

Environmental Audit Committee

Oral evidence: Sustainability of the fashion industry, HC 1148

Tuesday 30 October 2018

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 30 October 2018.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mary Creagh (Chair); Colin Clark; Zac Goldsmith; Mr Goodwill; Caroline Lucas; Kerry McCarthy; John McNally; Alex Sobel.

Questions 1-84

Witnesses

I: Stella Claxton, Senior Lecturer, Clothing Sustainability Research Group, Nottingham Trent University, Dr Mark Sumner, Lecturer in Sustainability, Retail and Fashion, University of Leeds, Professor Richard C. Thompson, Professor of Marine Biology, University of Plymouth, and Alan Wheeler, Director, Textiles Recycling Association.

II: Sarah O'Connor, Investigative Reporter, Financial Times, Kate Elsayed-Ali, International Advocacy Manager, Anti-Slavery International, and Sarah Ditty, Policy Director, Fashion Revolution.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Dr Mark Sumner, School of Design, University of Leeds - written evidence](#) | [PDF version \(83 KB\)](#) 
- [Professor Richard C. Thompson - written evidence](#) | [PDF version \(128 KB\)](#) 
- [Textile Recycling Association - written evidence](#) | [PDF version \(116 KB\)](#) 
- [Fashion Revolution - written evidence](#) | [PDF version \(123 KB\)](#) 

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Stella Claxton, Dr Mark Sumner, Professor Richard C. Thompson and Alan Wheeler.

Q1 Chair: I welcome all of you to the first hearing in our inquiry into the sustainability of the fashion industry. We have a very interesting and quite different audience than we normally have for our Environmental Audit Committee hearings. I welcome our guests, in particular Alan Wheeler who I believe is celebrating a significant birthday today—no better way to kick it off than with us. You are all very welcome and, starting with you, Alan, please introduce yourselves for the purposes of a sound check and Hansard.

Alan Wheeler: My name is Alan Wheeler. My day job is Director of the Textile Recycling Association, which is the UK trade association for collectors, graders, exporters and processors of used clothing and textiles. I also have a role in the Bureau of International Recycling as the general delegate of the textiles division.

Professor Thompson: I am Richard Thompson. I am Professor of Marine Biology at the University of Plymouth and I have been working on plastics in the environment, particularly microplastics, for about 20 years.

Stella Claxton: I am Stella Claxton. I am a Senior Lecturer in Fashion Management, Marketing and Communication at the Nottingham Trent University. Before that I was a designer and technical director within the fashion supply chain and in retail.

Dr Sumner: Mark Sumner, School of Design at Leeds University, Lecturer in Sustainability and Fashion. Prior to that I spent about 15 years working in industry, involved in sustainability in the supply chain.

Q2 Chair: It is always good to have someone from Yorkshire on the panel. Thank you all very much indeed for attending. We are going to be looking at environmental sustainability in this first panel and then social sustainability in the second panel.

We have all heard the horror stories and seen the programmes about sweatshops in the fashion industry but the environmental impact of our shopping habits is much less well known and less well understood. How environmentally sustainable is the UK fashion industry?

Stella Claxton: I think in its current form it is not that environmentally sustainable. In the last 15 to 20 years we have seen volumes rise, so volumes of clothing bought have risen. This has been driven by the emergence of the fast fashion model during that time. While some retailers have made a lot of effort to address some of the impacts of the actual products themselves, the rising volumes mean that there is a magnification of the issues. Coupled with that we have a situation where chasing low prices has led to global supply chains looking for cheaper manufacturing, which is normally in developing countries. This makes



HOUSE OF COMMONS

supply chains very fragmented and complicated, which means that quite often the problems are not known about, not necessarily actively hidden but just very difficult to trace and be transparent. Bearing that in mind and additionally thinking about how consumption in Asia is going to rise in the next few years and how UK brands are looking to service those markets, although it is a UK problem it is a global problem as well, so we are part of that global problem. I do not think it is sustainable in its current form.

Dr Sumner: I think it is absolutely right that there has been a vast increase in volumes and it is a global problem. We have supply chains that spread across the world. We are talking about 60 or 70 different countries growing cotton and we have garment making being shifted around the globe chasing low labour costs. There are some fundamental big challenges associated with the fashion industry, the clothing industry. I think it is really important that we balance that out with understanding some of the potential benefits of clothing and the fashion industry. At least 300 million people are employed by the fashion and clothing industry.

Q3 **Chair:** 300 million?

Dr Sumner: 300 million and that is probably an underestimate, associated with the fact that the supply chain is quite opaque so we don't have any hard and fast details of that. Not only is it providing employment, the textile industry for hundreds of years has provided a route through for developing nations growing GDP. Also for consumers in the UK the fashion industry provides well being in lots of different forms. It allows us to live a life that we all aspire to. The real big challenge for us in the fashion industry is the fact that we have an imbalance in the benefits and the costs. What we are seeing is that some of the benefits are associated with consumers in the UK. They are getting pleasure and enjoyment from fashion and that is coming at a cost to workers and the environment in extrajurisdictional, overseas production routes as well as agriculture. I must stress that agriculture is a really big part of the textile industry. The challenge is trying to work out how we get an even distribution across all of the actors within the value chain.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you. Mr Wheeler, what progress has there been? We have had the Sustainable Clothing Action Plan that came out from the Association, following on from the WRAP's report about six years ago, talking about what we needed to do to reduce the environmental impact of our clothing. Has that been a success, a failure?

Alan Wheeler: When you look at the measures by which the SCAP signatories are judged, they are making good progress. They are making significant progress towards their carbon, water and waste targets. What impact that is having on reuse and recycling market, which is the area that I am particularly interested in, is still a very problematic area. Both Stella and Mark mentioned how much consumption of new clothing has increased. I have seen figures that suggest that it has risen three times



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in the 21st century and five times as much since the 1980s when I was a teenager and I was certainly buying enough clothing then, so I don't know what they are doing with clothing now. The reality is that is now coming through to us in the reuse and recycling markets.

In Britain we have a pretty good collection rate per head of population. I know we are one of the best in the world but we are also one of the most wasteful. Even though we are collecting around 11 kilos of clothing per head of population, which is roughly what the Germans do and virtually no other country in the world gets anywhere near that, we are throwing away a lot more than the Germans. The question is what can we do with that clothing. At the moment, if it is reusable we are sending it to markets in Africa, eastern Europe and Asia and those markets are under pressure partly because other countries, quite frankly, need to improve their own collection rates.

We are seeing China move really rapidly into this market. In 2010 it accounted for something like 0.88% of all global exports of used clothing. It now accounts for 6% and is the fourth largest exporter in the world. There is only one thing that is going to happen to the Chinese market and that is it is going to become the dominant factor. I have done a quick calculation, which has had no verification from any third party or anything like that so I would treat it with caution. My estimate is that if China in, say, 20 years down the line were to be collecting half as much as the average British person does, the entire size of that market from China would be the same size as the current global market. We have to start seriously planning what to do with the stuff that is coming on to the market. There are lots of questions there.

The other issue is particularly with recycling, which has no value whatsoever. If you had a pile of rags here that were ripped up, nobody in this country would be interested in picking that up for recycling because they can't turn a profit on it. They pick a mixed grade of clothing that is reusable and textiles that have to go to recycling and the recycling happens because they can make a profit on the reusable element. If we are going to collect more, we are going to have to recycle more and we need new markets.

Chair: That is very interesting. Many thanks.

Q5 John McNally: Following on from that, in my own constituency we have a company called Nathans in Denny.

Alan Wheeler: I know it well, yes.

John McNally: It is a huge business locally and employs an awful lot of people. It has lorries come in from all over Europe, as you probably know. It sends stuff over to Africa, all over the world. The level of recycling is quite astonishing. One thing that always amazes is why they get only one shoe and not the other; they never seem to get pairs. I would love an answer to that but I don't think even they have one.



My question is on synthetic fibre pollution to Professor Thompson and Dr Sumner. What level of priority should we be giving to solving the problem of synthetic fibres entering the ocean from clothing?

Professor Thompson: It is a key issue. We are finding synthetic materials, plastics but particularly fibres, in the deep sea, in arctic sea ice, in fish and shellfish. It is certainly there in considerable quantities. In terms of priority, I think it is important to look at how easy is it to fix. If I take some of the work that we have done in our own labs—I am a marine biologist, I am not a textile designer—with a range of products that I have bought in a local high street supermarket and I wash them, I find that some are shedding fibres four or five times more quickly than others and these are identical looking, fleece-like garments. It is saying to me that there are things that probably we have not needed to think about historically at the design stage about life in service and fibres that are shed. It is not about not using clothing, it is not about eliminating fibres, but if we have identical looking garments and some of them are shedding fibres four times faster than others, it is suggesting to me that it has not been in the design brief to consider that.

Some of those fibres will be intercepted by waste water treatment but a good number of them will escape and because of the volumes of fibres and clothing that are used, even a relatively efficient waste water treatment plant can end up with a fairly substantial emission. My plea would be, as you are starting to consider sustainability right from the material source to the end of life recycling, is also to factor in at the design stage what is the wear, what is the life in service going to be like and is there a way we can design clothing to minimise those emissions.

Dr Sumner: I think the question about prioritisation is important. We know that the microplastic problem and microfibre problem is having an impact and Richard's work has shown that. But it is also important to recognise the scale of that impact. If we stopped all the microplastics and microfibres being released today, we are still going to have climate change and that is going to have just as big an impact on biological systems around the world. We are still going to have issues of water scarcity, toxicological impacts associated with chemicals use in the textile industry and the social issues associated with that.

It is important to recognise that there is a number of things that we need to be looking at and working on to resolve the problems. Microplastics is a new one that we need to do the research on to really understand the scale and scope of the impacts. As Richard said, it is very important that what we think about is the wider, full life cycle impact of clothing and fashion as a system and understand what we can do to minimise those impacts across all the different aspects of the environmental spectrum.

Q6 **John McNally:** Professor Thompson, you said something that I think is really interesting. We have had evidence here about sustainable goals and never reaching where it is supposed to go to the people where it actually matters and if you want to change the world you need to speak



the language of the people that you are trying to reach. If we can go a bit further, you said we need to do research. What current research is going on into potential solutions for preventing fibres going into the oceans?

Professor Thompson: There is not enough research in textile design. There is interest in filters that might be able to capture some of these fibres in a domestic setting. That is an end of life solution. We are currently doing work for the Natural Environment Research Council with a PhD student looking at the effectiveness of waste water treatment. When you realise the quantity of quite large sanitary-related items that escape waste water treatment, it is difficult to imagine, however efficient those plants are, that they are going to be able to capture all of the microscopic fibre.

The fundamental area where we need to look at a fix is the design stage. In my view—and we were discussing it a little bit before we came in—it has never really been part of the brief and if it has not been part of the brief to design textiles that don't shed during wear and washing, it is hardly surprising that we have some garments that are shedding quite quickly and some that are shedding relatively slowly. We need to understand that a little bit better and we also need to understand the behavioural science about how the consumer might interact with those things. If the garment feels slightly different, we need to communicate why that might be.

Q7 **John McNally:** I think we have touched on the nudge factor about changing behaviour but your point is that this should be coming from the Government. Do you think the Government is doing enough in the first place to instruct people about what manufacturers and designers probably should be doing from the very outset?

Professor Thompson: I will broaden this out into synthetic materials, plastics if you like, more generally. There is a real intensity, a real desire to want to take action from the public, from policy and from industry. I think where we need more investment is in making sure that we match the solutions to the appropriate parts of the problem, that we don't go for low-hanging fruit and we don't introduce solutions that might not address the problem and might create unintended consequences.

