are factories that are much cleaner than what we could see in Paris or in England."

### Payment of a living wage

The next theme that was addressed was the payment of a living wage. First, we asked how the price paid to the workshop was determined.

As a reminder, **brand A** works with one workshop and several cooperatives of Vietnamese women. We did not focus on the working conditions in the cooperatives but during the discussion, respondent A explained how the price was set for these cooperatives. Given that the price determination is done differently than for the workshop, we thought it was relevant to mention this information to see the different techniques that were possible.

"On the artisanal side [ethnic pattern weaving], we **never negotiate the prices**. They give us a price and we accept them as they are. We work with three cooperatives and we always take the highest price of the three and apply it to the three cooperatives out of fairness."

"On the industrial part [production workshop], we negotiate the price. In reality, we do not negotiate anything on small quantities, what we **negotiate is price stabilisation**. In the last two years, raw materials and labour costs have increased and it is reflected on the purchase prices of brands. We have succeeded on some models to stabilise the prices while on others we have not. Our bargaining power is limited because we do not have a big production: 30 000 to 40 000 shoes per year seems huge for us but for them it is nothing compared to their other customers."

**Respondent B** explained that the price is determined by the different workshops and that he knows that the workers are getting paid but does not know the exact amount.

On the other hand, **respondent A** explained that he knows exactly how much of the amount paid to the factory will be paid to the workers because they receive a **cost breakdown**. This document breaks down the price paid to the workshop: one part of the price goes for the purchase of the raw materials, another is linked to the labour cost and the rest is for the management of the workshop (e.g. manufacturer's margin, electricity). Respondent A explains that the cost breakdown is a valuable tool that **brings transparency** and that it should always be provided.

Next, we asked the respondent if they know the concept of a living wage. Both of them did and all of them assured that the workers were **paid a living wage**.

**Respondent A:** "They are paid a living wage, it's a requirement for the BSCI certification that the workshop has."

**Brand B** also has an initiative in place for customers to make tips that go directly to the manufacturer. Almost 70% of the brand's customers take part in the initiative.

"We work with the organization *tip me* and it works like this:

(1) People add the tip to their basket during their purchase. (2) We collect the tips. (3) *tip me* can track on our website what is tipped by the customer and every month they send us a bill for the tips. (4) We transfer the money. (5) *tip me* gets a list, from the factories, of the workers who were working on the shoes and they send the money to the workers. Depending on the country, the money is either sent directly to the account of the workers or

the money is sent to the cell phone of the worker and he can go to a kiosk to get his money. And the workers receive the full amount tipped by the customers.

It is a very smart system.”

Previously, we explained that we discussed the impact of coronavirus on the production. We also discussed the impact of the coronavirus on the prices and wages.

**Brand A** also explained the treatment of the cooperative for this question. He explained that during the crisis, they kept ordering from the artisans and they even ordered more to make sure that they received a proper wage every month. While for the production workshop, he stated that:

“We do not pay the workers directly but we kept ordering from the factory and paying them. The factory also kept receiving orders from their other customers during the coronavirus crisis. The factory was not impacted by the crisis, they kept growing during and after it.”

**Brand B** explained that the crisis has had an indirect impact on the wages:

“There has been a general increase in the price we pay to the factories. The purchasing price is approximately 15% higher, this means that we pay more for the manufactured shoes and that the manufacturer can give more salary to the workers.”

On the topic of wages, we also address overtime hours.

Both brands mentioned that the workers sometimes do overtime. **Respondent A** explained that the workers sometimes work overtime and that these hours are paid as overtime, at a higher rate than their basic wage. He also emphasized that overtime is on a **voluntary basis**. Respondent B emphasized this idea of working overtime voluntarily.

**Respondent B:** “The workers sometimes do overtime but it depends on the countries, the factories and the situation of orders. For example, I know a situation where over a couple of weeks, workers were working 10 hours instead of their normal 7 hours schedule because they wanted to complete the orders in time. I know that some people will say that it is not fair for the workers but I think that it’s fair if the **workers are not forced** and they want to do it because they want to make more money. As long as it is their own decision and that they are not forced to do overtime to generate a living wage.”

Regarding the payment, respondent B explained that the rate at which the overtime were paid depended on the factory. Some factories paid them at the regular wage while other factories paid them at a higher rate.

## Reliance from the brands on the labels or certifications

On this topic, we first asked about the importance for brands to be certified.

Prior to the interview, we knew that **brand A** was B-Corp certified and we were wondering why they chose this certification. During the interview, we learn that they were also certified by the label *Slowear*. We were thus wondering the difference between the two certifications.

“Slowear is a french ethical fashion label. Slowear is stricter than B-Corp. B-Corp will remain more generalist and won’t necessarily ask for proof on every element whereas Slowear will do a more thorough audit. [...] Slowear asked about inclusion, about working with ethnic minorities or people who are usually isolated or discriminated against. They also asked about the wages, the relationship with the factories, the working hours, overtime, etc.”

