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Master Thesis

Labour standards issues in the fashion industry supply chain: an ethical assessment of priorities and practical solutions

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Summary

The aim of my dissertation is to provide an overview of the labour standards issues that underlie the manufacturing process in the fashion industry's supply chain. This is done by conducting an ethical assessment of these issues and by determining what order of priority they should be given when they are addressed. In the first two chapters, I focus on providing definitions of the concepts of sustainable development and social sustainability, in order to analyze issues related to social sustainability in the specific context of the fashion industry. In the third chapter, I conduct an ethical assessment of the social issues discussed in chapter two, using Martha Nussbaum's capability approach as a normative framework. Finally, in the last chapter, I provide two examples of practical solutions that, if implemented on a large scale, would significantly improve labor conditions. The first solution entails actions that fashion brands and companies can take, whereas the second example is a practical tool that can be used by both brands and consumers to take action on social issues related to the garment industry.

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0. Introduction

0.1 Research question

The aim of this dissertation is to provide an overview of the labour standards issues underlying the production process in the fashion industry. To this end, I investigate the social conditions that exist in the garment industry production supply chain. This investigation becomes the starting point of a reflection on the concept of sustainability, which is often reduced to the preservation of environmental resources; instead we should also turn our gaze to the social landscape, to people's lives, or, in this case, people's working conditions. First, I reflect on the concept of social sustainability, a term that is still poorly defined and debated, and then analyze the problems associated with this concept as they are contextualized in the world of fashion. I then propose an analysis of these issues from the perspective of the capability approach, in the version proposed by Martha Nussbaum; using the notion of human dignity as a guiding value I employ her approach to reflect on the living conditions (related to my context of analysis, the working conditions in the garment industry) that provide people with a life that is worthy of their human dignity. The aim of this reflection is to create a ranking of the issues related to workers' rights in consumer product supply chains, in order to evaluate which issues are more urgently to be resolved than others and why.

Throughout my research on these issues, I came across a context, the fashion industry supply chain, where the presence of female workers was significantly higher than that of men, indeed the majority. Therefore, I have decided to focus on this fact and examine in detail the issues surrounding women's working conditions in the clothing manufacturing supply chain; I focus on issues of gender discrimination on multiple levels in this context, and then apply my ethical assessment using Nussbaum's approach. My goal is to see if this evaluation of labor standards differs when it comes to women workers, if some issues are more important and urgent for women than others, and if some issues have a greater impact on women's abilities than they do on men's abilities.

Hence, my research question is: Which social sustainability issues concerning the working conditions of workers in the fashion industry supply chain are the ones that need to be addressed more urgently? And for which reasons is one issue more urgent than another? And my subquestion is: Given the innate and socially acquired features of women working in the fashion industry supply

chain, do some of the sustainability issues examined need to be addressed more urgently for women than for men? Do they have a greater and more profound impact on the lives of these women than men in this context?

Finally, in order to give my thesis a practical purpose, I conclude my reflection by proposing practical solutions to the problems I have examined. To do this, I firstly focus on practical solutions that brands and manufacturers in the garment industry can implement in order to take action on social sustainability issues; secondly I propose a solution that involves both brands and consumers, encouraging them to produce and buy in a more responsible way, taking into account the origin of the garments and the working conditions of those who made them.

0.2 Methodology

In order to conduct my research and the ethical review of my thesis I used different kinds of sources and different methods because I believe that an applied ethics thesis (especially one dealing with an applied topic) requires an interdisciplinary approach.

Firstly, as a starting point, before beginning to write each chapter, I conducted a literature review in order to have the material needed to provide definitions of the concepts I deal with in the thesis (sustainable development, social sustainability, and all the issues I describe related to the fashion industry) and to provide a detailed overview of the labor standards that I analyze.

Then, in order to conduct my ethical evaluation of the problems analyzed, I focused on Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, using her perspective to create a ranking of social problems related to the working conditions in the fashion industry, evaluating which were more urgent because they had a greater impact on the capabilities described by Nussbaum. The capability approach is particularly suited for my research because it focuses not only on the basic needs of garment workers in terms of goods, but also on their freedoms more broadly conceived.

As previously stated, I chose to conduct this thesis research using an interdisciplinary approach, which resulted in the use of both academic sources (particularly articles and books concerning normative frameworks) and studies from the areas of business as well as human development.