What is needed from the academic community is impartial and reliable evidence in the round to look at solutions, whether it is textiles in clothing or another application of plastics, to say what are the environmental consequences, what are some of the material design solutions, what are the behavioural and social science aspects of that—will these products be acceptable—and, failing all of those things, are there legal and policy measures that we might bring in to help to nudge those directions. It is about independent, impartial evidence in the round that can guide industry and policy appropriately so that we don't take kneejerk reactions.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The stars have never been aligned in this way before in 25 years of looking at it that everybody is agreed we ought to do something about this problem. The question sometimes is "what" and there is a temptation to jump for low-hanging fruit.

Q8 John McNally: What should we be pushing to increase? Should we be pushing to increase the role of natural fibres in textiles and garments? It has almost gone back to where we were 25, 30 years ago when you bought some clothes. Are we pushing enough to get more natural fibres in textiles in our garments like the harvest wheat industry?

Dr Sumner: The life cycle analysis data tell us that the fibres that have the biggest environmental impact, because of the way they are grown, are cotton fibres, cellulosic fibres. There are significant challenges in the use of highly toxic pesticides and overuse of fertilisers. There are issues of health and safety for workers, water consumption, carbon footprints. Cotton has major impacts associated with the way that we grow it currently. Obviously it is a natural fibre but in the way that we grow it now we are stretching the resources and the ability of the planet to recover from the agricultural system. A direct switch across to natural fibres has all sorts of unintended consequences. We don't know about the microfibre impacts because we don't fully understand the biodegradability of cotton in the system. We also don't know what happens to the chemicals that we apply to the cotton.

All of us are wearing cotton now, it is by far the most common fibre, but all of the cotton we are wearing now has some sort of chemical applied to it. It might be a cross link resin, a colour, a performance chemical. That will be carried down through to the ocean on the fibre and we don't know what happens to that. We are very talking about very miniscule amounts of release per garment. In some of the work that we have looked at we are talking about 0.04% of the weight of garment may be flushed out in a washing machine. I am not saying that we have to ignore it; we have to bear in mind how many garments are in the world and being washed. It is trying to understand the unintended consequences of taking a kneejerk reaction, which is why a committee like this is really important so that we can get an understanding of the full system and can then start mapping out what are the areas of activity and the role that policy has.

I think policy has a very important role. We have seen some of the success of the Modern Slavery Act. There are some limitations with the Modern Slavery Act but there are opportunities where policy can have a very important role for UK plc but also the moral point of view in what we are doing to other nations through our consumption.

Professor Thompson: I agree. It is not about a switch to natural from synthetic or vice versa. It is about making sure that we use those fibres responsibly and we consider it in the round from source to grave and life in service.

John McNally: It does seem that we are at a pivotal moment in time



HOUSE OF COMMONS

when the will is with us. I think the will is with us anyway.

Q9 **Chair:** I was going to ask Richard Thompson what you made of the Budget yesterday with the failure to introduce the single use plastics tax, the latte levy. What is your initial response?

Professor Thompson: It was quite disappointing. I would have hoped for a little bit more.

Q10 **Chair:** Quite a lot more. Can I press you on acrylic versus polyester? These are the sort of details that people really want to understand. You said in some of your written evidence that acrylic garments release more fibres than polyester. Why is that? Is that across the fabric? What is going on with acrylic? What is acrylic? I am not even sure I know what it is.

Professor Thompson: We washed a range of different fleece-like garments, fleecy, hoody type garments made of different fibres that we had obtained from high street retailers, and some of them were shedding fibres far more quickly than others. The question to me is: why was that? Is it that acrylic is bad and polyester is good? I don't necessarily think that is the case at all. We had replicates of each garment; we did not have a whole range of different types of polyester garment. We had one fleece that we had multiple replicates of bought from the same store in different parts of the rack so they had not necessarily come out of the same box. The challenge to me is understanding why the acrylic was releasing more than the polyester.

In some of the work that we have ongoing at the moment we are looking at a range of polyester garments that are constructed in different ways with different lengths of fibres, different degrees of spinning of the yarn and different construction. Those initial studies are showing that there is difference even within a fibre type. It would probably be better for Mark or Stella to comment on why that might be. We don't understand it. I had charities that work outdoors contacting me and saying, "Should we switch all of our wardens' clothing from acrylic or whatever?" and I said, "No, we don't have the evidence for that yet".

What we are saying is that on the high street there is a difference between these fibres and we need to understand why that. Is it the way the garment was put together? Is it the way the yarn was put together? It is clear that there is something that has a substantial impact on the emissions but we don't fully understand why and what the factors are that sit behind that.

Stella Claxton: The thing we need to consider here is exactly what you are saying, which is that there are so many variables within products that it is difficult to come up with a methodology to be able to accurately measure these problems and so we are going through this process of trying different things. I am not sure whether you are even able to trace the specific chains back to the fibre producers, but there is quite a lot of variation in the different ways that polyester and other synthetic fibres



can be engineered and then there is the length of the fibre, how it is spun, the construction of the garment, how it is dyed, how it has been processed. All of those things create so many variables.

In the wider picture, polyester and acrylic tend to go into slightly different end uses. For instance, in knitwear you will see a lot of acrylic used as a synthetic fibre but little polyester whereas in woven fabrics like suitings or school wear or dresses you will see more polyester. There is that level of complexity about the end use and the actual product layered on top.

Professor Thompson: An interesting thing from the perspective of the variables was that when we did that piece of research I was expecting that it would be something to do with washing temperature or use of different powders, biological, non-biological, use of conditioners. The main thing that emerged was the difference in the type of garment you put in in the first place. Coming back to the earlier question, there is a fairly easy piece of scoping work that could go through some of these variables and establish where the greatest wins could be achieved.

Chair: That is really helpful. Thank you. We are going to move on.

- Q11 **Zac Goldsmith:** Very quickly on that point, if it is the case that some items of clothing release vastly more microfibres than other types of clothing and if it is the case that you don't yet know whether or not that is because of the manner in which those materials have been made or the nature of the materials themselves, who is doing that scoping work? That seems to me pretty crucial.

Professor Thompson: We have unsuccessfully applied for funding to do that kind of thing.

- Q12 **Zac Goldsmith:** Is that Government funding?

Professor Thompson: From Research Council funding. We are trying to secure funding at the moment to do something related to capture in washing machines, but I think it is really important. One of the challenges there is having funding streams that unite the key players, which are the material scientists and the polymer scientists who may have some solutions and the environmental scientists who perhaps understand the problem. If you don't bring those people together, you have the danger of a solution that is not matched to the particular problem.

- Q13 **Zac Goldsmith:** To your knowledge, has anyone else applied for funding for the same sort of scoping work and has any of that been accepted? Is any of this work being done at the moment?

Dr Sumner: Yes. We have applied for funding through the usual Research Council routes and been successful. We have applied for funding and almost crowd sourced, I guess is the right term to use, to get funding from industry. Parts of the industry are very interested in trying to understand the challenge here and want to work out what they can do.

- Q14 **Zac Goldsmith:** That work will be done. What is the timescale on that?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Sumner: I say that we have been successful with some funding. We still need a lot more to be able to do that. From a textile point of view—and Stella has hinted at this already—textiles is not a new science. I can look around the room now and say, “Your suit is probably not going to lose very much material. Your cardigan, probably is”. I am sorry, it is not your fault. For example, your jumper is a knitted product and the yarn will be fairly loosely spun, therefore we are going to get fibres coming out of it. We know that already, whatever the fibre. There are some interesting challenges around that as well. What we do know is that from a textile point of view we can go around the room and identify which we think are the products most likely to release material.

- Q15 **Zac Goldsmith:** Sorry to interrupt you. It is slightly straying into another question but just a last point on this. Once that research is done and we have a better idea of whether or not it is the actual nature of certain materials to be more polluting than others, presumably then your recommendation would be to look at some kind of regulatory response to that in the same way that we have seen initiatives to phase out microbeads. Is that the kind of direction you imagine us going in, assuming the answers to the research are the answers you expect?

Professor Thompson: I don’t think we can fix everything with a regulation. It has to start with the appropriate evidence. Consumers are quite hungry at the moment to make informed choices but some of this is about the social science to communicate to the consumer why the design of a lovely soft jumper, for example, has changed slightly. It could be regulation but it might be a more subtle nudge. We have to understand the evidence behind the problem and the direction of travel before we know how best to move in that direction.

- Q16 **Zac Goldsmith:** It is quite hard to imagine a mass market of people getting to the point where they understand the difference between every different type of fabric to be able to make that kind of informed decision. I am all for nudge but I can’t see that applying in something that is so ubiquitous.

Professor Thompson: I agree. To some extent I would use the analogy of the packaging in high street stores and I think what the consumer wants is the supplier and the retailer to have made some of those ethical decisions for them. It is different to, let’s say, food miles on a soft fruit where if you want it at a certain time of year it might have to come from South America and that needs to be communicated. Where you can achieve the same functionality with a lower environmental footprint, there is a responsibility on the manufacturers and the retailers to try to supply those goods so that the consumer is not faced with all of this information and choice and dilemma at the point of sale.

- Q17 **Zac Goldsmith:** I am going to move away—and we have covered this to some extent—and come back to Alan Wheeler. You were talking about the amount of unwanted or damaged clothing that is thrown away each year in the UK. To be clear, what percentage of clothing that is finished



HOUSE OF COMMONS

ends up in a normal household bin as opposed to being recycled? Do you know that figure?

Alan Wheeler: Well, roughly. You have to treat the figures with caution because there is not a detailed dataset but broadly speaking we are consuming about 1.1 million tonnes of new clothing a year. It is not an exact science to say that that must be how much we are throwing away because you get stuff stuck in the national wardrobe, you get things going through informal channels, but if you take that as broad brush stroke that is how much we are consuming, which incidentally is around 26.7 kilos per person and the rest of Europe is around half of that.

The amount that we are collecting as a country is quite high, though. We collect around 650,000 tonnes a year. The figures vary; some down from 600,000, others put it at nearly 700,000. You are talking about 300,000, 400,000 tonnes or more of used clothing is going in the bin.

Q18 **Zac Goldsmith:** I was going to say—I realise I am talking for too long—what is the best advice you could give this panel for our report in trying to get that 400,000 figure down? What is the most useful thing you can recommend?

Alan Wheeler: Basically, we need to look at ways in which we can get more clothing out of the waste stream. That is improving collection rates, but it is not quite as simple as that because if you improve the collection rates—as I have referred to—we have markets that are of limited capacity. We could increase our collections a bit, and that is fine, but when you talk about the whole global issue, we talk about our European partners; if they started collecting at the same rates that we do that would cause a real problem.

Q19 **Zac Goldsmith:** Of the 400,000 tonnes that is just chucked into ordinary household bins, how much of that is just not recyclable do you think?

Alan Wheeler: I am going back to a WRAP report from 2012, which I think was the one that Mary was referring to, and that suggested at the time 350,000 tonnes was going to landfill, of clothing that would otherwise be reusable or recyclable, and in—

Q20 **Zac Goldsmith:** Theoretically, all of it can be recycled?

Alan Wheeler: Virtually, yes, unless it is so dirty that it is obviously going to create a problem. Also, there is difficulty in the analogy because if you put something in a bin, how can you tell what the state of it was before it went in the bin, so there is an element of error.

