

Fashion identified as one of five key industries implicated in modern slavery

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by CLARE PRESS

FASHION NEWS

A new report highlights the problem, but what can we do about it?

The **Global Slavery Index 2018** reveals that every year Australia imports over \$US4 billion worth of clothes and accessories at risk of being tainted by modern slavery. According to the report, produced by the Walk Free Foundation, “our at-risk garments are imported from China, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Brazil and Argentina.”

About 40 million people are entrapped in modern slavery worldwide. That encompasses forced marriage, debt bondage, trafficked, bonded or forced labour. 71 per cent of them are women.

“Overall, Australia imports \$12 billion worth of goods at risk of slavery in their supply chains. It’s everywhere from our supermarket shelves and to the garments we buy,” says Grace Forrest, founding director of Walk Free. “It’s completely unacceptable and highlights fact that each of us, whether knowingly or not, are contributing to the continuation of this crime.”

Forrest, 25 from Perth, was recently appointed a UN Association of Australia goodwill ambassador for anti-slavery and has made it her mission to raise the profile of the issue across all industries. This new report puts fashion in a top five ranking it would rather avoid. The number one spot goes to Gadgets: laptops, computers and mobile phones. Garments came in as the second largest category of at-risk imports by dollar value, followed by fish, cocoa and sugar cane.

“I was in Delhi two years ago interviewing children who’d been in situations of forced labour and modern slavery in factories,” says Forrest. “One of the children I interviewed was nine years old, lured there under the pretext of being able to go to school, he was held in a garment factory for two years. He was stitching clothes for a manufacturer that can be found on every second block in New York City.”

The photo on the cover of the report shows his hands. “It connects slavery directly to fashion. If you look closely at his hands, you can see the scars. Those scars come from being beaten with scissors when there was a malfunction with the machine. He described the scissors being thrown at his hands to punish him.”

Modern slavery is present in garment factories in countries like Bangladesh, China and Vietnam, but extends right down supply chains through every stage of raw material production. “We see it in cotton picking, for example,” says Forrest.



The Global Slavery Index 2018. Image credit: Supplied

“Uzbekistan only very recently introduced legislation to address state-sponsored forced labour in its cotton fields, where the whole sections of the population were forced to pick cotton, including kids and pregnant women, and not being paid for it. This cotton goes into a number of massive suppliers around the world.”

In 2017, pressure from the Walk Free Foundation resulted in Zara’s parent company Inditex joining the likes of Gucci and Levi’s as signatories to the Responsible Sourcing Network’s **cotton pledge** that boycotts unethical Uzbek cotton.

Brands are taking action. Supply chains can be very complex. Around 100 pairs of hands touch an average garment during its production. While what the industry calls Tier 1 and Tier 2 factories are often audited and above board, the further back you go, the more difficult it can be to know if slave-like conditions are imposed on workers.

Nobody wants to think of such a thing being a part of their businesses or the products that they buy, but too often the truth is hidden. Forrest says we need to shine a light on the problem; to see it clearly before we can hope to solve it by broad-based collaboration from all stakeholders.

“Modern slavery is not something that happens ‘over there’ that we don’t have to think about,” she says. “It’s a first world problem; it’s our problem, but it’s also our opportunity, we can change it. If we care about the people who make our products we can make a difference.”

In recent years, fashion companies at all ends of the price spectrum have been moving towards greater transparency. Campaigns like Fashion Revolution’s Who Made My Clothes have helped build consumer momentum. Legislation has a major part to play. The UK introduced a Modern Slavery Act in 2015, and Australia is following suit.

In April, foreign minister Julie Bishop **told** a Commonwealth meeting in London that the new Australian legislation “will contain reporting requirements for Australia's largest businesses to raise awareness about the scourge of modern slavery...To encourage disclosure, identification and disclosure of instances of modern slavery, and to clean up supply chains.”

These laws are set to be even stricter than Britain’s, requiring companies to show what actions they’re taking to ensure supply chains are slavery-free.

<https://www.vogue.com.au/fashion/news/fashion-identified-as-one-of-five-key-industries-implicated-in-modern-slavery/news-story/4cbd8bdc1168f3925bc8cbc96b1f6e6e>

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