I believe these methods are particularly suitable to answer my research question because I believe that evaluating such a concrete issue solely from a philosophical standpoint is insufficient, and that other sources and content from disciplines other than philosophy must be used. This is due to the fact that, in order to propose a practical solution that supports my ethical assessment of the problem,

I should indeed rely on more specific disciplines that deal with practical dynamics and can provide empirical evidence in relation to concrete contexts. This approach to a research question is unusual in the field of the philosophical discipline, but I believe that, just as applied ethics differs from theoretical philosophy, it is in the same way necessary to address issues of applied ethics differently from those of philosophical theory.

1. The concept of Sustainability

In this chapter I outline a definition of the concepts of Sustainability and Sustainable Development. Starting with a brief historical excursus on the genesis of the terms, I then concentrate on analyzing the structure of the idea of sustainable development which consists of a tripartition into three fundamental pillars: the economic pillar, the social pillar and the environmental pillar. I explain why these three aspects are intrinsically linked to each other and why the issues related to them are not to be faced/managed individually but together with interconnected strategies. I finally put the focus on the social dimension of sustainability. I give a definition of the concept of Social Sustainability, explain on which fundamental values it is based and highlight different ways in which it contributes to sustainable development.

1.1 Historical background

Sustainability has been one of the most widely used buzzwords in the last two decades. It seems to have become the embodiment of what Thomas Gieryn¹ refers to as a ‘border phrase’, one in which science intersects with politics and politics intersects with science.²

The very first time the term sustainability was used was several hundred years ago, in 1712, when Hans Carl von Carlowitz, a German forester, in his treatise *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* coined it in order to describe how woods should be managed on a long-term basis. However, it was not until the 1980s that the word gained mainstream popularity. It was during the late 1960s and 1970s, with the start of the contemporary environmental movement and the first debates about growth limits, that environmentalists were eager to demonstrate how environmental issues might be related to mainstream development issues. In the mid-1980s, the commission directed by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Brundtland became the focal point for this debate, culminating in the report *Our Common Future* in 1987.³ In this report, sustainable development is defined as development

¹ Gieryn, T., *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*, Chicago University Press, Chicago (IL) 1999.

² Cfr. Scoones I., *Sustainability*, in “Development in Practice”, Vol.17, Issue 4-5, Routledge, 2007, pp.589-596, p. 589.

³ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 590.

“that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴

Since the 1980s, there has been a global explosion of intellectual and policy debate on these concerns, especially in the run-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This conference was a key moment for this intense debate on how sustainability should be translated into practical policies. The summit, held by the United Nations, was attended by representatives from 178 governments, multiple heads of state, and over 1000 NGOs, civil-society, and campaign groups. This was probably the start of the age of sustainable development, the moment in which sustainability would rise to the top of the global political agenda and become a permanent aspect of the way in which development would be carried out in both the North and the South.⁵ The challenge, then, for the organizations that made sustainable development a key aim was to translate the theory into practice, to move from ideals to tangible results on the ground. The result was a growing number of planning methodologies, analytical frameworks, measuring indicators, audit systems, and assessment processes aimed to assist governments, organizations, communities, and individuals in achieving sustainability.⁶

The 1992 Rio agenda was very ambitious since it focused on a global level primarily and it did set up very big expectations assuming that states that will be the one implementing the policies were all going to comply with this agenda. However, the good intentions were often not enough to implement sustainable development beyond the rhetorical gloss and translate it into real and effective policies. Since 2000, the superficial managerialism of many ‘sustainable development’ efforts has left a lot to be desired. The lack of progress on major goals set in 1992, the endless repackaging of old initiatives as ‘sustainable’, and the lack of capacity and commitment within governments and international organizations to turn the ideals of sustainability into practice were among the criticisms.⁷

But the hope was not lost. While the alliances formed before and after the Rio summit may have scattered, splintered, and turned in on themselves, there has been a renewal of sustainability debate

⁴ United Nations, World Commission on Environment and Development, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future*, 1987, Ch. 2, paragraph 1. Online version: <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>

⁵ Cfr. Scoones I., *Sustainability*, cit., p. 591.

⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁷ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 592.

since the late 1990s. And the debate was more focused on creating policies this time. Rather than stemming from an abstract concept of sustainability, contemporary arguments have centered on certain major challenges that have surfaced in the international news. These have elicited public and, more often than not, political responses. The 2002 ‘Rio-plus-10’ conference in Johannesburg was an occasion to bring up a very lively debate and, most significantly, a lot of dissent. The discussion focused on the triumphs and shortcomings of the Rio commitments’ various routes and the debate between proponents of local and international solutions. Some groups maintained that local solutions had proven to be more promising; cities and municipalities could make significant progress in addressing the consequences of climate change (i.e. conserving green spaces, and meeting recycling targets). Others, on the other hand, have argued that major sustainability agendas should remain global, and that, in an increasingly globalized economy and interconnected world, achieving some form of international agreement on these issues, possibly through new institutions (such as the World Environment Organization), should remain a key goal for achieving sustainability. During this conference the ‘sustainable development’ movement, which had been so confidently ambitious in Rio a decade before, was more quiet, fractured, and perhaps a little more realistic. However, the term “sustainable” has remained a boundary term that allows disparate parties - even those who are vehemently opposed to one another - to find a common ground.⁸

At the moment the goals of sustainable development are represented within the UN Agenda 2030, an action program “for people, the planet and for prosperity”⁹ approved in September 2015 by the leaders of the 193 UN member countries. The Global Agenda outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals that must be met by 2030, divided into 169 targets that serve as a compass for putting countries on a sustainable path. Goals, targets, and over 240 indicators are used to track the process of changing the development model: each country is judged on these parameters by the UN and by national and international public opinion on a regular basis.¹⁰ The goals of this agenda are to establish universal peace, fully realize human rights, and conserve the earth. The 17 principles are “interconnected and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental dimensions.”¹¹

⁸ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 593-594.

⁹ UNGA, A/RES/70/1, 25th sept. 2015, p.1.

¹⁰ Cfr. <https://asvis.it/1-agenda-2030-dell-onu-per-lo-sviluppo-sostenibile/>

¹¹ UNGA, A/RES/70/1, 25th sept. 2015, p.1.

1.2 The three pillars of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development has been described by the *Brundtland Report* as a guiding principle for economic, environmental, and social development that aspires to meet “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”¹² and an “equitable sharing of the environmental costs and benefits of economic development between and within countries”¹³. This definition of sustainable development puts the focus on two key concepts:

1. the concept of *needs*, particularly the essential needs of the poorer part of the population, which should be given absolute priority;
2. and the concept of *limits* imposed on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs which might vary according to technological progress and social organization (for example consumerist society).¹⁴

Moreover, the document emphasizes that all countries’ economic and social development goals must be stated in terms of sustainability. Although there may be differences in how the objectives are interpreted, there must be agreement on the general aspects of the notion of sustainable development and a strategic plan to achieve it.¹⁵

Despite the fact that the report focuses on environmental challenges, it emphasizes that sustainable development should not be reduced to environmental protection or economic growth in the traditional sense. Sustainability has been defined as an integrative term that addresses three key dimensions: environmental, social, and economic. These three dimensions have been labeled “pillars of sustainability”, implying that responsible development must take into account natural, human, and economic capital, which in other words means the planet, the people and the profits.¹⁶ Inability to manage the environment while also supporting economic development has far-reaching effects that threaten to overwhelm a lot of countries. For example, if a country is highly dependent on mining (Ecuador) or oil (Venezuela), or other non sustainable materials it can be very difficult to

¹² United Nations, World Commission on Environment and Development, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future*, 1987, cit.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Cfr. *Ivi*, Ch. 2, paragraph 2.

¹⁶ Cfr. Hansmann R., Mieg H. A., Frischknecht P., *Principal sustainability components: empirical analysis of synergies between the three pillars of sustainability*, in “International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology”, Vol. 19, Issue 5, published online 25 Jun 2012, pp. 451-459, p. 451.

switch to a sustainable strategy without losing a lot of money. In fact, environment and development are two primary issues that are inextricably linked: development cannot take place in the face of declining environmental resources, and the environment cannot be safeguarded if growth ignores the costs of environmental devastation.¹⁷ The links that subsist between environmental problems and the three pillars of sustainability are therefore described as follows:

1. To begin with, environmental challenges are intertwined, which requires an approach that considers the strong ties that bind them together.¹⁸
2. Second, environmental challenges and patterns of economic development are inextricably intertwined. As a result, economic and ecological strategies must be completely integrated into decision-making and legislative processes, not only to conserve the environment, but also to safeguard and promote development, as both are equally crucial in improving humanity's future condition.¹⁹
3. Finally, environmental and economic issues are linked with a variety of social and political aspects.²⁰

