



Slave to Fashion

Safia Minney

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Slave to Fashion is made up of interviews and microdocumentaries with the men, women and children caught in slavery, making the clothes sold in the malls and outlets across the USA and the world. It uses photos, visuals and graphics to bring the subject to life and give consumers the facts, stories and actions needed to eradicate modern slavery.

Slave to Fashion Details

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Malcolm says

That the textile and footwear industries are hideously exploitative is not new news (neither is it news that the sports goods industries are also in the same camp), and for many years there have been activist and campaign groups, trade unions and development agencies that have been involved in work all designed to improve working conditions. From British factory campaigners in the 1850s to anti-sweatshop campaign groups (trade unions and others) in the 1890s to the International Ladies Garment Workers Union who lead the resistance and fightback after the murderous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City in 1911. More recently textile workers trade unions in Cambodia, Bangladesh, Indonesia as well as Mexico, the Dominican Republic and a host of nations along with the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation, now part of the IndustriALL Global Union have helped organise workers in those industries in their struggles for social and workplace change.

For many years there have been allies, such as the urban communities in which members of the ILGWU and others lived, as well as wider networks of groups, including over the last 30 years or so the Clean Clothes Campaign as well as nationally based groups such as, in the UK Labour Behind the Label or in the USA the Workers' Rights Consortium and a whole bunch of others, organisations with both an educational and campaigning remit. Elsewhere we have seen groups such as the Anti-Slavery Society and Walk Free all working around the question of clothing and footwear, and their respective supply chains. But, the thing about most of these groups, or versions of them, is that they've been around for a very long time (the Anti-Slavery Society is the same one the William Wilberforce and others who were responsible for the 1807 anti-slavery legislation in the UK were members of – and that's not a typo; 1807). What's changed is ethical consumption, ethical shopping.... [I suppose at this stage I should declare myself – I am a trustee of Labour Behind the Label.]

That's where this excellent book comes in. Safia Minney has been around the world of ethical fashion for quite some time, as an entrepreneur, as an activist, as an educator. In 2016 she was responsible for *Slow Fashion* as an industry focussed exploration of the issue. The more recent change in Britain at least is the Modern Slavery Act 2015 which obliges all manner of British businesses to report each year on the steps they are taking to ensure that slavery and human trafficking are not present in their supply chains or their own business. The provisions of the Act are more than many campaigners hoped for but less that is needed to be really effective – but it on the books and it's up to us to demand that it gets teeth – but that's a parallel story.

Transparency is perhaps the most difficult thing to ensure in supply chains – there are long contract chains, businesses cite commercial sensitivity when it comes to even identifying the factories where their goods are made (and often workers in those factories are not sure who they are making for) and in many cases supply chains blend and meet so we never really be sure where raw materials, for instance, come from. It is this need for transparency that this book helps develop, and it is great for both experienced campaigners and those newer to the field (even those who are just concerned about who made their clothes, to steal a phrase from the folks at Fashion Revolution).

Minney build the book around five sections: the Modern Slavery Act, which although it is UK specific can be useful to campaigners elsewhere and is built on and extends the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act 2012: it turns out to be not that difficult to get legislators interested in slavery; getting legislation is a little trickier but the conversation can get going fairly easily. This section includes discussion of the global textile industries, industry and third sector agreements and similar components of the area of work. She then opens up issues of the global economy, including agreements such as Sustainable Development Goals,

population growth, climate change and human rights issues including freedom of association as issues in the development of supply chain transparency.

Moving from here she explores the situation of workers in these industries, not through high level or abstract econometric analyses but through powerful and moving personal stories and cases (I spend a lot of time in and around this sector and these stories are continually unsettling). This section, which could be bleak, is well balanced between personal stories of workers and exploration of agencies and groups providing support, pathways out of the industry – or more often into much better working conditions, often in local cooperatives and networks controlled by those workers (she focusses on South and South-East Asia, but there is also a superb and quite comprehensive case study in Jane Collins' *Threads* based in the Dominican Republic). The upshot is that although there are some difficult cases here, the section becomes quite inspiring.

Alongside these cases of networks and agencies providing support, she also looks (in the next set of cases) at technological developments around social enterprises, fair trade and ethical business practice, which she assesses in terms of Sustainable Development Goals. There is some overlap with the previous section here: although in a couple of cases the developments centre on quite capital intensive developments, in others it is things such as the use of mobile telephones to better organise and maintain information networks or locally developed, smaller scale business and technology that can help workers take control of their own working worlds.