For **brand B**, we knew prior to the interview that the brand had the GOTS certification. We learned during the interview that all the workshops they are working with are Fairtrade certified.

Then, we asked about the importance for brands to work with certified workshops.

**Brand A’s** factory is certified BSCI (Business Social Compliance Initiative), not since the beginning of their collaboration but it was not an issue.

“When we were looking for a workshop, they were only 60 people and it’s **impossible for a small workshop to be certified because it’s an expensive process.**”

After a while, brand A wanted the workshop they work with to get certified to help them get more skills and also to ensure transparency. They started with their workshop and now, they are in the process of having their other suppliers certified.

“To be honest, when the factory was not certified, it was already paying the workers well, respecting the environment, the health and working conditions of the workers. **It is not because a factory is audited that it is better than a non-audited factory.** [...] But it was our will to get them certified so that they were audited and increased their skills and knowledge. Now that we work with a certified factory, we want to work with our other suppliers (e.g. raw materials) to also get them certified.”

This is on the brand’s side but on the factory side, it was also their desire to be certified.

Respondent A: “At the beginning, the workshop was only 1 building with 60 workers. Now there are 5 or 6 buildings with approximately 1 000 workers and they want to keep growing because they have more and more demand. In 2019, they did a pre-certification to prepare for the BSCI and in 2022, they received a C grade for the BSCI certification. This **opened up many opportunities** for them to be able to work with well-known brands in Vietnam.”

**Respondent B** explains that it is important to work with certified workshops because it means that **audits** are performed.

“On one hand, we like to visit and have direct feedback from the workers. But we are a small brand so on the other hand, we use the support of NGO, Fairtrade and other organizations which are more powerful and more structured to make audits, set standards and ensure that the standards are respected. [...] The audits have to be renewed every year or every three years, it depends on the organization. If it is every three years, then they have a big audit with smaller audits in between.”

**Respondent A** also explains that regular audits are performed for the BSCI certification.

“The BSCI is a social certification which include an audit of the factory on different criteria (no child labour, right to unionize, good working conditions, safety, environment, waste recycling, proper wage and career development perspective). [...] A yearly audit is done, knowing that there can be inspections at any time, it’s very controlled.”

The last audit in brand A’s factory was done in October 2022. The results of this audit can be found in Appendix 4, identification information has been blurred. We were not able to ask questions on the document given that it was provided post-interview.

The results show that the factory rates highly for almost all Performance Areas (PAs) that were audited. The PAs “Social Management System” and “Occupational Health and Safety” were rated by the audit organism at the second lowest grade. It would have been interesting to ask respondent A the reasons for these PAs to be scored low. In addition, we could have asked what has been put in place since the audit to improve these two PAs.

**Respondent B** has a lot of **trust in certifications and the different audits** put in place and states:

“I know workshops which are not under the control of organizations which make audits. Most of the time, these workshops are not safe to say it gently. If a manufacturer isn’t under the control of auditors, then you have really bad working conditions and the safety is also not guaranteed. [...] For the factories which are under the control of big auditors organizations, you can say that 80% of the people are protected.”

**Respondent A** has a more radical view on the matter and explains that even if a workshop is certified and audits are performed, it is not guarantee that workers’ right to a decent work is respected.

Respondent A: “People must remember that certifications are a business, there is a lot of money in it. Just because a brand is certified, it doesn’t mean that it is any more eco-responsible than another. And same for the factories. Sometimes when I see brands that are certified by B-Corp, I think that it doesn’t mean anything anymore. **People have to be careful, certification does not mean proof of eco-responsibility.** [...] Even for a certified factory, I think the risk zero doesn’t exist. For everywhere in the world, not only in Asia.”

## Key mechanisms to guarantee good working conditions

We finished the interview by asking what they thought was the most important in order to guarantee decent work to the workers. Both respondents put the emphasis on different mechanisms, respondent A repeated the importance to work directly with the manufacturing site while respondent B put the emphasis on having a control system.

**Respondent A:** “For me, to ensure good conditions for the workers, we need to **work directly with the supplier**. [...] I believe the majority of fashion will continue to be made in Asia. If we want to change the system, I think it’s better to go there, where most of the fashion is made and **improve the conditions directly on site**. This is our brand’s philosophy.”

**Respondent B:** “The most important for me is to have a **control system** in the workshops such as the one we already have with the auditors. I think that if there is regular control in every workshop, the conditions will improve.”

**Respondent B** even proposes a solution:

“A **law** should be adopted for all incoming products in Europe. There is already something similar for electronic devices, the « CE marking ». This is a seal present on every electronic device that is imported in Europe and I think it would be very simple to make something similar for clothing or for shoes. It would not be a technical seal, it would be a **human marking** proving that the clothes and shoes were made in humane conditions for all the workers. The law would provide that nobody can sell a product which doesn’t fit with the regulation and its conditions. [...] If a product doesn’t have the marking, it’s not allowed to be imported to our business areas.”