1.2.1 Environmental Sustainability

The last half-century has seen the most rapid and profound changes in human relationships with the environment. The world's population has grown by two and a half times, to roughly 6.5 billion people. The global demand for food, energy, water, land, and other resources has risen even faster. Significant technological advancements have given the rising population a larger impact on the environment while also providing human society with the ability to perceive and measure these changes. Human influences on the environment have never been more widely recognized, ranging from pollution and biodiversity loss to acid rain and global warming; similarly, the consciousness about human-nature ties and the dependence of society on the environment has increased from a few perceptive individuals to a global level. The scientific understanding of the environment, ecosystem ecology, and global ecological processes has grown in unison with public awareness of

¹⁷ Cfr. United Nations, World Commission on Environment and Development, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future*, cit., Ch. 1, paragraph 40.

¹⁸ Cfr. *Ivi* Ch. 1, paragraph 41.

¹⁹ Cfr. *Ivi* Ch. 1, paragraph 42.

²⁰ Cfr. *Ivi* Ch. 1, paragraph 43.

the necessity of safeguarding all of these environmental factors.²¹ This awareness that has risen and developed over time is the foundation of the concept of environmental sustainability.

The threats to environmental sustainability come from a variety of sources, including: (1) war and terrorism, which pose a serious threat to natural and human-dominated ecosystems; (2) increased market globalization, which accelerates the invasion of unknown species and the spread of infectious diseases; (3) suburban expanse and fragmentation of landscapes and coasts; and (4) a lack of leadership on these issues in many of the most powerful countries of this historical moment.²²

1.2.2 Economic Sustainability

The term economic sustainability refers to practices (implemented by any kind of reality, from states to small businesses) that support long-term economic growth while minimizing negative effects on the community's social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. Economically sustainable decision-making involves reflecting how we use, secure, and sustain resources (both human and natural) in order to create long-term value through optimal use, recovery, and recycling. To put it another way, we must conserve finite natural resources today in order for future generations to be able to meet their own necessities.²³ Some examples of economically sustainable practices could be switching to renewable energy sources (like solar panels), implementing recycling strategies, choosing to buy products locally instead of buying from long distance countries, buying second hand products and so on.

At this historical moment, there have been numerous attempts to find effective solutions to support both sustainable development and economic growth on a large scale. Many countries are attempting to 'green' their economies by pursuing so-called *green growth*, also known as a *circular economy*. The goal of the circular economy is to rebuild capital, whether financial, manufactured, human, social, or natural, and to provide opportunities and solutions for all types of businesses.²⁴ The basic

²¹ Cfr. Rockwood L. L., Stewart R. E., Dietz T., *Foundation of Environmental Sustainability, the Coevolution of Science and Policy*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, p. 3.

²² Cfr. *Ivi* p. 51-52.

²³ Cfr. Löf R. M., *Economic Sustainability*, University of Gävle, Updated: 2018-06-18. Link to the page: <https://www.hig.se/Ext/En/University-of-Gavle/About-the-University/Environmental-Work/What-is-sustainable-development-at-HiG/Economic-sustainability.html>

²⁴ Cfr. Stahel W. R., *The Circular Economy, A User's Guide*, Routledge, New York, 2019, Preface.

idea is to maximize the utility and value of objects rather than their production; to preserve the use value of objects, components, and molecules at their highest utility and value levels; and to profitably manage these stocks in competition with other economic options.²⁵ The circular economic model manages stocks of manufactured assets, such as infrastructure, buildings, vehicles, equipment, and consumer goods, to keep their value and utility as high as possible for as long as possible, as well as stocks of natural resources at their purest and most valuable state. In contrast to the linear industrial economy, the goals of this model are to maintain value (rather than add value), optimize stock management, and improve the efficiency of consuming commodities. This helps to extend the life cycle of products, reducing waste to a minimum. When a product's purpose is complete, the materials it was made with are reintroduced into the economic cycle, when possible. As a result, they can be utilized repeatedly throughout the production cycle, producing additional value. The circular economy's principles differ from the standard linear economic model, which is built on the "extract, produce, use, and throw away" system. The old economic model is based on the availability of enormous amounts of easily available commodities and energy at low prices.²⁶ We could say that the circular industrial economy brings a 'caring' attitude towards economic, environmental and social needs, and a different consideration of the 'factor time' into economics and society.²⁷

Transitioning to a more circular economy can have numerous benefits, including:

- Reduced environmental impact
- More security about the availability of raw materials
- Promotion of innovation
- Increased employment - it is estimated that the circular economy would create 700,000 new jobs in the EU by 2030.