The other thing I was going to say is that there is another 80,000 tonnes that they often don't talk about, which they suggest would go to incineration, so in that report you are actually talking about a figure of 430,000 going into the waste stream.

Q21 **Zac Goldsmith:** I saw you shaking your head. Can I put the same question to you?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Sumner: I think there are limitations on what we can do with the current recycling and reuse industry. It is under great stress at the moment. A number of Alan's members are going through very difficult financial times. In terms of: how do we resolve this, there is a real role for Government to play in looking at funding for recycling techniques.

The current recycling process—and by “recycling” I am differentiating between reuse—70% of the stuff that gets pushed through charity routes, for example, is reused and that is good. We are keeping that in circulation. There is another 20%-odd that may get recycled and then we have maybe 10% that is going into landfill or going into incineration. What we desperately need is to understand how we can take the current garments that we are producing and find a recycling process for that.

There is a lot of research going on around the world that is trying to work out a scientific solution to this called fibre to fibre, the idea that we take a fibre and we chemically process it to turn it into something else. People have done it in test tubes. We have done some work at Leeds on this and we are making some progress but it is really slow. The textile industry generally does not receive very much in the way of Research Council money. It is not considered to be sexy enough or to be of impact. If the UK could demonstrate that we could come up with a recycling process or recycling technique or recycling science, that could be exported all over the world.

As you said, the Chinese and Indian markets are going to go in the same direction. The middle classes are going to grow and grow and grow. We are going to see more and more people buying more and more clothes. It is going to be really challenging.

If we had a recycling process we could be linking up our waste, turning that into raw material that is then exported, and that is driving GDP. What we are lacking is the science and the technology to be able to fulfil that home grown—

Professor Thompson: Is it just about the recycling process, or is it about making sure that we try to maximise the wins that we have at the moment by making sure that we design clothes to be as compatible as possible with the existing recycling?

Alan Wheeler: That has a role to play, yes.

Professor Thompson: That seems to be lacking all the way along the piece. It is a lack of thought at the design stage for life and end of life.

Alan Wheeler: I would like to see producers and retailers in some way being made to take more responsibility for the clothing that they are putting on the market, and offering incentives for design for recycling, design for disassembly, design for durability, and perhaps looking at incentives to stimulate markets for recycled fibres, which at the moment when we talk about recycling, as opposed to reuse, we are talking about



HOUSE OF COMMONS

mechanical recycling, so that the fibres are shredded or the garments are cut. That shortens the fibre length. You cannot separate blends or anything like that, so the markets are limited to things like wiping cloths, insulation, shoddy, which is a wool/yarn substitute.

What I would like is if we got chemical recycling processes that enable fibre-to-fibre recycling to happen in the future, give those retailers and producers a tax break or something like that to incentivise them to say, "Our clothing has so much recycled content in it", something like that.

Q22 Zac Goldsmith: That is in relation to the recycled materials. Is there anything you can suggest in terms of growing the market for second hand clothes?

Alan Wheeler: That has limited applications, because in the UK we are pretty good at domestic use already. If you take another WRAP report from a couple of years ago, the "Textiles Markets Situation Report", that estimated that around 32% of all clothing that is discarded in a way or donated in the UK ends up being reused in the UK. That is around double what our European counterparts are doing. Therefore, I don't know how much potential there would be to encourage domestic reuse in the UK.

Again, I am coming back to when other countries pull up their shoelaces—or whatever the saying is—they are going to struggle to find enough domestic reuse markets in their own countries, so where it is going to go?

Stella Claxton: If I could add something to that as well, if you look at where the growth in the retail market in the UK is coming from, it is very much from the low value end, particularly the success of online retailers—such as ASOS and Boohoo—who are competing on low prices and fast turnaround. I saw a dress on Boohoo that retailed at full price for £5 at the weekend, so we have a market where these garments are mainly aimed at young women who are engaging in the kind of behaviour that Mark was talking about, which is to gain pleasure from what they wear and expressing their identity through their clothing, but the actual value of the item is very low in real terms, in quality terms and in emotional terms to them. The incentive for them to then recycle or want to pass that on in some way, or even for charity shops to want that kind of product in their shops, is very low. The opportunity for that end of the market to have a second hand opportunity is quite limited.

Q23 Chair: Thank you. What about an extended producer responsibility, like we have in plastics industry, that basically says every time you pay 50 quid and you have to show how it is exported? Would that sort of thing work for some of the people in your industry that are struggling?

Alan Wheeler: It is certainly worth having a look at.

Q24 Chair: Market support?



Alan Wheeler: Yes. There is certainly a role for producers to have a—well, they need to take responsibility for the garments that they are putting on the market and EPR is possibly one of those models.

Q25 **Chair:** That then goes back to charity shops and textiles recyclists?

Alan Wheeler: It could be used for a whole variety of purposes. It is not just about recycling. It is about improving the whole sustainability of the clothing supply chain. We have talked about improvements in the design stage, so if we get some garments coming on to the market that are proven to release less fibre then that should be something that is incentivised through the EPR scheme.

It is all very well for me to say, “Well, we are buying far too much clothing”, we are, but if I was to say, “Well, we should stop buying clothing” and people suddenly did that then that would create an impact on the economy and impacts on jobs and so on. Maybe there could be a role for getting retailers that slow down or reduce their number of seasons to be somehow incentivised through and EPR scheme.

Chair: Okay. We are going to leave that there.

Alan Wheeler: That is fine.

Q26 **Caroline Lucas:** Thank you. I want to ask Dr Sumner and Stella Claxton, in particular, whether you think fast fashion as a concept can ever be sustainable. We have talked about tinkering round the edges somewhat but do we have to be a bit bolder with the whole concept or can we somehow make it more sustainable?

Stella Claxton: It is a very successful model and certainly the newer entrants to it, the ones I was referring to earlier who are purely online, so the pure play retailers—like ASOS and Boohoo—have managed to set up a supply chain in a way of supplying clothing to the market that is very, very flexible. It means they can test trends and new ideas very quickly because they do not have stores to fill, so those entrants have speeded up the throughput of new styles and new items for people to buy.

The impacts of fast fashion clothing are the same as for general clothing, so the impact is related to the volumes that are being sold, the speed at which it is being done and the opaqueness—as Mark described it—of the supply chain where sometimes the issues can be hidden and the drive for low prices—which is my opinion based on some anecdotal evidence but also some press coverage and documentaries that we have seen in the past 10 years—can hide problems in the supply chain, because if you beat suppliers for price you will get them maybe cutting corners on environmental impacts and also in the sort of social side.

The speed, the opaqueness of the supply chain, the rising volume and the lower prices are the features of the fast fashion market that make it a bit more unsustainable than maybe the way we see the market moving at the top end where things are a little bit slower.



Q27 Caroline Lucas: I saw the Stacey Dooley documentary. It does seem to just lend itself to that sort of binge shopping where you are just going out there and grabbing what you can and coming back. One of the things she was suggesting was you could get different role models who would challenge that idea. Do you think something as simple as that could have a big impact?

Stella Claxton: I think it could. Again, we have to remember that it is an emotional thing. It is not a practical reason. None of us buy clothes for purely practical reasons, so we are no different to fast fashion consumers. It is simply that we have more disposable income and can buy from better quality at nicer shops.

There has been pressure on wages for young people recently, so this is one of the ways that they can enjoy themselves and express their identity. I think Mark and I see this a lot because we teach at universities and we see the pressures that young people are under and the amount of information that they are bombarded with from online sources and through social media. They are under the influencing behaviour that brands, influences, celebrities and their peers create.

Q28 Caroline Lucas: In a way, because it is such a social construct—and I completely agree with you, I am not being judgmental at all, at least I am not trying to be—as you say, what we wear is a way of signalling who we are, our identity and who we want to be associated with and so on, that makes it susceptible to change.

Stella Claxton: It does make it an opportunity. I have had students doing dissertation projects on: can we get sustainable influences going? There just isn't the power for them to break through yet. I don't know how to turn that tide. I am not a marketing expert. I don't know how we do it, how we can fund it or how the Government could support it because all these things have been driven by society, as well as business, but at the moment it is not in retailers' interests, I suppose, to have sustainable influences. I don't know. They would have to tie that to a sustainable business model that was part of a bigger strategy to move in a more sustainable direction.

I am not quite sure how that could be done but, yes, there is the opportunity there. It is breaking through that wall of consumption messages that they get all the time—and it is not confined just confined to young people either—with education, more awareness of the issues. Certainly, as I said, I have ex-colleagues who work in the industry who were not aware of the problems and may be more open to changing their shopping behaviour based on seeing the Stacey Dooley documentary.

Therefore, yes, I think it is a combination of that but I don't know how we make that happen. If you look at what happened with the plastics, there was a real tipping point with the "Blue Planet" programme. Maybe we need some kind of tipping point in fashion to push that forward.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Professor Thompson: I think it is about separating the things that are relatively quick wins. That may involve changes in the way that we do things on an industrial scale versus the societal changes that will take a little bit longer to kick in, but I see an increasing number of reusable drink containers and coffee mugs around the table that I did not see the last time I came to the Environmental Audit Committee. I think we can nudge behaviours.

Chair: Wait until you go to the canteen.

Professor Thompson: We have to accept some of those changes will take a little bit longer to burn.

Dr Sumner: There is an interesting challenge for us. Clothing and fashion, this is thousands of years of evolved behaviour that we are talking about. It is a cultural phenomenon that we are talking about. It is an economic phenomenon. If Philip Hammond was sitting here listening to us saying that we should stop buying more stuff, what would that do to GDP?

I am not suggesting that that is a reason to not do something, but I think there are a group of brands and retailers who are fast fashion brands who do some interesting stuff. They have cotton projects in places like India, where they are reducing water consumption and improving schooling for children.

Q29 **Caroline Lucas:** Can you name them?

Dr Sumner: We have Marks & Spencer and Primark. There are others involved in the cotton industry that are associated with this, so there are good areas of best practice going on within the industry and I think we have to be very careful that we say that there is fast fashion there and then there is other fashion over there. All of us will engage in fast fashion at some point and all of us will engage at some point in non-fast fashion. They all have impacts.

What we need to be thinking about are those cultural drivers that are getting millennials, in particular, who are very aware of the sustainability issues, but they are under a lot of pressure to perform within culture and within society. The idea that we are going to have a millennial, or even somebody in their mid-30s or 40s, saying, "There is a garment over there that doesn't have as much polyester coming off", maybe something like this, "and I am going to choose that over a garment over there that makes me look really attractive, and it may help me find my mate and may help me be successful in my job interview". I think we are being naive in terms of that.

Q30 **Caroline Lucas:** Hopefully, that does not need to be the choice, does it?

Dr Sumner: That is what we need to be working on; trying to work out how we can set up policy, for example, that says to brands, "What you should be doing is delivering, a bit like the SCAP programme does, X



thousands of tonnes of cotton that is sustainable. You should be using processes that are sustainable”.

The idea of APR is an interesting one, but that is just another tax on an industry that is on its knees at the moment. We have stores closing down left, right and centre. To push all the emphasis back on to brand and retailers I think is going to be challenging in the short term, but there is a way of joining it all together and it is being innovative and clever with the policy approach that we take, recognising it is a cultural phenomenon that we are facing at the moment. There are definite solutions there. It is working our way through and making sure that we avoid the unintended consequences that are potentially floating around.

Professor Thompson: If it is designed for circularity it becomes less important how fast it is flowing. You still want to slow that rate but, if it is designed to be circular rather than linear, it does not necessarily knock the GDP. It is not necessarily about doing less. It is about doing it smarter.