## Future of slow and fast fashion

We finished each interview by asking the respondent their opinion on the future and evolution of slow fashion and fast fashion.

To the question *“Do you think it would be possible for fast fashion brands to improve the working conditions of the workers?”*. Both respondents agree that brands could have the power to improve the conditions if they wanted. However, respondent A expressed his concerns regarding that happening because as long as consumers are in the demand for cheap items, brands will continue to supply them and will not change their current way of doing business.

**Respondent B:** “Yes, I think it would be possible if the companies and brands which drive fast fashion want to invest and give money for that.”

**Respondent A:** “If the prices stay as they are, I think it would be impossible to improve the conditions. **I don’t blame the brands, I blame the consumers. Brands adapt to the market**, as long as there will be customers buying a t-shirt for two euros, these brands will exist. For me, making brands responsible is one thing, but we must not make consumers less responsible. I am quite pessimistic, I think this kind of consumer will always exist so these brands will also keep existing and be allowed to sell in our countries. It’s unfortunate but **you can’t ask brands to change their way of working if people don’t change their consumption behaviour.**”

The respondent also had divergent opinions to the question *“Do you think it would be possible for slow fashion brands to replace fast fashion in the long run?”*.

**Respondent B:** “It’s a good question. For me, it’s a **question of fashion**. If it’s fashionable to have slow fashion brands, then we will have slow fashion brands. And if it’s fashionable to have fast fashion, then we will have fast fashion. **It depends on the consumers at the end of the day.**”

**Respondent A:** “I think not. It’s going to get better and you can see that **fast fashion is getting better** on the environment side of things. You see fast fashion brands wanting to use recycled and organic materials but they don’t want to reduce the number of products manufactured. That’s **the problem, we overconsume and overproduce**. It’s better to buy one t-shirt made of plastic and only have that one in your wardrobe than to have five organic cotton t-shirts. [...] Nowadays, fast fashion brands promote using organic and recycled materials but it’s just to sell more, it’s a market-driven logic. **They don’t want to change the system, they want to keep selling.**”



## Discussion

### Research question

The semi-structured interviews have allowed us to identify different mechanisms put in place by slow fashion brands in order to guarantee good working conditions for the workers of the manufacturing. We will dive into these mechanisms but before we would like to clarify the reasons brands have to choose a remote production and how they select the workshops which will manufacture their shoes.

During the literature review, three reasons for choosing a remote production have been detailed. The loss of hand craftsmanship and the lack of capacity in Europe was a reason confirmed by the brands. However, it was not the main reason.

When slow fashion brands decide to produce in remote countries, it is also a statement to prove to other brands and to the consumers that it is possible to do things right in these countries. By making it a point to treat the workers with respect, they prove that if it is something that the brand values, it is possible to achieve it. Additionally, producing in remote countries allows the use of local handcrafts and techniques specific to the country. It supports the local people and promotes their craft to the customers.

On the ecological side, producing in remote countries allows for the production to be located close to the production of the raw materials.

However, we would like to point out that choosing to use raw materials located in remote countries is also a choice. For example, the production of cotton is most predominant in Asian countries (Shahbandeh, 2022) but cotton is also produced in European countries such as Greece, Spain (European Commission, n.d.) and Turkey (Shahbandeh, 2022). Even though the production in Europe is much smaller, it could be possible to use cotton (and other raw materials) produced in Europe. And consequently, the manufacturing process would have to be located in Europe if the company wants to pursue the same ecological reason.

Even though brands did not mention the price or explained that it did not influence their choice, we believe that the labour price might have indirectly influenced their choice. By that we mean that given that the labour price in remote countries is known to be “cheap”, we presume that it did not deter the brands from producing in those countries. For example, if Vietnam or another country had been known to be costly in terms of labour costs, the company might have decided to produce somewhere else because otherwise it would be too expensive, without regards to the good intentions to produce in the chosen country.

Regarding the choice of the workshop, brands choose to collaborate with partners that they trust and know are well-minded. Whether they found the workshop on their own or it was recommended to them, they met with the potential partner before making a decision to collaborate.

## 1. No intermediary

The first identified mechanism used to guarantee good working conditions for workers is to work directly with the workshop without any intermediary. There is no middleman handling the communication and business between the two entities.

Having no intermediaries has several advantages. It allows direct feedback from the management and the workers and it enables the brand to build a relationship with the people inside the factory without necessarily seeing them everyday. In addition, it gives the opportunity to the brands to know where their products are manufactured and under what conditions.

Regarding the disadvantage, we can mention the effort needed to build and maintain the relationships with the different stakeholders. Indeed, this task requires a lot of investment from the brands. This can explain why some brands decide to call on intermediaries to manage those relations.