Consumers will be able to obtain more durable and inventive items as a result of the circular economy, which will save money and improve quality of life.²⁸

1.3 Social Sustainability

²⁵ Cfr. *Ivi* p.1.

²⁶ Cfr. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/it/headlines/economy/20151201STO05603/economia-circolare-definizione-importanza-e-vantaggi>

²⁷ Cfr. Stahel W. R., *The Circular Economy, A User's Guide*, cit., p. 6-7.

²⁸ Cfr. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/it/headlines/economy/20151201STO05603/economia-circolare-definizione-importanza-e-vantaggi>.

The concept of social sustainability was overlooked in the first decade after the notion of sustainable development was introduced in 1987, in favor of the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability. The debate appeared to be mostly focused on environmental and economic issues, with social factors playing a minimal role in the discussion about sustainability. Social sustainability was first recognized as a crucial component of the sustainability agenda in the late 1990s. Following that, it gained a lot of attention. Despite the massive amount of work that has been done in this area over the last few decades, there has yet to be agreement on a comprehensive definition of social sustainability, and the concept remains under-theorized to some extent.²⁹

1.3.1 Why is social sustainability such a difficult concept to define?

The concept of social sustainability is more difficult to evaluate, comprehend, define, and integrate into sustainability initiatives and plans than the other two dimensions. The lack of a coherent, precise, and applicable definition of the notion of social sustainability is commonly blamed on social scientists, who have been criticized for being conceptually unclear and inconsistent.³⁰ Many of the concepts proposed may remain implicit because they are disguised by a not sufficiently transparent selection of socio-political variables and they tend to define social sustainability in a variety of ways (social standards, institutional sustainability, democratic rights). Furthermore, in many cases, the connections between social, economic, and ecological sustainability remain hazy: different priorities are frequently assigned to the three dimensions, and they are grouped together without being merged into a whole.³¹ In general terms we could say that social sustainability can be defined as a combination of policies aimed at meeting basic human necessities, as well as ensuring a reasonable degree of social homogeneity, an equitable distribution of income, a job that provides for good livelihoods, and equal access to resources and social services.³² A proper definition of social sustainability must be built on the fundamental value of equality and the successful

²⁹ Rasouli A. H., Kumarasuriyar A., *The Social Dimension of Sustainability: towards some Definitions and Analysis*, in “Journal of Social Science for Policy Implications”, Vol. 4, No. 2, published by American Research Institute for Policy Development, Dec. 2016, pp. 23-34, p. 28.

³⁰ Cfr. Eizenberg E., Jabareen Y., *Social Sustainability: A New Conceptual Framework*, in “Sustainability”, Vol. 9, Issue 1, pp. 1-16, MDPI, 2017, p. 2.

³¹ Cfr. Littig B., Grießler E., *Social sustainability: a catchword between political pragmatism and social theory*, in “J. Sustainable Development”, Vol. 8, Nos. 1/2, Department of Sociology, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), Vienna 2005, pp. 65-79, p. 68.

³² Cfr. Sachs, I., *Social sustainability and whole development*, In: Becker, E., Jahn, T. (Eds.), *Sustainability and the Social Sciences*, Zed Books and UNESCO, New York, 1999, pp. 32-33.

appropriation of all human rights, including political, civil, economic, social, and cultural rights, by all people.³³ Nevertheless social sustainability, just like the concept of sustainability, is neither absolute nor constant. Social sustainability must be considered as a dynamic concept that evolves over time (year to year and decade to decade) in a given location:³⁴ for example if we think about how the conception of the role of women in the society has changed over time (in different timings and degrees depending on the country) and the consequent change of the consideration given to womens' rights, womens' necessity, we can understand how the consideration of what is just on a social level changes along with the customs and mentality of a given time and place. Such conceptual imprecision and interpretative flexibility is frequently viewed as both a strength (in that it facilitates communication among diverse and often conflicting parties) and a weakness (in that it makes it difficult to reach a consensus: people must constantly elaborate what they actually mean when they speak about social sustainability).³⁵ Because sustainable development is tremendously complex, the diffusion of many frameworks, rather than a single hegemonic theory, is beneficial. Pluralism is preferable to a single common approach since different geographical and temporal scales, as well as situational circumstances, necessitate their own frameworks, which may not always present a coherent picture, but rather a mosaic of somewhat contradictory perspectives of reality. The diverse approaches highlight the need for social sustainability to be constantly reframed and reconstructed.³⁶

1.3.2 The challenges

While it is still difficult to establish a specific definition and framework for social sustainability, what we can do is map out what social sustainability frequently entails, as well as the challenges that this topic has to face. This can help to clarify that social sustainability generally refers to both the improvement of living conditions for current and future generations as well as the quality of how the development process is managed.³⁷ In this process it is useful to distinguish within the

³³ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 27.