Dr Sumner: What we have to bear in mind is that designers—and I am not a designer, I am a product developer or used to be—design for people to wear the product. What you have to do is make sure that you have an attractive outfit that you want to wear and want to wear for a long time. What we have to build into this process is: how do we deliver all of those nice, beautiful garments in a way that is better for the environment, better for society as well? I think that is the real challenge there.

I have done it on several occasions in the past, developed a really green product that sits on the coat hanger in the store and doesn't sell. That is even worse than fast fashion because you have put all that resource in and no one has bought it, so I think there is a much more systemic approach that we need to be thinking about to solutions.

Q31 **Caroline Lucas:** Let me go back to Professor Thompson just to finish. You have talked a couple of times about the circular economy, and I know we have touched on it, but is there anything else—just to put on the record—that the Government could be doing to encourage a more circular economy, or do you still feel that we do not have enough evidence yet to be able to know what the policy recommendations are?

Professor Thompson: My main view is that we need to make sure we have reliable evidence in the round. Some of it we have already, and it is about synthesis of that, but in aspects—and we do not have time to go into the details of it now—we are missing key pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, in my view, to help to guide them. It is about bringing together academics across the disciplines, social science, material science, environmental science, to help us understand exactly what we are missing and to provide that evidence that can inform change to make sure we are not moving towards unintended consequences.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It is foolish for us to imagine we can make these changes overnight. If you look at our use of plastics it has gone up from 5 million tonnes in the 1950s to 300 million tonnes today. It is going to take some decades to reverse that, if we are going to do it in a responsible way. I am saying “reverse it”. I am not saying we are going back to 5 million but to use it in a more responsible manner.

I do think a key thing is about evidence but it is about allowing the disciplines to work together creatively. That was something European Union funding used to facilitate. It used to allow the disciplines to work together and I worry that that is something we might lose without creative thinking.

Stella Claxton: If I could come back to some of the points that Professor Thompson has made—and you have made a lot of comments—about the design process, that you need that evidence base before you can design effective solutions. There are already known sustainable design approaches, which researchers have looked at and written about quite widely, but education needs to play a part and looked at in terms of how it is developed to be able to bring this more multidisciplinary approach together, because at the moment we really teach in silos in universities.

We have designers who are very creative but we have lost the kind of textile technology aspect of our education that was very present 20 or 30 years ago that served our own manufacturing industry. We have lost a lot of that knowledge of materials and processes that, if we still have that, would be a huge help. We probably have people left from that time who could be leveraged to contribute ideas and get involved in solutions.

Therefore, how we look at our education and design processing, how we are educating designers and then maybe how design departments or products are developed in the industry and within retailers, how those teams are set up could be looked up.

Professor Thompson: A final thing, Caroline, which just struck me while I was thinking about it there was: the money that there is available that is being directed at this, I think it is important that there is not an attempt to get it out of the door fast and insist on results within really short and ridiculous timeframes. To get the kind of evidence that I am talking about it needs to be done in a proper and considered way, and it worries me at the moment that some of the funding schemes that are on the table are requiring very fast turnarounds that do not necessarily align themselves with the kind of systemic change that we might be looking for.

Dr Sumner: The other thing we should be adding in as well is that there is an important role for industry to be playing here, and there are definitely people who are doing some really good stuff. Members of the SCAP initiative, which is funded by DEFRA, need more money. What is going on there is some really good stuff that is happening. There is lots of best practice out there. The challenge is: how do we help industry deliver



the sustainability agenda and, at the same time, do it on a level playing field so that you don't have a brand like M&S, for example, who are trying to compete with a Boohoo dress at £5 and, at the same time, they are trying to deliver modern slavery—it is not deliver modern slavery—trying to eradicate modern slavery, and trying to minimise their environmental impact, and they have nipping at their heels this £5 dress that the consumer really wants, "I really want that because it is going to make me look good"?

What we have to work out is how we can level that playing field so that everyone has the same targets to work to, and use the existing knowledge that is already there. I am an academic and I should be saying, "Give me some more money to do the research". There is a lot of work that has already been done, that is already known out there. The challenge is: how do we make a circular model work for industry and for business, as well as finding out these big issues around, say, microplastics, for example?

Q32 Alex Sobel: A lot of the points about consumer behaviour have been covered, but how about the issues around manufacturers designing and manufacturing clothes to last longer? I have t-shirts still that I bought as a teenager, so clearly it is possible. How can we look at the industry? There is consumer behaviour but say we overcame that and there was a change because of the environment, people seeing that this was part of the mix, how would that feed into the manufacturing/design process?

Dr Sumner: I would say I spent years and years developing garments to be indestructible when I was at M&S. I have an example here, I have a garment here, if I could just show you very quickly, a base layer garment, which I have had since I was 20 years old, believe it or not; I am 48 now. That is still perfectly functional.

Q33 Chair: From M&S?

Dr Sumner: No, it is not M&S. It is another brand. It is perfectly functional as an outdoor product and works really well, as well as it did back then. It is made from plastic. I have the equivalent garment here, which I really like—because it is really soft and it is natural—but this is full of holes now and it is falling apart. I don't know if you can see the holes on that.

Q34 Chair: Is that one for Alan?

Dr Sumner: Yes. It is full of holes. That is Merino wool and that is a beautiful garment as well, and the challenge that we have here is we can make stuff last as long as possible but we have to understand the: how do we get there? The other challenge is about emotional longevity, the emotional longevity of: how long are you going to hold on to something like this? The t-shirts you have, you probably have a strong emotional connection with. Something happened while you were wearing that t-shirt. You don't need to know. Something happened while you were wearing that t-shirt that has made it valuable to you, and the problem we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are seeing at the moment maybe is that £5 Boohoo dress is so low value, unless there is an emotional connection, it stays as a £5 dress.

Stella Claxton: A lasting emotional connection, yes.

Dr Sumner: A lasting emotional connection. We have to disentangle luxury and price from this as well, because you can have luxury garments that will go to be recycled fairly quickly because there is no emotional connection with it. There is a different equation there in terms of how much disposable income you have.

That emotional connection is often very much related to consumers, their behaviour, their friends, that cultural experience, and that almost determines whether something is fast fashion or slow fashion. It is not the manufacturer. It is the consumer themselves going, "I want to hold on to that t-shirt. I want to hold on to that because I have all sorts of memories associated with it", so there is a limit on how far we can go in terms of longevity, not because of the technical limits but because of users and consumers and how they value those garments.

Stella Claxton: Also, how they wear them, the difference in wearing practice and the difference in laundering practice. As soon as the consumer has that garment—apart from the emotional thing—there is how they engage with it physically that can make a difference.

Professor Thompson: At the same time, although design for longevity has been part of the mix that has not necessarily been driven by environmental concerns. We were discussing outside that there has not been a consideration at the design stage of fibre shedding, for example. It is only recently that we have started to think more closely about the materials, how they are sourced and the issues relating to slavery. Some of these things have not been there at the design stage. I think it is important that they are there and we need to bring those changes.

Alan Wheeler: We have to accept that fast fashion will be here. We cannot change that thing, so if it is going to be here rather than designing it—you could almost design it so durably that it makes it very difficult to recycle. If you take it at the extreme, you could put a suit of armour out. I guess you could actually recycle that but—

Alex Sobel: Quite easily.

Alan Wheeler: Yes, but you know the point, so what I would say is that, accepting that fast fashion is going to still be here, it is better to design it for recycling more than anything else. Mark showed those two garments and the wool one was obviously rather worn, but I would suggest to you that, under the current processes available, it is probably easier to recycle the wool item rather than the polyester one once it has to go for recycling.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Sumner: We have to get it from me to the recycling point and that is the standard problem with recycling in general, is getting the consumers to engage with it.

Professor Thompson: So there is an education programme to be had there.

Q35 **Chair:** Isn't there an issue, though, about taking out a needle and thread and darning things? Isn't that pretty radical?

Dr Sumner: That is pretty radical, and I would just replay a conversation I heard at the university. I am hoping that no one at the university is listening to this. I followed some design students. They are designers who spend all of their time working in the design studio with a sewing machine and a needle and thread and everything. One of the students said to her friend, "I have to go down to Trinity Shopping Centre to buy a new coat. A button has fallen off my coat". That is one example, and it is a very bad example but there are real challenges around that whole thing about repair.

There is definitely a niche where repair and making your own garment is important. I suggest it is quite a small niche in relation to mainstream, and what we are seeing is more and more people just thinking, "You know what, I am going to buy a new outfit because I can't be bothered to fix it" or, "It is so cheap to buy the outfit I am going to do that".

I have to say—and Stella mentioned this before—it is not just about clothing, buying new appliances is much easier and cheaper than getting them repaired. My bread maker broke last week. It is just the paddle on the bottom has broken. No one can repair it. No one can give me the part, so I have to buy a new one. Therefore, I think it is about this cultural phenomenon as well.

I would strongly suggest to you that designers and the design process is working very hard to tick a lot of boxes at the moment, and is quite successful. The UK clothing industry is very successful in terms of exports, so we are designing things well. What we are missing here is: how do we design things well and build in some of the sustainability ideas that we have. We should be careful that we are not blaming designers or design process, per se.

Q36 **Alex Sobel:** Coming back to your red Merino wool top, to get better longevity out of natural fibre garments, is it much more difficult to do the design for them to make them last longer? Is it much easier with plastic?

Dr Sumner: For technical longevity, that durability, yes, it is much easier to take a polyester—this is actually polypropylene—and make that longer lasting. The colour in that is not going to disappear. Cotton products will fade. They will pill. Cotton itself degrades every time you wash it; slowly, chemically degrades. With a natural fibre you have limitations. If you take a garment to its end of life, where you have washed it and washed it and washed it, it become very difficult to then try to work out how you



can recycle it mechanically. This is why the fibre to fibre route of looking at the chemical recycling is important.

The problem with natural fibres is they definitely have a shelf life and they will wear out far quicker, generally, than a manmade fibre. If you want it to last longer, which is what the industry has been doing in some ways, is you would blend that wool with some polyester. There are probably some suits in here that are a wool polyester blend. That suit will last longer than a pure wool suit. It will be easier to care for.

Q37 Alex Sobel: Will it be harder to recycle?

Dr Sumner: It will be, and this is the dilemma we have. It will be harder to recycle but the environmental impact of that suit, if it is worn to the end of its life, is potentially lower than a wool suit.

Chair: It is all the trade-offs.

Professor Thompson: The recycling of it is more important if it is being used for a very short time. If it lasts a long time in service, then the relative merit of the recycling becomes less.

Alan Wheeler: I think that is something that sometimes people lose sight of because we tend to talk about recycling or down-cycling in our sector. It is called down-cycling because it tends to be used once. If you are recycling an item and you shred it and you use it in loft insulation, the lifetime of that new product can be decades, even hundreds of years, so is that not better than continually trying to recycle those fibres into new clothing that will last a few years? I don't have the answer but I just think people should not be too dismissive of the so-called down-cycling markets. I think that they still have a very important role to play and we need to improve those.

Dr Sumner: Last time I looked at loft insulation it was three or four times more expensive if it was a wool option. It is trying to work out what incentives can be built around that for the building industry and for consumers.

Alex Sobel: Some new Mr Mongers and Mr Shoddies then.