Additionally, the language barrier can also be a deterrent because brands cannot communicate by themselves directly to the managers and workers of the factory. This disadvantage should be mitigated by the fact that most people speak English nowadays.

For us, the advantages and the benefits brought by the technique seem to prevail over the potential drawbacks.

A transparent supply chain is needed to apply this mechanism. A brand needs to have visibility over its supply chain and to know their partners in order to work directly with them. Subcontracting without knowing to whom is not possible.

Several methods are possible in order to execute this technique:

- Work and manage the brand and its business directly from the country. It allows one to be on site whenever but it requires one to uproot his life to a different country.
- Hire a management employee who lives in the manufacturing country. The employee is able to be on site whenever and can work for the brand remotely.
- Travel to visit the workshop as often as possible.

As we found in the literature review, some brands do not know where their production takes place because of subcontracting or because they have a long supply chain. This means that they cannot work directly with the factories while it seems to be a convenient way to manage the working conditions of the workers.

## 2. Audits and certifications

The second mechanism that helps brands ensure good working conditions is to have the factories audited.

Indeed, we had found that many brands relied on being certified or having their partnered workshop certified. The reason for this reliance is that audits are required to be certified. If a factory is certified, it means that a third body has done a (thorough) investigation of, amongst other things, the working conditions and has validated that they are decent enough to grant the workshop a certification. For example, the safety of the factory and the wage paid to the workers are being investigated during audits.

Amongst other criteria, the safety of the factory and the wage paid to the workers is being investigated.

Even though the respondents had a different level of reliance on certifications, we were happy to hear that they do not fully rely on certifications. Despite certifications allowing for a control from a third party, brands and consumers should keep a critical view on them.

On the brands' side, brands should couple the audits with regular visits which enables them to see whether what the certification guarantees is really put in place inside the factory and to talk with the workers and get their opinions on the working conditions. The best would be to combine a professional control system with regular personal checks because:

- On one hand, having only personal checks might not provide sufficient objectivity.
- On the other hand, audits may not always reflect the reality on the ground.

On the consumers' side, consumers should be aware that a certification is not everything and that a certified brand (or workshop) is not necessarily better than a non certified brand (or workshop). Consumers should seek to have more proof than a certification to be able to know that a brand does not have a damaging impact on people (or the planet). The combination of the two verification techniques we explained in the previous paragraph is one of the guarantees consumers can expect.

Lastly, we would like to add that audits should also serve as a way to spot where improvements are needed. Indeed, we were not able to ask the respondent about the results of his factory's audit (Appendix 4) but we imagine that actions have been put in place in order to improve the low performance in certain criteria. If it is not the case, we encourage brands and factories to use audits as a tool to detect the areas of improvements and then put a plan of actions in place to ameliorate the conditions.

### 3. Cost breakdown

Receiving a cost breakdown is the third mechanism we have deduced from the semi-structured interviews.

The payment of a living wage is an important issue. One of the brands introduced us to the *cost breakdown* which is an effective mechanism allowing the brand to know that the manufacturing workers are receiving a living wage.

The cost breakdown shows transparency from the factory and brings awareness to the brands by making them aware of how their money is being redistributed.

A drawback of using such a technique is that it increases the paperwork between the brand and the factory. Additionally, the use of such a tool can lead one to question the reliability of the document and wonder if it really reflects reality. Obviously, people can be suspicious of anything which is why a relation of trust between the brand and its producers is crucial.

To use this technique, a negotiation must be done between the brand and the workshop so that it becomes a requirement for the factory to provide the document to the brand.

Nonetheless, we would like to stress that having the cost breakdown is one thing but being able to react and make an impact if the brand's management realises that the workers are not paid a living wage is important.

## Surprising results

We are going to discuss the answers that surprised us during the semi-structured interviews.

Firstly, one of the respondents explained that since the coronavirus crisis, the purchase prices to the factories have increased by approximately 15% and explained that due to this increase, the workers receive a higher wage.

We were a bit skeptical as to this statement being true because we would believe that the increase of the purchasing price to the factories would rather be used as a way to compensate for the rise of the raw material prices.

Secondly, we were not aware that it was possible to market a product as « Made in France » when the majority of the production is not made in France.

This is interesting because some brands might have been disregarded during the sample selection because they showcase that their production is made in local countries while the actual manufacturing step is happening in a remote country, and therefore would fit our criteria for selection. We suspect the possibility for this to happen to be small because we researched the manufacturing process location during the sampling.

Thirdly, we appreciate and would like to highlight the partnership of one brand with *tip me*. We are convinced that this is a good mechanism for consumers to directly reward the workers manufacturing their shoes. It also allows the consumers to fully realise that human beings are behind the making of the shoes.