³⁴ Cfr. Dempsey N., Bramley G., Power S., Brown C., *The Social Dimension of Sustainable Development: Defining Urban Social Sustainability*, Published online in Wiley InterScience, 2009.

³⁵ Cfr. Boström M., *A missing pillar? Challenges in theorizing and practicing social sustainability: introduction to the special issue*, in "Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy", Vol 12, Issue 1, Published online: 05 Oct 2017, pp. 3-14, p. 4.

³⁶ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 5.

³⁷ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

concept of social sustainability between both substantive aspects (that focus on *what* needs to be done and what are the goals) and procedural aspects (that focus on *how* to achieve those goals).³⁸

Table 1 example of substantive and procedural aspects of social sustainability.³⁹

Substantive Aspects	Procedural Aspects
Basic needs (food, housing, income)	Access to information about risks and sustainable development projects
Extended needs (self fulfillment, entertainment (leisure activities))	Access to decision-making opportunities at various phases of the process and over time
Inter- and intra-generational justice with regard to gender, race, class and ethnicity dimensions	Proactive stakeholder communication and consultation throughout the process
Fair distribution of income	Empowerment as a result of participating in the process (e.g., increased awareness, education, networking, and financial compensation)
Equality of rights	Assisting with the framing of issues, such as identifying criteria, scope, and justice issues
Access to social infrastructure, transportation, local services, amenities, and green spaces	Monitoring the policy, planning, and standard-setting processes from a social perspective
Possibility of self-improvement and learning.	Accountable governance and management of the policy, planning, and standard-setting process
Community capacity for civil society and social capital development.	
Economic and environmental security	
Social cohesion, inclusion, and interaction	
Cultural diversity and traditions	

³⁸ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 6.

³⁹ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

Sense of community attachment, belonging, and identity

Social recognition

Good quality of life, happiness and well being

In conclusion we can define social sustainability as a context-dependent concept which addresses the living conditions of current and future generations by (1) meeting their basic human needs and enabling human flourishing (e.g., via introducing a living wage), (2) ensuring a minimum degree of social homogeneity, an equitable distribution of income, and equal access to resources and social services, (3) guaranteeing the continuity of a human rights regime, and (4) allowing for stakeholder participation on the question of how social sustainability is conceptualized and implemented.

2. Social sustainability in the Fashion Industry

Following the analysis of the concept of sustainable development and after providing a general definition of social sustainability, in this chapter I deepen the examination of the social pillar of sustainability focusing on its role within the fashion industry. First, I provide an overview of what social sustainability in the garment industry entails, along with an explanation of the issues related to working conditions in global fashion supply chains and an insight of what we are talking about when we talk about workers' rights in this particular field of consumer product supply chains. In this context I will then deepen my analysis focusing on the problem of gender discrimination in the global garment industry, since women constitute the majority of the garment sector workforce and they often work in terrible conditions. I will describe the main issues that women garment workers have to face in the workplace such as lower living wage and working opportunities, gender gaps, unequal employment terms, precarious employment, and unsafe and unhealthy working conditions.

2.1 Social sustainability in the fashion supply chain

In the last few years the fashion industry has become one of the main subjects in the debate about sustainable strategies both from an environmental and social point of view. The fashion industry, which is characterized by very short product life cycles and global and fragmented supply chains, is one of the most challenging sectors with regard to sustainability.⁴⁰ In the past, companies used to be primarily concerned with identifying efficient manufacturing processes, with an emphasis on keeping end product prices low and reducing production and delivery lead times.⁴¹ In recent years instead, corporates have begun to incorporate sustainability measures in their supply chain in addition to traditional parameters such as pricing, quality, and reliability, as a result of stakeholder awareness and pressures.⁴² As the importance of corporate environmental and social issues has increased, stakeholders want to know how corporate strategies integrate sustainability aspects into the firm's economic objectives. Consumers are increasingly demanding that businesses manufacture

⁴⁰ Cfr. Macchion L., Da Giau A., Caniato F., Caridi M., Danese P., Rinaldi R. & Vinelli A., *Strategic approaches to sustainability in fashion supply chain management*, *Production Planning & Control*, in "Production Planning & Control, The Management of Operations", Vol 29, Issue 1, Published online: 12 Sep 2017, pp. 9-28, p. 9.