Alan Wheeler: One of the things I have heard is one of the key market barriers to having more used textiles in insulation is that, obviously, the manufacturers are required to know what is coming into their input process. When you have clothing that has come from a mixed grade it is very difficult to say, "It is exactly this type of fibre" or "this mix". It is an issue, and so those are the kinds of market barriers that we need to be—

Q38 Alex Sobel: On labelling, we have very good labelling around how to wash your clothes but we do not have very good labelling on how to recycle your clothes. That is something that we do here. That is by statute. Is that something that could be brought in?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alan Wheeler: If we are going to go down a route of producer responsibility, one of the key things that can be used for is to improve communication campaigns. That is what they do in France, which is the only country so far that has EPR on clothing. That can be directed at the public. It can be directed at educational institutions. It can be directed, dare I say, at the manufacturers who need to know about the environmental impacts of their clothing, so I think that is an important thing to take heed of.

Dr Sumner: The French EPR system is essentially a tax on retailers and brands. They are being taxed on how much they sell, so—

Alan Wheeler: It is being used to improve collection rates. The collection rates have gone up substantially, albeit, from a very low base in France.

Dr Sumner: Absolutely. It is very light weight. But it is a tax on the retail and brand environment, and I think before EPR is considered we need to be thinking about the consequences of it. It does bring in income, but one of the things that the Government should be thinking about is more municipal waste and kerbside collections. Should there be more work done in terms of providing the systems and the infrastructure for recycling of textiles and other materials?

I have recently seen from—I think it was—Leeds City Council saying it cannot take textile waste.

Q39 **Chair:** That is an area in which we are experts. At a time when I think councils are about to receive another cut from the Budget, new waste collections will not be funded any time soon.

Dr Sumner: Absolutely, so there is a big challenge there in terms of what we want to do with all this waste and then trying to work out who has the responsibility and, also, the accountability for dealing with that.

Alan Wheeler: There is the quality issue coming from kerbside collections from local authorities. They are significantly lower than if you are collecting it through textile banks or through charity shops, so I think you would have a bit of a pushback from the industry on trying to encourage further household collection.

Chair: The bell is ringing. It has been absolutely fascinating. As an MP for a shoddy area, Ossett in Dewsbury, it is good to see that the heavy woollen industry still—

Alan Wheeler: I did not need to explain what shoddy was to you then, did I?

Chair: No, absolutely not. We still have mattress and carpet makers up in our area of West Yorkshire. Thank you all very much indeed.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah O'Connor, Kate Elsayed-Ali and Sarah Ditty.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q40 Chair: This is the second panel in our fashion sustainability inquiry and we are going to be looking at social sustainability. It is great to have an all-women panel, some of whom I have already met and worked with over many years. For the sound, can you please introduce yourselves, starting with Sarah Ditty?

Sarah Ditty: I am Sarah Ditty from Fashion Revolution and we are an organisation that is five years old. We were founded as a direct response to the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, where 1,138 garment workers lost their lives when a building collapsed with five garment factories in it. We have been campaigning for greater transparency in fashion supply chains ever since. I am the Policy Director.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: I am Kate Elsayed-Ali from the UK-based NGO, Anti-Slavery International. We work within the UK, also globally, to address contemporary forms of slavery.

Sarah O'Connor: I am Sarah O'Connor. I work at the *Financial Times*. I am on the investigative team and I mostly write about the world of work.

Q41 Chair: You are all very welcome. I think two Sarahs is a first on our panel. We normally have more Johns. That is just a function of the game that we are in.

Let's talk broadly about sustainable development. Sustainable development goals have been adopted at the United Nations. Which of those are we going to miss if we don't reform the fashion industry? Do you have anything to say on the general picture, Sarah?

Sarah Ditty: Quite a few of them. The fashion industry really touches a lot of the sustainable development goals: SDG1, poverty; SDG5, gender equality. I fully feel that the fashion industry and all the problems that persist across the value chain is a huge feminist issue. SDG8, of course, decent work and economic growth; SDG12, which is responsible consumption and production, which we have been talking about in the previous session quite a lot; SDG13, of course, climate action. The fashion industry is one—I think recent statistics put it at the fifth most polluting industry in the world, also a big carbon emitter. SDG14, life below water, of course fashion contributing a huge amount of microplastics going into the ocean, and SDG15, life on land. A lot of the materials our clothes are made from derive from ancient and endangered forests.

As many of you may have seen, the Stacey Dooley documentary recently on BBC, also contributing to things, like the desertification of the Aral Sea due to cotton farming and pollution of rivers. So, yes, there are a lot of obligations by the UK towards addressing fashion in the context of achieving the sustainable development goals.

Q42 Chair: Can I ask, because we have in our brief that there are 60 million people, mostly women, employed in the industry and then we heard in the previous panel it is 300 million. Is that the whole supply chain? Is



that the difference?

Sarah Ditty: Yes. The numbers are just estimates also because a lot of the fashion industry or the fashion supply chain employs informal workers. There is an estimated around 60 million to 75 million garment workers throughout the world, so people working in garment production. If you look across the supply chain, there is like 34 million artisans who are working on fashion crafts in India alone. There are at least 100 million households who are growing cotton, which obviously a lot of that goes into clothing. Then there are millers, dyers, spinners. There are millions of other people often working in informal situations in the developing world, so hundreds of millions of people around the world are employed by the global fashion industry.

Q43 **Chair:** Great. Thank you. Can I move on to Kate? What actions have the UK Government and the international community taken to ensure that activity in the garment industry aligns with the sustainable goals and tries to stamp out child labour and modern slavery?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: That question links really nicely to what Sarah just raised on the sustainable development goals. My organisation is particularly focused on sustainable development goal 8 on decent work, and particularly target 8.7 of that sustainable development goal is on ending modern slavery, trafficking and child labour. It is important to look at some of the figures from the International Labour Organization, which estimated in 2017 that 25 million people were in forced labour globally. Of those 25 million people, over 60% are exploited in the private sector and, therefore, it is likely linked to the supply chains of international businesses providing goods to western markets.

The reality is that forced labour is an issue for the fashion industry, both because it happens within the supply chains and, also, because the fashion industry has the potential to tackle it but obviously not just on its own. There is a role for businesses but there is also a really important role for the Government.

In the UK we have obviously seen progress in the last few years with the Modern Slavery Act and the transparency in supply chains clause of the Modern Slavery Act. That was an important step forwards but I think it is also important to take one step back and look at where we are and what needs to happen next, so definitely progress but there are limitations in the Modern Slavery Act. What the Modern Slavery Act requires is for businesses to publish a modern slavery statement if they are making an income of £36 million globally.

Businesses are required to publish a statement saying what they are doing to address slavery in their supply chains, but technically a business could publish a slavery statement saying, "We are not doing anything" and they would still be compliant with the transparency in supply chains clause of that Act. I think we need to look beyond compliance. What my organisation is calling for is mandatory supply chains transparency but



HOUSE OF COMMONS

also mandatory due diligence. That is businesses looking proactively at the entirety of their supply chains to establish what are their forced labour risks, what are their child labour risks, how can we address those?

If I could also point out that public authorities are not covered by the TISC provision of the Modern Slavery Act, and if you think about public authorities, the fire service or the police, those are institutions that are buying a lot of uniforms. There is a lot of cotton within that, so I also think that the Government need to look at their public procurement practices: where is it sourcing from? Where are those? What are the supply chains for those suppliers? They are important steps forwards but there is also a lot that can be done still.

Q44 Chair: What about child labour? Sarah talked about the 34 million artisans in India. There is an epidemic of child theft, child abduction in India. Do you think that there is child labour endemic in the fashion industry?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Absolutely, yes. Forced labour and child labour are really endemic in supply chains, particularly the—

Q45 Chair: Any countries particularly bad?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Interestingly, linked as well to the question on the gendered risk of forced labour and child labour, going back to the ILO and its figures on forced labour, women and girls represented 58% of victims of forced labour in private sectors outside of commercial sex work. I think what I see globally is that women and girls really do comprise the majority of people in forced labour and slavery situations. There are particular vulnerabilities. There are also gendered forms of forced labour and child labour.

If I take the example of India, a massive cotton yarn producer after China, there is a very specific form of forced labour within the cotton mills that only affects women and girls. It is called the sumangali system. It is pretty widespread in Tamil Nadu where most of those spinning mills operate. Girls are bonded to a particular mill for a period of up to three years. Their parents take an advance payment. The intention behind that is that at the end of the three-year period that would be used to arrange their marriage, essentially, but the girls go to the mills with an agent, will have signed contracts that they don't have a copy of and, in most cases, they will not have been able to read. We are talking about quite young, 13 to 18 year-olds working 12-hour days. They will be living in camps associated with that mill. They will not be able to go home and visit their parents, in the hope that at the end of those three years they will have this advance payment. It very much is bonded child labour.

If I could move on to another situation that my organisation works on in terms of cotton, so we work in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan where what we see is—is that okay?

Chair: Yes, do. We have a question on Turkmenistan so I don't want you



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to answer it before we have asked it, but give us the first bit and I will stop you if you are—

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are among the world's biggest producers and exporters of cotton. What we see in these countries is a state-sponsored forced labour. It is a cotton sector that is controlled by the government, where the benefits of that industry—it is very much the government themselves that benefit financially.

Q46 **Chair:** I am going to stop you there because we have a whole question on that. We are going to explore that in detail with you in a minute. Sarah, anything to add or shall we—

Sarah O'Connor: I would add very quickly on SDG8 about labour standards. Part of SDG8 is about promoting productivity and promoting high value, high productivity work that involves more mechanisation, higher wages, all that sort of thing. What has struck me most looking at garment manufacturing in the UK is how intensely low productivity it is. It is striking that this is really labour-intensive and, because of issues that we can get into in later questions, the high productivity garment manufacturers in the UK are being undercut by the low productivity ones.

Chair: Caroline is going to ask you about that specifically, so I will let her ask the question.

Q47 **Caroline Lucas:** Leading beautifully on, I want to ask you about your Financial Times article. As you have just demonstrated, quite often when you think about labour exploitation your mind goes to India or Bangladesh, or whatever, and you have been demonstrating that it is being reshored into a place like Leicester. Could you talk us through what you found in Leicester?

Sarah O'Connor: Yes, sure. Leicester always was a big garment manufacturing centre. It used to have lots of big factories, like Corah, which employed 3,000 people at the peak. It went into decline when a lot of retailers, like M&S, started outsourcing, started moving their manufacturing to the developing world. What remained was a skills base, a community of people, often people who had emigrated from places like India and Pakistan who still knew how to make clothes. They survived by parcelling up these big old factories into tiny outfits that might employ 10 people. I think the average factory size in Leicester is 10 people.

They rumbled along, did not do very well and were making clothes for market stalls and that sort of thing. Then what has happened in the last five or 10 years is fast fashion, which you were talking about a lot in the previous session. The word "fast" there, the reason that it is fast is that they manufacture close to home. Companies like Boohoo and Misguided source 50% of their clothes from the UK, so Leicester is absolutely now a prime manufacturing place for fast fashion.

Yet if you go around the high street—and I did this for my investigation—and you take off clothes and have a look at the labels, you will be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

amazed to see how many do say "Made in the UK" but they cost £5, £6, £7 for a dress. I wondered "How on earth is this possible?" because the minimum wage in the UK is £7.83 an hour, so how on earth can you make a dress for £5? The answer is that basically, in a huge chunk of Leicester's garment industry, labour law does not apply. It is, as one factory owner put it to me, a country within a country.

The going rate for a garment worker in lots of places in Leicester is £3.50, £4 an hour. I was told that £5 was like a really top rate. You would walk out of a factory with your head held high if you were on £5 an hour. That shows that you are really skilled. You have a lot of experience.