Lastly, we would like to discuss the idea of a “human marking” that one of the respondents mentioned. This could be a good idea to make sure that every product sold in the EU was made with good working conditions for the workers. However, this seems like a long term solution as the implementation of such a marking would necessitate the creation of a whole new system of control. Especially to make sure that the marking is fully reliable and trustworthy in order to avoid the current issue of reliance toward certifications.

## Future of slow and fast fashion

In this section we would like to discuss the responses received regarding the future and evolution of slow fashion and fast fashion.

One of the respondents explained that it would not be possible to improve the working conditions of the workers inside the supply chain of fast fashion brands because it would require a change in the consumption behaviour of the consumers.

We believe that consumers can play an important part by acting more responsibly and demanding better from brands. However, the responsibility should not only be on the consumers changing their behaviour, brands should also want to act better and treat their workers with dignity, regardless of the consumers. Additionally, some consumers buy cheap products from fast fashion brands because they do not earn much money so they do not want to invest money when they have the possibility to buy pieces for nothing.

Regarding the question whether it would be possible for slow fashion brands to replace fast fashion brands in the long run, we agree with the respondents that it depends on where consumers choose to buy. But, we think it would be possible for fast fashion brands to improve their impact on people and the environment and keep selling as much as they are right now.





## **Conclusion**

### **Key takeaways**

The goal of this thesis was to understand how shoe slow fashion brands manage to guarantee good working conditions to the workers of the manufacturing process in remote countries. A literature review allowed us to delineate the exact scope of our research and an empirical investigation was done with the use of semi-structured interviews to gather information from professionals. Let us highlight the key takeaways that emerge from this work.

Slow fashion brands are part of the sustainable movement who aim to do better for the people and the planet. These brands are doing what they can do to have a positive impact on society but people should keep in mind that even slow fashion brands cannot do everything right. They can always improve and many slow fashion brands aim to be transparent on these areas of improvement.

The brands from the sample prove that it is possible to produce remotely while respecting the workers of the manufacturing process. At the end of the day, ensuring good working conditions to the workers is all about the will to do things the right way and choose the right partners who share the same desire. As was said by one of our respondents, the most important is not the location of your production, it is how you decide to produce and under which conditions.

Consumers can also have an impact by adapting their consumption behaviour and by reducing or refusing overconsumption. Consumers also have the power to choose which brands they are going to support. Brands will adapt to the customers' demand to keep selling.

### **Literature contribution and practical implications**

Several contributions to the literature have been made during the first part of this work. With the available resources we found, we were able to define what is slow fashion, we made a complete representation of the fashion supply chain and we assessed the current situation regarding working conditions in the fashion industry.

Regarding the practical implications, we shed light on several mechanisms allowing slow fashion brands to guarantee good working conditions which can also serve as inspiration and as a demonstration to other brands that it is possible to offer a decent work to the manufacturing workers in remote countries.

### **Limitations**

The small sample and the limited number of respondents to the empirical research is a big limit of the present research. 11 brands fitted the criteria of selection but only 2 brands accepted to speak with us. Having more respondents would have allowed us to compare several different discourses and it could have possibly led to the discovery of other mechanisms that could be put in place to ensure the respect to the workers of the manufacturing process in remote countries.

Another limit, which is linked to the method used, is that the interviews were limited to the words of the respondents. One of the interviews was performed in English, a second language for both the interviewer and the interviewee. The language barrier might have played a role in the received answers, the respondent might have not been able to express themselves fully.

## **Future paths for research**

Further research on the topic of this present work could benefit from seeing the reality on site and talk and ask directly to the workers their opinion on how they feel that the brands for which they produce care for their well-being.

As it was impossible to focus on every element of good working conditions (e.g. social environment, prospects) and every kind of slow fashion brands (e.g. clothing brands, local production), future researchers could concentrate their study on these elements.

