

# The New York Times

## Here to Help

VANESSA FRIEDMAN ANSWERS YOUR STYLE QUESTIONS



I'm an average size woman. I'd like to dress fashionably, but I don't want to wear clothes made by enslaved or exploited workers. I've looked at lots of sites that have heartwarming blurbs about their commitment to small producers and the environment, but exploitation can be small as well as large. How can I find age-appropriate fashion that is made fairly? JOAN, MOUNT SINAI, NEW YORK



I wish I could simply point you toward an index that would answer your question, but one of the problems with fashion is that no centralized clearinghouse for corporate social responsibility exists. Generally, once we moved beyond Rana Plaza, the focus has been on environmental sustainability more than working conditions, though in both cases there are no universally agreed quantified measurements for what constitutes an "ethical" business.

And given that many large fashion brands outsource production to multiple factories (which can in turn outsource their own bits), it is often hard to trace exactly where and how something was made.

All of which means that in many ways the burden is on each of us to do our research, to the extent that we are able or feel comfortable. Places to start: NGOs like the Fair Labor Association, NEST and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition.

I asked Julie Gilhart, a consultant who

Fisher (check out the Behind the Label section on the website), Mara Hoffman (see World of) and Everlane (look at the Factories section).

Another way to ensure production values is to work with very small-batch brands that make their own clothes on-site, where they can stay connected to their labor force. These include Alabama Chanin and Zero + Maria Cornejo. For the latter, most of the clothes are made in New York's garment district, and there is a focus on supporting female entrepreneurs.

Still, there's no question their products are more costly than others. Which brings up one essential question we all have to ask: How much is the knowledge that the garment you wear has been made responsibly actually worth? Because honestly, if we hold that truth to be self-evident, we need to be willing to pay for it.

Every week in the Open Thread newsletter — a look from across The Times at the forces that shape the dress codes we share — The Times's chief fashion critic, Vanessa Friedman, answers a