Basically, there is this sort of sector that is starting to flourish, in a sense, because there is much more demand from these fast fashion retailers but actually the terms and conditions are illegal, and that goes for health and safety as well, so lots of these places are operating out of very old crumbling buildings that genuinely look and feel quite unsafe and I went inside some of them.

The strangest thing about all of this is that it is a totally open secret. Central government knows about it; local government knows about it. All of the retailers know about it. I was first told about it by a Government official. He said, "You should go and look at what is going on in Leicester. It is really interesting".

Q48 Caroline Lucas: But wait, why has there been such a chronic lack of enforcement?

Sarah O'Connor: Why has there been a chronic lack? This is basically the question that I went around asking everyone: why on earth, if everyone knows this, is nothing happening? To be fair, that is what the workers in Leicester are asking. They know that they are not getting the minimum wage. They are accepting it because they do not have better options but they said to me, "The Government know this is happening so they must have decided that we are not worth bothering with. It is not worth enforcing the law for us".

I think the issue is slightly one of everyone thinking it is someone else's responsibility, so—

Caroline Lucas: Enforcing the minimum wage is—

Sarah O'Connor: Enforcing the minimum wage is HMRC's responsibility. I have some figures. HMRC in the five years to 2016-17 identified 232,000 people who had been underpaid the minimum wage. Of those, only 83 were textile workers so, even though this is endemic in the textile sector, they are not looking there. I think part of the reason for that is that they are really small, so it is very hard to get in and do decent inspections in these places because they are so fragmented. I also think, to be honest, that they clearly have not been trying hard enough.

Q49 Caroline Lucas: We will hopefully get the Minister in. It is gobsmacking.



Sarah O'Connor: It is kind of baffling. In his new strategy David Metcalf, who is the Director of Labour Market Enforcement, devoted a whole page this year to the Leicester garment industry, in which he said that whatever enforcement activity has been happening has not been enough and he called it a culture of impunity that existed in Leicester. I think there are moves afoot to try to do something a bit more decisive but it is astonishing that it has gone on for this long.

Q50 **Caroline Lucas:** What would it do to the whole model if those workers in Leicester were paid the minimum wage? What happens to the whole fast fashion model, does it still survive?

Sarah O'Connor: That is a really good question. Personally, I think it probably would because there are some manufacturers in Leicester who are following the law and they are struggling because they are being undercut by all the ones that don't. But actually the products that they are producing are not crazily expensive. It is like £20 for a dress instead of £5 for a dress.

ASOS has a very good relationship with a fast fashion manufacturer in London called Fashion Enter, where again everything is done totally legitimately. Everyone gets paid the minimum wage. So I think it is possible but it will mean that some of these products need to become a bit more expensive.

Q51 **Caroline Lucas:** Can you remind me, did you speak directly to the retailers themselves?

Sarah O'Connor: Yes.

Caroline Lucas: What is their—

Sarah O'Connor: The retailers are interesting. They split into different camps, really. There is a group of retailers that I think genuinely are worried about Leicester and want to improve it, and they are working with the Ethical Trading Initiative. They came up with a whole new way of auditing suppliers, specifically in Leicester, to try to hold them to higher standards, to try to make sure that they really are doing what they say they are doing. Even then, a few of them got caught out in a "Dispatches" documentary last year, even the ones that were trying to do their best. What happens is sub-contracting, so you might have a relationship with a supplier who shows you they are doing everything right but when push comes to shove they subcontract 50% of the orders to the sweatshop down the road. That has proved quite difficult.

Then I would say that there are a group of retailers who are not members of the ETI and I think have done less. They all say that they have auditors on the ground going in and out of these places but there are some that seem quite happy to use as much Leicester labour as possible.

Q52 **Caroline Lucas:** Are you able to say who they are?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Sarah O'Connor: One of the biggest would be Boohoo. They source an awful lot in Leicester. They are not members of the ETI.

Q53 **Chair:** Is Leicester Missguided?

Sarah O'Connor: Missguided quite recently joined the ETI I believe. They declined my requests for interview, so I don't know very much about what they are doing. I think they were very big in Leicester and I believe that they are now trying to clean up their act at the moment.

Q54 **Chair:** What about TK Maxx?

Sarah O'Connor: TK Maxx does source from Leicester because I bought a dress in TK Maxx that literally said, "Made in Leicester" on it, so they do source from Leicester.

Q55 **Chair:** Are they ETI members?

Sarah O'Connor: I am not actually sure. I would have to check that.

Chair: Okay. We will look. Thank you.

Q56 **Caroline Lucas:** You have explained the particular factors that led to this happening in Leicester. Is there anywhere else in the UK that you are aware of that has that same combination or is Leicester fairly unique?

Sarah O'Connor: I think they are. Leicester gets very annoyed when you say this is a Leicester problem. They say, "This is happening in London. This is happening in Manchester. This isn't just a Leicester thing". I think that is probably true. It is just that Leicester is the biggest single centre of it. The reason it is happening is basically there is just a huge amount of pressure from retailers on manufacturers to push down prices, and they will play the manufacturers off against each other in order to push down those prices.

Q57 **Mr Goodwill:** You say it is an open secret in Leicester. Are the Members of Parliament aware of this? Have they not spoken out?

Sarah O'Connor: They must be aware of it and I have not heard them speaking out about it. I don't know if they have.

Q58 **Alex Sobel:** Following on from that, Sarah, what actions could retailers and brands take to safeguard the wellbeing of workers in their supply chains? Maybe talking with HMRC a little bit more.

Sarah O'Connor: Yes. I think there are two things that need to happen. One is we just need to start enforcing our laws properly. I think that is a no-brainer and it costs money and it requires effort and we just have to do it. What the retailers can do, as I said, they are genuinely trying quite hard and it is difficult, and partly it is difficult because of this lack of a level playing field, which is due to the lack of enforcement. I heard from lots of retailers, talked to some buyers and people from different areas.

A retailer is not a monolithic organisation. There are different people within retailers who have different motivations. Most retailers will have an



HOUSE OF COMMONS

ethical trading team who are really focused on this stuff and want to get it right, but then they have a separate team of buyers and it is the buyers who will make the decisions. The buyers are incentivised on price. They need to buy the stuff at the cheapest price to get the best prices.

There needs to be much more education of buyers. Particularly in the fast fashion world, these buyers are often very young and very inexperienced. The suppliers say they have no idea how to cost a garment. They do not really know what labour costs or what fabrics cost. There should be some kind of minimum pricing standard so that retailers tell all their buyers, "If a manufacturer, whether it is in Leicester or Bangladesh, tells you they can make a garment for X price, you need to find out how that is possible. If you cannot prove to us how it is possible, we are not going to make that order".

Q59 **Alex Sobel:** Maybe a code of conduct for buyers, then?

Sarah O'Connor: Yes, I think so.

Q60 **Alex Sobel:** Traditionally, workers were safeguarded through their membership of a trade union. I am from Leeds. Burton was the biggest garment manufacturer in the world but also probably the best unionised one, with two trade unions that competed with each other. Now, in terms of fashion brands, how well unionised are they? We have had the high-profile case at ASOS where the GMB was trying to get recognition and they unilaterally recognised Community. They had to go through arbitration and now the GMB is back at ASOS. More broadly, how well unionised is it? Clearly not so well in Leicester if they are paying £3.50 an hour.

Sarah O'Connor: Unions are trying quite hard now to unionise those distribution centres, which are a source of low-paid labour. The conditions are not great. In the garment manufacturers themselves, I did not see much evidence of trade unions. I do believe that Community has been trying a bit in Leicester but it is hard for trade unions now because this is not a huge factory with thousands of workers. These are tiny little places, and often the trade union representatives are middle-aged white men while the people that they need to unionise are middle-aged women who might not speak very good English. There is a culture clash there as well. It is difficult for them and as a result trade unions do not have much of a presence in this sector.

Q61 **Alex Sobel:** Sarah, I think the answer is maybe at least that and more, but female workers seem to be disproportionately affected by the drive of these fast fashion companies to make the garments quickly, maximise their profits and keep prices down. Do you want to give us a flavour of how that affects women in these places?

Sarah Ditty: Roughly 75% to 80% of garment workers around the world are female and a lot of them are between 18 and 40 years of age. They are around the age of us, basically, sitting at this table. Last year we did a research project called the Garment Worker Diaries where we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

interviewed 600 garment workers in Cambodia, Bangladesh and India—in Bangalore, actually—every single week for a year to understand the issues that they are facing. The garment manufacturers cut corners, because of the competitive price issue, by essentially exploiting women, who tend to make up most of the garment workers in these factories.

Of the workers we surveyed in Bangladesh, 50% said they sometimes or rarely felt safe in their factory, 12% reported being hit, pushed or grabbed while at work, between 8% and 15% of workers reported making less than the legal minimum wage, and over 60% reported working illegal overtime hours, over 60 hours a week, six days a week or sometimes seven days a week.

In Cambodia it was even higher: 76% of female garment workers said they did not feel safe in their factory, 45% witnessed a fire in their factory at least once over the 12-month period—almost half—while 82% reported pregnancy as the top reason for workplace discrimination, essentially getting fired or not being allowed to take a break to go to the bathroom, and 32% reported being verbally abused at work.

In India, 57% of garment workers reported being verbally abused or physically harassed while at work and only 12% reported being part of a trade union. In Cambodia, trade unions are also a huge issue. They are not very effective.

Q62 Alex Sobel: I went to India 10 years ago and saw factories. It is sad to hear that things do not seem to have moved on in the subcontinent. How do you think conditions compare between low-pay workplaces in the garment industry in India or Cambodia and in the UK? Do you think that UK workers face the same issues or do you think the issues are much more acute?

Sarah Ditty: I am not sure because I have not spent a lot of time in UK factories. I have mostly spent time in factories in Asian countries. Sarah, maybe you have had the chance to visit those?

Sarah O'Connor: I have not been to Asian factories but between us we can probably—I would assume the answer is that it is much worse in Asia.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: One of the things it highlights is that exploitation of workers—and in extreme forms forced labour and forced child labour—are not just a UK problem but also an overseas problem, but in the converse are a UK problem as well. In my organisation's work on cotton specifically, we try to look at the entirety of the supply chain, starting from the farmer in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, moving on to the cotton picker and the worker who makes the garment, and, as we move towards more of a UK market, also looking at who is packaging and delivering that clothing. It is very much cotton's life cycle from being farmed to the item that the eventual consumer wears.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There is exploitation and forced labour at all stages of that supply chain and there are opportunities for intervention at all stages of the supply chain. It is a continuum from exploitation to forced labour, but all those things happen to different workers in those different, multifaceted elements of the very complex production of a garment, all the way through to the eventual consumer wearing it.

Q63 Alex Sobel: It sounds like if you want to be an ethical consumer and you want to buy cotton products, say, it is exceedingly difficult. You might think that environmentally it is better than other things but at some point in the supply chain there is probably some unethical practice.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Yes. In this era of global supply chains there is a huge vulnerability to pretty much all businesses of having forced and child labour. I saw a 2016 survey of 71 brands and retailers conducted by the Ethical Trading Initiative and Hult Business School, and 70% of companies operating in the UK felt that there was a likelihood of modern slavery occurring in their supply chains.

Something that both Sarah O'Conner and Sarah Ditty have emphasised is that there are some good businesses that are genuinely making efforts to understand their supply chains and the situations of exploitation and forced labour that are happening at all the different stages of the process, who have genuinely taken on board the need for not just compliance with the Modern Slavery Act but going beyond that to tackle those systemic and underlying causes that we see.