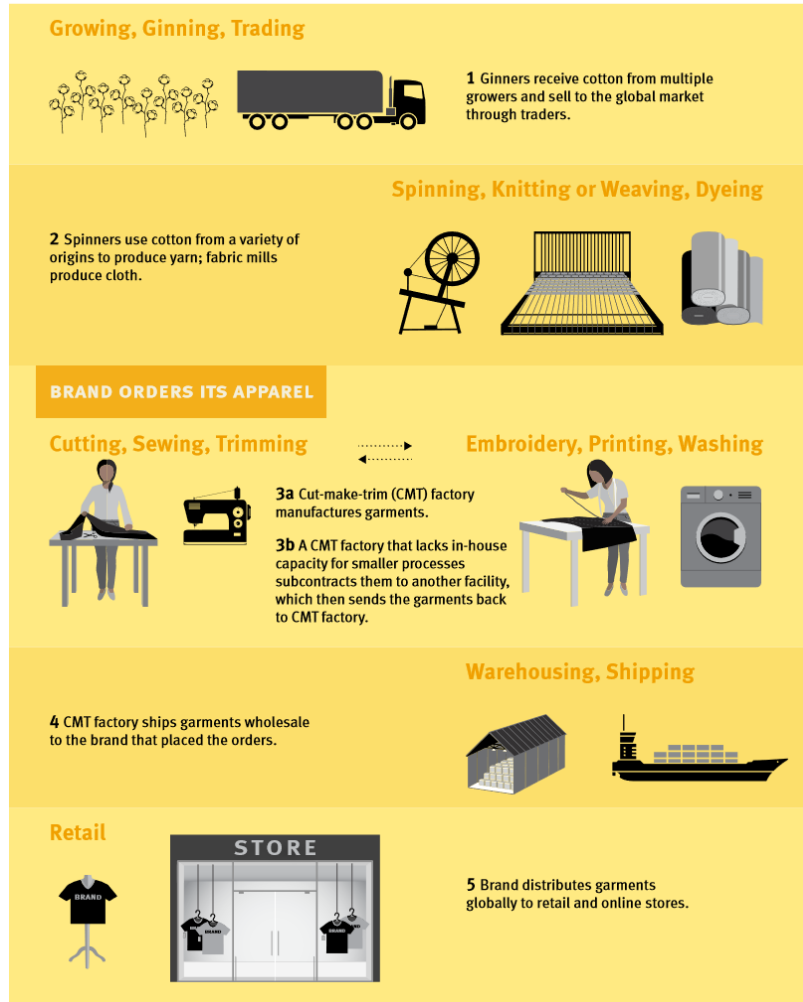
It could also be interesting to compare the working conditions of clothing and shoe manufacturing workers to see how the products made influence the conditions of the workers.

Another future research could try to research the possibility to create the “human marking” system for the fashion industry. Amongst other things, the feasibility, the potential impact as well as solutions in order to have a trustworthy system would need to be studied.

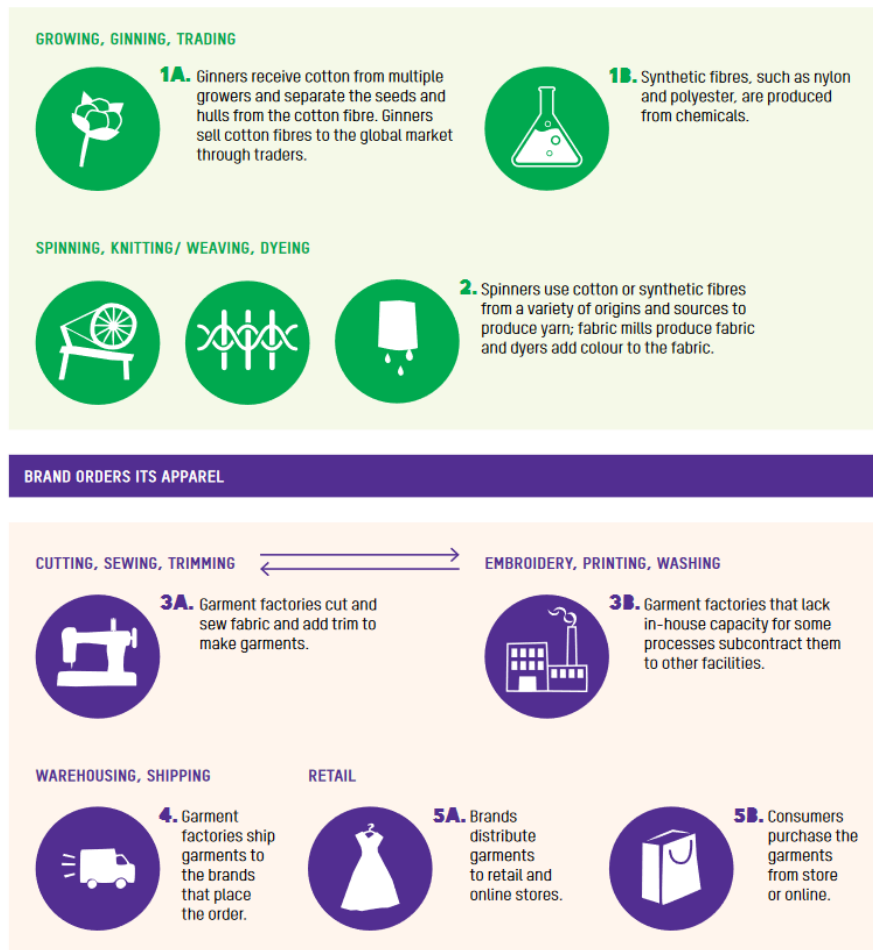
# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Fashion Supply Chain Representations

