

UK: Fashion firms urged to add ethics to buying practices

Fashion brands and retailers are being encouraged to take a broader look at their buying decisions as it becomes increasingly clear that the way they purchase garments has a direct impact on working conditions across global supply chains.

Fast fashion, lower prices, and a move to closer and shorter supply chains can lead to excessive overtime, illegal sub-contracting or even layoffs as buyers insist on last-minute changes to styles, quantities or colours.

According to Dan Rees, executive director of the Ethical Trading Initiative, a labour organisation which sets out basic rights for employees across the supply chain, "it is critically important that companies start to integrate ethical criteria into buying practices."

Rees, who recently chaired a public level discussion on 'Positive buying: confronting the challenge between buying practices and workers,' stressed: "What's urgently needed now is for companies to take a much more strategic approach, so that workers don't pay the price for our demand for fashion."

The event organised by The MFA Forum, a task force trying to mitigate the impact of the end of textile and garment quotas on workers in developing countries like Bangladesh and Lesotho, also made the point that a well-paid, well-trained workforce is likely to be more productive.

Dan Henkle, senior vice president of social responsibility at US clothing giant Gap_Inc confirms: "The factories with good compliance standards seem to have better product quality and on-time delivery - which can lead to better profitability. It can be a win-win situation."

So what can fashion retailers do to make sure their buying decisions are ethical and help improve the conditions of workers in global supply chains?



Top tips for buying ethically include:

- Know your suppliers - cut out the middle man and where possible, develop long-term, direct relationships with suppliers. This will help build the trust and leverage to make sustained improvements to workers' conditions.
- Incentivise your suppliers. Make sure compliance with labour standards is built into contracts with suppliers. Reward them for their efforts with repeat orders.
- Incentivise your buyers to 'think worker'. Educate buyers about the impact of their decisions on workers, and make sure they include ethical criteria alongside cost and quality when selecting suppliers.
- Improve production planning. Deciding to change an entire line of T-shirts from pink to blue when production has already started can mean workers are forced to work excessive hours in their efforts to get orders out in time. Give suppliers clear and predictable lead times, making it easier for them to ensure their employees work predictable and reasonable hours.
- Look at the price you pay your suppliers. At the very least, make sure that it allows suppliers to pay their workers a wage that they can afford to live on.