However, the risk is that those businesses stand to lose out to businesses who are not trying to identify and tackle these problems, who get a commercial advantage from exploitation of workers and low wages. This is where I would see the role for Government. We need to create a level playing field for businesses so that a business doing the right thing is the norm rather than the exception, rather than the industry leaders. That has to be mandatory supply chain transparency and mandatory due diligence. We cannot leave it up to some to be the leaders and bring others along with them. There is a way to create that level playing field so that the fashion industry, the Government and consumers are working together to address some of these key social impacts.

Q64 Chair: We are in a digital world. We have a digital supply chain in every business that we use, apart from perhaps food businesses and fashion businesses. We had anonymous evidence from someone involved as a buyer who said there are digital platforms that allow companies to see every stage of everything that is produced but that fashion companies do not want to use the digital platforms because the buyers, who wield the power, are in some cases getting kickbacks from the factories, stashing money in offshore accounts or washing it into watches and cars, and there is an incentive in the entire fashion model for exploitation to happen. Is that a picture that you recognise?



Sarah Ditty: In other sectors, traceability is a bit easier. A banana is not going to go through as many processes as a garment is going to. The supply chains are much longer, they are much more fragmented, as we talked about, and there are so many different processes.

Q65 **Chair:** This digital issue and the buyers' incentives. Do you have any particular—

Sarah Ditty: I do not have any experience specifically of buyers taking kickbacks, but these solutions do exist. Digital solutions do exist and some leading brands are beginning to invest in them and implement them in their own businesses, but that is still just the tip of the iceberg.

Q66 **Chair:** Sarah, do you have any evidence on that?

Sarah O'Connor: I have not heard of that but it sounds very interesting and worth pursuing. I have taken a note down.

Chair: We are going to move back to Turkmenistan.

Q67 **Mr Goodwill:** Kate, you briefly touched on the cotton industry in central Asia. It has been just over 10 years since I was in Uzbekistan meeting with cotton farmers and being on farms. It would be helpful if you could give us a bit of an update on what the situation is like now and what may have changed since I was there.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: The majority of the time we are talking about forced labour perpetrated by a private individual, by a factory or by an employer, but in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan the government itself is the perpetrator of that forced labour. The cotton industry in both those countries is heavily state controlled, from the farmer who is required to grow cotton on land leased from the government and is given, essentially, a quota, to how the cotton is harvested.

In both those countries there is an annual cotton harvest. As I am giving this evidence we are in cotton harvest season. Therefore, as I speak today there are in both countries public and private sector workers who are being forced to pick cotton to meet a cotton quota that has started with central government, been passed down to regional governments and then to institutions who mobilise their workforce. In Turkmenistan at the moment you have teachers, doctors and nurses in the field who are forced to pick cotton under threat of punishment. That punishment will range from public censure to loss of wages and even termination of employment.

If I talk about Turkmenistan first and then move on to Uzbekistan, there are thousands of workers each year forced into the fields to pick cotton or to pay a bribe to exempt them from picking cotton themselves, or they are forced to hire a replacement worker to pick cotton instead. Each worker will have a daily cotton quota. They will be working long hours in the field in poor conditions and very much under threat of punishment. As I mentioned before—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr Goodwill: That is one of the most repressive regimes in the world.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Absolutely, yes.

Mr Goodwill: Not just in the cotton industry, across the piece.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Exactly. You are talking about a country, using the example of Turkmenistan, where there is no freedom of expression, no freedom of association, torture and ill-treatment in prison and forced disappearances. One of the real challenges to addressing state-sponsored forced labour in the cotton sector of Turkmenistan is exactly that. Activists who try to document the state-sponsored forced labour system and report on what is happening in the cotton harvest right now do so at immense personal risk.

One of the monitors who was documenting the 2016 harvest—Gaspar Matalaev—just two or three days after publishing a report with evidence of forced and child labour in the cotton harvest with photos, was arrested, confessed to politically-motivated charges of fraud and corruption, and is now still in prison two years later. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has declared his detention arbitrary and urged the government to remedy his situation. He is in prison because of his activities documenting forced labour in the cotton harvest but he is also in prison to act as a deterrent to other activists. “Do not document this harvest. Do not try to get information to the outside world”.

The whole system also leads to child labour. This immense pressure to meet a daily cotton quota means that children often pick cotton at weekends with their parents. It is a real system of state control, state coercion, forced labour and child labour.

Moving on to Uzbekistan, for many years Uzbekistan ran one of the largest state-orchestrated systems of forced labour in the world, mobilising private and public sector workers against their will for that two-month cotton harvest period. We have definitely seen progress in Uzbekistan since about 2015. The government has been working with the International Labour Organization to address this problem. We have seen a near end to systematic forced child labour and certainly in the last year we have seen very high-level policy commitments by the new president to address forced labour. The challenge we have now is how to reform a system that for decades has relied on forced labour to bring in that cotton harvest, given the importance of cotton to the country. We are in cotton harvest season and it is different this year.

Q68 **Mr Goodwill:** When I was there we asked the farm manager—it was a big former collective farm—and he was very open about the situation. He said, “Well, yes, of course. The whole village closes down in cotton harvest and everybody goes to pick cotton. How else would we pick the cotton?” We said, “Why can you not buy cotton-picking machinery?” I checked before the meeting. A new John Deere cotton-picking machine costs US\$600,000. He said, “First, we cannot afford the equipment but,



secondly, if we did have the equipment everyone in the village would get sacked. What else would we find them to do?" We ended up comparing notes about my childhood, where we picked potatoes from the age of about 10. In those days that was not seen as something unacceptable. To what extent are we imposing our developed world views on an economy that is developing and relies on cotton exports to put food on its tables?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: In the majority of situations that Anti-Slavery International delivers programmes and projects we do not call for boycotts because of, as you state, the detrimental effect on workers. However, in these two situations, because you are talking about a state-orchestrated system where the financial benefit from cotton-picking really does go to state officials rather than the workers themselves, it is different. In those situations, we have called for companies to sign a cotton pledge, on Uzbekistan and we have just launched one recently on Turkmenistan, to not knowingly source cotton from those countries. Any business that has cotton from Turkmenistan will have forced and child labour in its supply chains. It is unavoidable.

The issue is that there is not the financial benefit for the farmers and the cotton pickers. To use the example of Turkmenistan right now, what we are getting is complaints from teachers who are having to spend a high percentage of their monthly salary to hire a replacement worker to pick the cotton for them. The financial benefit from their labour is not going to them. The farmers are impoverished.

Q69 **Mr Goodwill:** Thank you. Have you visited any of the prisons in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: For the first time last year my organisation was able to join a delegation from the Cotton Campaign, which is a network of employers' organisations, trade unions, retailers and non-governmental organisations, and that was the first time that we were able to access the country. That was Uzbekistan. We were able to hold really useful meetings to discuss the system because, as I said, there has been the emergence of political will. The issue at the moment is how to translate that political will into real impact on the ground.

Early indications from the harvest in Uzbekistan this year are that teachers, doctors and nurses are not currently present on the fields but there is vast mobilisation among local government officials, a kind of village committee called mahalla committees. It is how to translate the policy commitments at the top to bringing in—in a very short time—the cotton harvest that is so important for the country's economy.

Turkmenistan is a very closed country. It recently had its UN Universal Periodic Review, in which one of the recommendations a lot of governments were making was about access for the ILO and access for the special procedures, which are the UN's independent experts, to do country visits. That is something that is really important for the UK Government to keep pushing. The UK Government have raised state-



HOUSE OF COMMONS

sponsored forced labour in the cotton sector with the Government of Turkmenistan. We go through periods where there seem to be openings to engage with this issue with the government and then periods where it seems to shut down again. The UK Government can play a role in raising this at international forums.

Q70 Mr Goodwill: I will just add that when we were in Uzbekistan, we were very surprised to be given access to a prison where there were 200 prisoners in something almost like a Second War World POW camp facility. They had a cotton-spinning plant next to the prison and they were using the staff from the prison, the prisoners, to work in the cotton plant. There was great competition in Uzbekistan to be the prisons minister because you could benefit from that access to labour. I hope when you go again they will give you access to their prisons as well.

The second big issue that we saw, in Uzbekistan in particular, was the amount of water being used for irrigation and the effect that has not only on the Aral Sea, which we all know about, but also the salinification of the land and the difficulty they were having in producing food there. Have you any evidence on that?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Yes. What we are seeing in the central Asian countries is the consequence of a system that has not only abused its workers but has also abused the environment. I would not use the word "obsession" but the importance of, and preoccupation with, cotton and the cotton sector to the governments has led to a very problematic environmental situation. We have seen water diverted towards cotton production, not only resulting in the Aral Sea basin crisis but also salinisation of irrigated lands and decreased fertility of land. The partner organisation we work with on Turkmenistan has pointed out that around 90% to 95% of irrigated land in the Turkmen Aral Sea zone is now saline. In these countries we are talking about social impact and also environmental impact, both inextricably linked.

Q71 Mr Goodwill: The other problem was that cotton bales were being used to hide heroin from Afghanistan, which was then being shipped through by rail to the Baltic. That could get into the EU market. It was difficult to identify, in the middle of a cotton bale, where this heroin might be. I don't know if that is anything you picked up when you were there but that was a real issue.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: That is a learning point for me today. I had not heard of that before.

Q72 Mr Goodwill: How much Uzbek or Turkmen cotton is finding its way on to European markets?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Vast quantities. The countries are very big producers of cotton. The majority of Uzbek cotton is exported to Bangladesh and China, where it finds its way into clothes and other cotton products that we use every day. Turkmenistan is the seventh-largest exporter of cotton in the world and 80% of Turkmenistan's cotton exports go to Turkey.



Turkey is, at current figures, Europe's second largest apparel supplier. As a result of that Turkey-Turkmenistan connection, any business sourcing from Turkey could have forced labour in their supply chains. Several western apparel companies have been linked to Turkmenistan production facilities and it is almost guaranteed that any business sourcing from Turkmenistan will have forced labour in its supply chain because its entire cotton industry from farmer to pick is on the back of forced labour.

Q73 **Chair:** Which chains?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: 80% of Turkmenistan cotton ends up in Turkey and Turkey is one of the second-largest apparel suppliers to Europe, so there are—

Sarah Ditty: All of the big ones produce in Turkey.

Kate Elsayed-Ali: Yes. There is a lot of Turkmenistan cotton making its way to Europe through Turkey.

Q74 **Chair:** Thank you. What about initiatives like OEKO-TEX or the sustainable cotton initiative? Are they valuable in distinguishing which supply chains are good and which are environmentally harmful?

Sarah Ditty: I am not an expert on cotton so I am not going to delve too far into it but there are initiatives like the Better Cotton Initiative, which a lot of the big retailers are part of, which is working towards scaling up their sustainable cotton sources. A few of the big brands have made commitments—pledges, basically—to source up to 100% of their cotton from sustainable sources by around 2030. The way they are doing that is through the Better Cotton Initiative. As far as I know, Better Cotton Initiative cotton is not fully traceable, whereas, say, Global Organic Textile Standard cotton would potentially be fully traceable. However, it is a step in the right direction. I am certain the cotton coming from the Better Cotton Initiative is not coming from Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan.