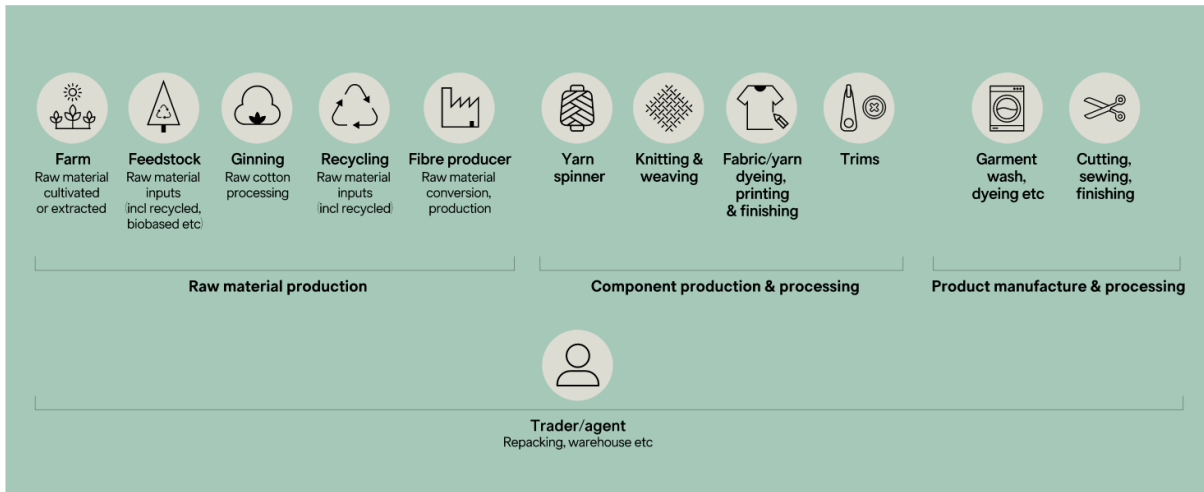
### The Global Garment Industry Supply Chain (Human Rights Watch, 2017)



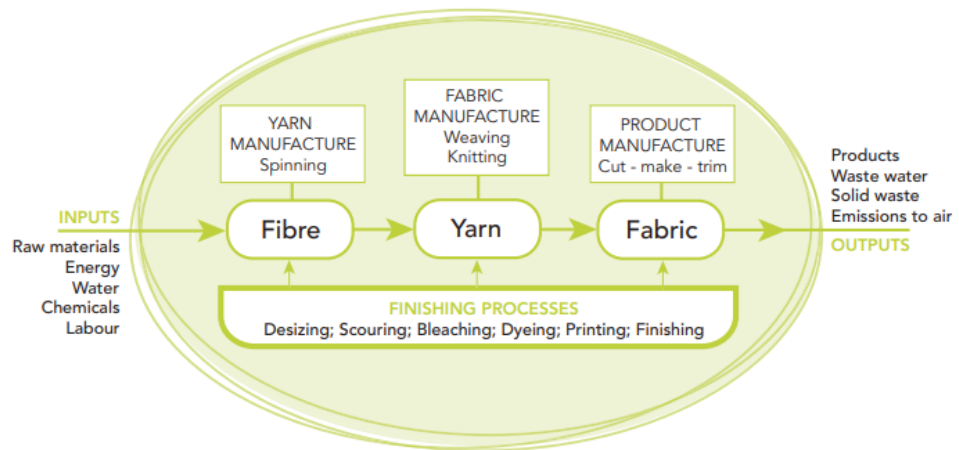
## How Australian Garment Supply Chains Work (Oxfam Australia, 2019)



## A typical fashion supply chain (H&M, n.d.)



Map of key processes, inputs and outputs in the textile production chain (Fletcher, 2014, 57)



## Appendix 2 - Fair Trade Certified Factory label in a Belgian store (Misukami, 2023)



### **Appendix 3 - Interview protocol (without adaptation for a specific brand)**

Hello [name]! I would like to start by thanking you for accepting to do this interview which will help me a lot in the making of my thesis. As a reminder, the theme of my dissertation is “How do shoe slow fashion brands manage to guarantee good working conditions for the workers of the manufacturing process when the production is located in remote countries?”.

I would like to inform you that all answers provided will be strictly confidential, anonymous and used only for the purpose of my dissertation. If you give me permission, I will record our conversation.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

#### ***Starting question***

- To start, I would like to know how you would define good working conditions? And what elements do you find are necessary to be able to say that working conditions are good?

Thank you for your opinion. Given that it would be impossible to focus on all aspects that are included in good working conditions, I have decided to focus on three aspects, namely: the health and safety of workers, the payment of a living wage and the trust of brands in labels and/or certifications.

#### ***General questions***

- How did you determine the workshops you were going to work with?
- Were the conditions of the workers an important criteria during the selection?
- Why did you decide to produce in [countries of production]?
- [If no mention of the price] Did the price of labour also influence your choice?
- Is there an intermediary between [brand] and the workshop? Why? How do you manage the situation?

