

VOGUE

RUNWAY

Nest Gathers Industry Leaders at the United Nations to Discuss the New Handworker Economy and the Future of Ethical Fashion



DECEMBER 11, 2017 2:28 PM
by EMILY FARRA



Photo: Courtesy of Nest



If you've been operating under the impression that sustainable, ethical fashion is a niche market or a fleeting trend, here's a statistic that might change your mind: Fashion is the second-most polluting industry in the world, right behind oil. That's almost impossible to grasp, and finding a solution can feel even more overwhelming. We do know how we got here, though. Fast fashion has played a role, with issues ranging from collapsed factory buildings to child labor and unsafe chemical use, but on a greater scale, as the price of clothing decreases, there's also more of it than ever. Twice as much, in fact. Not only is there a vast surplus, but much of it gets thrown out after just a few wears.

Fashion's negative impact extends beyond the environment, however. At Nest's third annual Artisan Leadership Summit last Thursday at the United Nations, panel topics ranged from wastewater management to the media's role in affecting change and, most significantly, the new handworker economy. Consider it an old-school solution for a very new-world dilemma. Sustaining and empowering the handworker—for instance, an embroiderer in India or a tie-dyer in Kenya—can address environmental issues as well as economic, social, and gender-equality issues. While you might assume that most clothing is made in factories these days, author Lucy Siegle estimated that up to 60 percent is made by artisans in her 2011 book *To Die for: Is Fashion Wearing Out the World?* Indian *Vogue* editor Bandana Tewari put it this way: “We had a blueprint [for a sustainable fashion economy] less than 100 years ago defined by Gandhi . . . He believed in decentralized government and wanted to empower each unit of weavers, dyers, and embroiderers. Each village was a microcosm of the nation. In a country that employs 17 million handcraft workers, we've forgotten the narrative Gandhi handed us at the time, which was [about] self-reliance and empowering [yourself] from grassroots. That ideology was the backbone and the fabric of fashion.”

As fashion has progressed and sped up at a breakneck pace, certain handworkers and traditional crafts are being phased out. But consumer awareness—or lack thereof—is also responsible, Tewari argued when she joined *The True Cost* director Andrew Morgan, *The New York Times* fashion director and chief critic Vanessa Friedman, and the World Economic Forum's senior advisor Cristiana Falcone Sorrell for the Nest discussion. “I'm overwhelmed sometimes at the level of invisibility of the people who make the things we love,” Tewari said. “Fashion is a product-led environment, and you get consumed by the beauty of the product and refuse to acknowledge the chain of events that leads to getting it. It can be very unethical—and the biggest challenge is, how do we make that story cool?”

“I don’t think we’ve forgotten the value of small artisans; I think we’ve devalued them,” Friedman added. “Globalization of the fashion industry swamped the smaller manufacturer and the individual. We traded the value of the singular and the hard-to-get for the incredible allure of joining a massive community that was represented by a brand name, like H&M or Chloé. That’s a shifting of identity that needs to be readdressed.” She suggested that new businesses need to begin with specific value systems rooted in place—i.e., the textiles they use, their distribution mechanisms, the storytelling, and how they treat employees. But there probably won’t be real change unless the consumer gets involved, which inevitably will involve social media and new technology. “There’s this brave new world of video that can make a difference,” Friedman said. “In the Dries Van Noten retrospective [at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs] in Paris, he had a video of the communities he works with in India [playing on a screen] right in the middle of the museum with all of his clothes. I thought that was very powerful and a really good way to tell that story.”

“With social media, everyone is a content generator, so in many ways, that’s empowering,” Tewari added. “I can take a video of an embroiderer in an Indian village, post it, and tag a brand to it.”

During the summit, the crowd also heard from Fidelis Muia, director of financial operations at Heshima Kenya, an organization that protects and educates refugee children and youth. The majority are refugee girls who are separated from their families. Despite scarce resources and a broken-down infrastructure, learning the craft of resist-dyeing (or tie-dyeing) has helped them work toward economic independence through making their own scarves. However, the craft also helps the girls begin to heal emotionally; it’s been scientifically proven that repetitive hand motions like knitting, weaving, and tie-dyeing have the same effects on your brain as meditation. In the midst of the worst refugee crisis in history, organizations like Heshima Kenya are increasingly vital.

The fact that many of these refugees are young girls, many of whom have been denied education, makes this issue hit particularly close to home. Morgan, the director of *The True Cost*—undoubtedly the most-referenced documentary in conversations about sustainable fashion—saw the plight of these women firsthand. “We’re the first generation that can measure the impact our lives are having on the world in real time,” he said. “That’s tremendous and overwhelming. The role of storytelling is vital to help us understand where we are. I think the handwork economy is still one of the greatest untold stories in the fashion industry, [and] the role of women, more broadly. These aren’t just aesthetic decisions—they’re political and evocative of the world we live in.”

At the end of the day, Nest and its steering committee of partners, including Patagonia, Eileen Fisher, Maiyet, Target, West Elm, The Children’s Place, Jaipur Living, and PVH, announced its new Nest Compliance for Homes and Small Workshops program. It aims to “increase supply-chain transparency beyond four-walled factories,” as well as to ensure that home work is a safe, viable option for women and families. You can learn more about the initiative on Nest’s website.