Q75 **Kerry McCarthy:** We have already covered a fair bit of this, dipping in and out of which companies are doing a good job of trying to ensure there is no exploitation in their supply chain. We had a meeting of the All-Party Group on Modern Slavery a week or two ago where Louise McCabe from ASOS came. I thought some of the initiatives that she outlined were quite interesting. Would you agree that they are leading the pack in trying to set the right example? Is there anyone else who is trying to do the right thing?

Sarah Ditty: Every year we publish a Fashion Transparency Index where we review and rank the biggest global fashion brands on how much information they are putting out about the policies, practices and procedures that they have in place for implementing their policies, their suppliers, and then their risk assessment and facility level for supplier assessments. ASOS is scoring more in the top range of that Fashion Transparency Index and they are—at least apparently—putting a lot of time and effort into doing this kind of due diligence risk assessment



HOUSE OF COMMONS

throughout their supply chains. There is certainly more that they can be doing.

What the index highlights is that there are a lot of brands, the boohoos and the TK Maxxs of our industry, that are not really disclosing any information about what they are doing, which leads you to believe that they probably do not have a whole lot of visibility and are not doing a whole lot other than just basic audits in their supply chains. That is why we also tend to promote mandatory due diligence, which does help level the playing field between someone like ASOS—which is not perfect, for sure, but is taking huge strides to figure out what the risks and the issues are and to remedy those—and those companies that simply do not care that much.

- Q76 **Kerry McCarthy:** This was specifically a meeting about modern slavery but one of the interesting things we heard from ASOS was that they had taken modern slavery out of the corporate social responsibility department and put it into the trade department. It meant that rather than it being—I do not know what the equivalent is—a greenwash, a whitewash or PR fluff, “Aren’t we doing wonderful things?”, it was actually embedded at every stage. At any point of anybody buying or selling something, they were meant to be considering it.

Sarah Ditty: Through the Fashion Transparency Index research you can kind of tell which companies are taking this stuff seriously and which are not, depending on who works with you in the company on filling out the questionnaire. For example, with someone like ASOS I would be engaging with, speaking with and getting data from a buyer, from the trade department, from someone who is maybe doing sourcing or someone who works in materials. In other companies I would be put with the corporate communications person, who does not really know the ins and outs of everything the company may be doing. They obviously view it as a PR exercise.

- Q77 **Kerry McCarthy:** Does anybody have anything else to say about who are the good guys and who are the worst culprits? We have been talking quite a lot today about cheap fashion but can you assume that if you pay a huge amount of money for something it is going to be safe?

Sarah Ditty: We heard in the panel before a little bit about this on the environmental side too. There is such a thing as “fast luxury” as well, which we are seeing increase. Louis Vuitton has just hired Virgil Abloh, this new trendy creative director, and the new model for them is dropping limited edition collections every couple of weeks. It is not just happening in fast fashion. Although the price might be higher in luxury, the speed at which it is moving is happening in luxury as well.

On the social side, luxury brands and fast fashion sometimes and a lot of times are producing in the same factories anyway, if it is in Leicester or if it is in India. They may be selling an £80 cotton t-shirt and a fast fashion retailer might be selling an £8 cotton t-shirt, but at the end of the day



the workers in the factories are still getting paid the same low wage. That is what makes it extra hard for consumers to try to make a responsible decision about what they are buying, because although cheap prices probably encourage over-consumption it does not guarantee that they have been made in fair, safe, healthy working conditions by someone paid a proper wage.

Q78 Kerry McCarthy: What about the supermarkets? You can buy very cheap clothing in supermarkets now but they do not tend to get scrutinised in the same way as, say, the Primarks of this world. Are they good? I remember there was a huge fuss a few years ago about Tesco selling pairs of jeans for £3. There was a report just published and Tesco rated quite highly, better than the other UK supermarkets, in transparency in their supply chain and so on. Have you focused on their clothes-selling side of things?

Sarah Ditty: At least through our research, the characteristics of someone like ASOS or Misguided and a supermarket retailer are somewhat similar. They are all slightly different, of course, because the company structure is slightly different. What is interesting about grocery retailers, especially around doing human rights due diligence, is that they almost have, in a way, an advantage and maybe even more of an obligation because they sell other products in which due diligence and proper human rights risk assessment is more advanced, in Thai fishing, for example, or timber or things like that. They have a lot more to learn but like any other company in my experience, some are doing more than others. Tesco certainly seem like they are doing a lot more than maybe even Sainsbury's or Asda. In that way, they mirror the rest of value fashion brands and retailers.

Q79 Kerry McCarthy: What do the others think about that? Also, is it enough to just try to shine the spotlight and name and shame or could we be doing more to force them to sort out what is going on in their supply chain?

Sarah O'Connor: Personally, I do not think naming and shaming seems to work that well. That is just based on recent experience in which plenty of retailers have been named and shamed for these sorts of things over the years and it does not seem to do any harm to their sales whatsoever. I do not know what that says about us as consumers but relying on that alone is not going to be enough.

I do feel a bit sorry for consumers because, as we have all been discussing, it is hard to be a responsible consumer in this area, particularly with something like the story I was working on with Leicester. Before I started working on this, if I went into a shop, picked up a dress and saw a label that said, "Made in the UK", I would have thought, "Phew". As a UK citizen, I have a reasonable expectation that if this was made in the UK everyone was paid at least £7.85 an hour and health and safety have been in to check the factory. It is tough for consumers and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we should not put too much on their shoulders. It has to be Government enforcement and the retail sector itself that takes the lead on this.

Q80 Mr Goodwill: As you say, it is very hard. I have a suit that says, "Austin Reed, by appointment to Her Majesty", and then when you look at the label it says, "Made in China".

Sarah Ditty: That is also why, at the moment, mandatory due diligence legislation is so important. We are still probably very far away from having anything like the food industry has, where you have an ingredient list with traffic lights that gives you useful, accurate signals and detailed, meaningful information at the point of purchase. We are probably still quite far away from that, particularly because of the complexities of fashion supply chains and how fragmented they are. You have all these various social and human rights issues but then you have also the complicated environmental issues that we were talking about in the earlier panel around which fibre is better than the other.

The Modern Slavery Act is a step in the right direction in that it does have the transparency reporting requirement, but mandatory due diligence reporting could go a step further. Then at least consumers would have access to information about what the companies they are buying from are doing to meaningfully understand what their human rights risks are, to address them and remedy them. Then at least you would have that information. Even if it is not one product being better than another, at least you can have a better gauge of which companies you can place more trust in when shopping.

Q81 Colin Clark: Last question. I am very conscious of time. You have all touched on the subject I have asked about, so please do not feel you have to necessarily repeat it. How effective has the 2015 Modern Slavery Act been in preventing extreme forms of labour exploitation in the fashion supply chain?

Kate Elsayed-Ali: It was definitely a step forwards and it was really welcome. I think, first, we could address some of the gaps in the legislation in bringing public authorities within the remit of the legislation. As I highlighted earlier, public authorities are massive consumers of things like uniforms and equipment. We need to bring public authorities within the scope of that requirement to produce a modern slavery statement.

Then, secondly, to go beyond just reporting. At the moment the requirement is to produce a modern slavery statement. Some companies, in producing their modern slavery statement, have taken it as an opportunity to advance discussion on the transparency of their supply chains and on human rights due diligence, but others have not. Although an improvement, it remains the case that you are compliant if you publish a statement saying, "We have not done anything to tackle slavery".



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Bringing public authorities within the remit and now moving forward to mandatory supply chain transparency and mandatory due diligence would be a really good next step.

Sarah Ditty: Could I just jump off the back of that quickly about transparency? About six or seven years ago, I think, H&M literally had a supplier list in a safe and only a couple of people in the company had the code to be able to access that list. In 2012 they published a list of who all their garment manufacturers are. If you count today, over 100 major global fashion brands are now publishing who their suppliers are, at least the first tier of their supply chain, those who they have a direct relationship with. There was a lot of fear about giving out their competitive secrets, who their suppliers are, and I think what they have found since publishing is that none of them has faced any negative competitive ramifications because of that.

That information has been very helpful for trade unions, NGOs and maybe even some journalists, who can then go out and understand or help solve human rights abuses when they happen much faster and often not have to do that publicly. If they have access to a list they can go directly to a brand they know that factory is producing for and say, "We have this issue going on. Can you help us solve it?" rather than, "We do not know where these products are going and we do not have any proof, so now we have to make a big public campaign and get journalists involved so that it is a reputation risk to brands".

Q82 **Colin Clark:** On that, can I just bring in Ms O'Connor? I am staggered. I come from the food industry. It is mainly own-label and we were taken to task to know exactly where it is coming from, exactly who is picking it and who is doing it. I am absolutely staggered. What is the success of the Modern Slavery Act if you are telling us—and Ms Ditty said the same thing—it does not have any impact?

Sarah O'Connor: When it first came out I was astounded by how weak it was because, as Kate said, you just have to write a statement. That is all you have to do. Even then, if you do not write the statement there does not seem to be any sanction. Is there any sanction if you do not write the statement? Plenty have not even done it.

That said, I think I was too cynical about it because people in the fashion industry and other sectors like food do say that it was one of those weird tipping points where even though it was not a massive requirement, it did force a lot of companies to start thinking about these things. I do not want to dismiss it. It was probably a good thing but clearly it has not been enough because there are huge amounts of abuse still going on.

On top of the thing about enforced transparency, I quite like the idea of joint liability, making the company at the top of the supply chain liable for abuses that go on further down the supply chain. Those could be environmental or labour abuses. At the minute, if a manufacturer in Leicester gets done by Health and Safety or HMRC that guy will have to



pay a fine—or, in extremis, he might have to go to jail—but it will not have any effect on the companies that he was supplying, whereas if you bring in a joint liability law it gives teeth to the law and means that the big retailers, the ones at the end of the chain, have a much better incentive to care about it.

Q83 Colin Clark: That is my final question on legislative changes. What can we do to make the brands much more accountable?

Sarah O'Connor: That is what I would do. David Metcalfe was thinking about that and in the end in his strategy he has recommended a slightly softer version that he is calling “joint responsibility”, which is basically the idea that if law enforcement finds out that somewhere in a big retailer’s supply chain something bad is going on, they will tell the retailer and the retailer will have a chance to remedy it. If they do not remedy it, they will be named and shamed. That is fine, but personally I would go the whole hog and make them responsible.

Q84 Mr Goodwill: I was just thinking about what you are saying because there are other examples of this, a legislation of joint and several responsibility.

Sarah Ditty: Yes, there are. This is essentially what France’s new duty of vigilance law is doing. It is almost like a joint liability law in that businesses are given the opportunity to remedy the situation and if they do not then they face sanctions. That is definitely a powerful stick but that legislation is one year old and we do not have evidence of how it is going to work in practice yet. Similar legislation is now being proposed and is potentially very likely to be passed—although even stricter—in Switzerland, but again it is new and we do not have any evidence. It is the same thing with the Modern Slavery Act. It is a step in the right direction but it was still only passed in 2015 and obviously slavery has been around for the whole of time. We are still building up evidence of what the impact of it is going to be.

One positive aspect of the Modern Slavery Act is that I think for the first time it has forced a lot of CEOs or business owners to think about these things when they had not in the first place, and that is a huge step. Once you see it, you cannot “unsee” it. That has been an important part of the Act itself.

Chair: Great. The Act is currently undergoing review and this report’s findings will be fed into and are being fed into that Act, which is being co-ordinated by some Lords, Vernon Coaker and a couple of other MPs. It is very much a live issue for discussion in this place.

Thank you all very much for your patience and for sharing your wisdom with us today.