The final section is then a guide to activism – what to do. Some of this is obvious – link up with activist groups – but others is less so – pay attention to fabric and production quality and support work including efforts to build better partnership within the supply chains. Really usefully there is helpful section on how to build pressure to beef up the Modern Slavery Act. All in all this is an excellent introduction to issues in and action around supply chain transparency, with useful pointers to what to do.

The book has some significant strengths: Minney's style is engaging and in telling good stories she provides clear and accessible ways into what are, in many cases, quite complex issues. On top of that, the case study approach means that the issues are not abstract but made real and specific by being about cases we can identify – although there is a cost here in terms of context and reach: we don't know if the case study is one of 20 similar organisations or cases, or one of 1000 or more – there is no easy way out of this problem: that'd be a different kind of book. In almost every case, the examples, the agreements and provisions include weblinks to further information, and there is a good guide to further information in the appendix. On top of all this, the book is really well designed and very well illustrated.

Of course, there are always things that don't quite make that quality, and I have two niggles. The first is the definition of Modern Slavery, on which the Act is remarkably vague (as it is on the question of 'exploitation' – a term it often uses) with the result that Minney includes child labour, human trafficking, forced and excessive labour and bonded labour within the remit of the Act and her definition of 'slavery': as an activist this seems fine; as someone who spends altogether too much time with lawyers this seems a bit vague, especially 'excessive labour' – so use this as a starting point. The other niggles is that the final, join the campaign, section is a bit light – not that it is lighter than other sections but in the world of modern activism many readers may need to go elsewhere. There are plenty of useful introductions to campaigning. I like Lucy-Anne Holmes *How to Start a Revolution* – it is very much an introduction, and for anyone looking to organise something make sure you contact one of the activist groups – Walk Free, LBL or the like.

All in all though, the size of the global fashion industry makes it an essential focus for those concerned about workers' rights, about who made your clothes, about exploitation, about environmental depredation and economic (in)justice. If you're concerned about where your clothes come from, about who made them and about social justice for those workers, this is an excellent place to start.

Devin says

An energetic and educational book about recent developments in the world of fair trade. A must read for consumers looking for ways to have a positive and sustainable impact on the world.

I'm personally also highly interested in the potential for fair trade in vulnerable communities in developed countries, which is briefly touched on in this book. Workers rights are a serious issue in developed countries as well. Fair trade is not just a solution for fashion or for those living in poverty in developing countries. Everyone deserves a fair and living wage for the work they do, safe working conditions, job security, opportunities for advancement, and reasonable time off.

When I buy fair trade, I feel great knowing about the people behind the product who I'm supporting. My fair trade clothes are also of superior quality and I look great in them. What's not to like?

Carla Coelho says

É fácil pensar que nenhum de nós pode fazer nada de relevante pela vida dos nossos semelhantes, sobretudo daqueles que estão longe. Mas isso é mentira. Este livro incide sobre um ponto essencial para todos nós cidadãos e cidadãs da sociedade da abundância: o consumo ético. O que é isso? É, por exemplo, perceber que se compramos um t-shirt por um preço módico, alguém está a pagar o seu preço real por nós. Esse alguém é muitas vezes um trabalhador ou trabalhadora do Terceiro Mundo que não tem direito a salário mínimo, subsídio de férias ou subsídio de Natal, que não tem horário de trabalho e exerce a sua actividade profissional em condições desumanas. Este livro foca esse fenómeno de que todos temos mais ou menos consciência. Não se fica pelo diagnóstico da situação, indicando formas como todos nós podemos agir. Desde logo, procurando resposta para a pergunta “quem fez as nossas roupas?”, não embarcando no consumo desenfreado, mas antes perguntando-nos como podem determinadas marcas ter produtos tão baratos. Também há uma lista de aplicações que podem ser colocadas no telemóvel e sites para explorar. Há sempre alguma coisa que podemos fazer, desde que estejamos realmente disponíveis para sofrermos o leve incómodo a que toda a acção obriga.

O livro em si mesmo está bem escrito e com edição cuidada, mostrando a diferença que a introdução de preocupações de justiça na economia pode trazer na vida de cada um.