#### ***Questions on the health and safety of the workers***

- Do you know the workers who manufacture the shoes? And in what conditions they work in?
- Have you put any mechanisms in place in order to monitor workers' working conditions?
- Are there mechanisms in place in order to avoid accidents?
- Do you know if there are any systems or techniques in place to avoid the problems associated with the repetitive motions involved in shoe production?
- Did you continue to produce during the coronavirus crisis? Were the working conditions adapted, if yes how?

#### ***Questions on the payment of a living wage***

- How is the price paid to the workshops defined?
- Do you know what percentage of the price paid to the workshops will go to the workers?
- Do you know what a living wage is? And the difference between a living wage and a minimum wage? Do the workers who manufacture your shoes earn a living wage?



- How do you make sure that the wage is paid?
- Do crises such as the coronavirus influence the paid salary?
- Did you continue to pay normally during the coronavirus crisis?
- Do workers often work overtime? Are they paid?

***Questions on the reliance on labels and certifications***

- [If the brand is certified] Why did you choose to get certified by the certification?
- What were the requirements for this certification? And regarding the workers, the social side?
- [If the brand isn't certified] Would you be interested in being certified?
- On the workshop side, is it important for you that they are certified?
- What does this certification guarantee?
- Is there a regular audit done by the workshop's certification body?
- Do you know when the workshop was audited for the last time?

***Key mechanisms***

- What do you think are the most important mechanisms or things a brand can do to guarantee that the working conditions of the workers are good?

***Questions on the future of slow and fast fashion***


- Do you think it would be possible for fast fashion brands to improve the working conditions of the workers?
- Do you think it would be possible for slow fashion brands to replace fast fashion in the long run?

I do not have any more questions but is there anything you would like to discuss in more detail or anything that we haven't talked about or something you would like to mention?

Would you like me to send you my work when it is finished?

Appendix 4 - Monitoring result of brand A's workshop for the BSCI certification received from respondent A

## Monitoring result for [REDACTED] [REDACTED] on site [REDACTED] [REDACTED]



---

### Monitoring

Monitored Party amfori ID Site Site amfori ID Address	
Monitoring Activity : <b>amfori Social Audit - Manufacturing</b> Monitoring Type : <b>Full Monitoring</b> Monitoring Partner : <b>Bureau Veritas Hong Kong Limited</b> Monitoring Start Date : <b>28/09/2022</b> Closing Meeting : <b>07/10/2022</b> Finished Date Submission Date : <b>07/10/2022</b> Expiration Date : <b>07/10/2023</b>	

i

This is an extract of the online monitoring result, generated on 10/10/2022, and is only valid as an acknowledgement of the result. To see all the details, review the full monitoring result, which is available [here](#) - The English version is the legally binding one.

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### Overall rating

A	B	C	D	E	None
		▲			

### Section rating

PA1: Social Management System	D
PA 2: Workers Involvement and Protection	C
PA 3: The Rights of Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining	A
PA 4: No Discrimination	A
PA 5: Fair Remuneration	B
PA 6: Decent Working Hours	C

Monitoring result for [REDACTED]
1 / 8

PA 7: Occupational Health and Safety	D
PA 8: No Child Labour	A
PA 9: Special Protection for Young Workers	A
PA 10: No Precarious Employment	A
PA 11: No Bonded Labour	A
PA 12: Protection of the Environment	B
PA 13: Ethical Business Behaviour	A

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## **Executive summary<sup>1</sup>**

In the recent years, awareness has grown toward the abuses present in the fashion industry.

Slow fashion is a movement prompted by the will to do better, both for the environment and for the people. Slow fashion is a different way to produce and consume. This includes offering good working conditions to the workers inside the supply chains of the brands. However, no literature explaining how these brands manage to guarantee these working conditions can be found.

Fashion supply chains are long and require the sequences of multiple different steps and this thesis will focus on the manufacturing process step. At this stage, fabrics are transformed into products with the help of different operations (e.g. cutting, trimming, assembly). We have chosen to focus on the manufacturing process because evidence shows that many social challenges are present in that process and that good working conditions are not a guaranteed right for every worker.

The concept of good working conditions will be explained using the seven dimension of job quality determined by Eurofound and the International Labour Organization in a collaborative report: physical environment, work intensity, working time quality, social environment, skills and discretion, prospects and earnings. The working conditions in mainstream fashion will also be researched regarding the seven dimensions.

This study made use of semi-structured interviews with brands' representative to understand how they manage to guarantee good working conditions to the manufacturing workers. Sampled brands had to have a remote production and be active in the footwear industry. The semi-structured interviews focused on three main topics: the health and safety inside the factories, the payment of a living wage to the workers and the reliance from brands on labels and certifications.

The interviews allowed us to determine three key mechanisms used by brands in order to guarantee the working conditions of shoe manufacturing workers, when the production is located in a remote country: having no intermediaries, the use of certifications and audits and receiving a cost breakdown.

Key concepts: slow fashion, fashion supply chain, manufacturing process, (good) working conditions

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<sup>1</sup> Word count: 25 238 words