⁴¹ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 9-10.

⁴² Cfr. Mani V., Agrawal R., Sharma V., *Supply Chain Social Sustainability: A Comparative Case Analysis in Indian Manufacturing Industries*, in "Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences", Vol. 189, 15 May 2015, Pages 234-251, p. 235.

high-quality, environmentally friendly, and safe items using cutting-edge production techniques that are less detrimental to the environment and to social communities. As a result, businesses must not only implement sustainable practices, but also effectively communicate such practices with all their stakeholders and with society.⁴³ Nevertheless also in this context the debate on the social dimension of sustainability is still the most underdeveloped and under-explored among the other three dimensions. Social sustainability in the fashion industry has recently received attention against the backdrop of rising social issues that are not only linked to the immediate business environment, but also to other stakeholders with whom the corporation has economic and commercial interactions.⁴⁴ Many recent scandals, such as the Dhaka catastrophe⁴⁵ in 2013, in which around 1200 people died when a textile factory collapsed, have had a huge impact on the image of fashion businesses and raised awareness of social issues such as safety and working conditions. Furthermore, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace have undertaken campaigns that have exposed various human rights violations and environmental abuses by fashion firms, increasing customers' and companies' interest in sustainability.⁴⁶ The tragedy brought attention to working conditions in global fashion supply chains around the world and to the fact that workers in global fashion supply chains are subjected to serious abuses of their rights to a living wage, fair working hours, a safe working environment free of harassment and abuse, and a secure employment relationship on a daily basis.⁴⁷

Companies have begun to recognize the significance of social and environmental responsibility, as well as its impact on business performance. As a result, businesses are starting to contribute to the solution of societal problems by improving workplace conditions, decreasing waste, and efficiently employing resources, among other things. In reaction to increased stakeholder demands, government rules, criticism of non-governmental organizations, and competitive pressure about social sustainability issues (that is the competition among corporations regarding the implementation of socially sustainable standards), new approaches to improve corporate social

⁴³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Cfr. <https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/past/rana-plaza>.

⁴⁶ Cfr. Macchion L., Da Giau A., Caniato F., Caridi M., Danese P., Rinaldi R. & Vinelli A., *Strategic approaches to sustainability in fashion supply chain management, Production Planning & Control*, cit., p. 9.

⁴⁷ Cfr. Parker L., *Fashion brand and workers rights*, in Fletcher K. and Tham M., *Routledge handbook of Sustainability and Fashion*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 210-220, p. 210.

performance in worldwide operations are emerging as a means for the companies to improve their sustainable practices.⁴⁸

2.1.1 The issues

Social sustainability in the supply chain can be narrowed down to the actions, measures and processes that determine the safety and welfare of the people in the chain.⁴⁹ Such social sustainability practices can be defined as how a company manages its supply chain employees by addressing social issues such as safety, health, cleanliness, pay, labor rights, education, and housing, among others, in order to ensure the firm's long-term sustainability.⁵⁰

However it is important to underline the fact that the management of sustainability, on the other hand, is not limited to a company's internal procedures; it includes the full network of suppliers, distributors, and retailers that constitute each company's supply chain. In fact, the development of sustainability approaches within supply chains entails the administration of both environmental and social issues, beginning at the strategic level of governance and extending to product design, raw material selection and purchase, manufacturing processes, delivery to stores, sales, and the recovery of end-of-life products.⁵¹ This means that since each company is accountable for the alignment of its whole supply chain's sustainable actions, sustainable sourcing may require companies to rigorously check suppliers to certify their environmental and social efforts.⁵²

Since garment production, like that of many other items, now takes place across vast global distances, garment producers' customers, who are typically global brands, are searching for low pricing and short production times. They also make changes to product design, volume, and production deadlines, as well as placing last-minute orders without accepting higher costs or delivery delays. Factory workers are frequently the ones that take the burden of such policies.⁵³ The

⁴⁸ Cfr. Mani V., Agrawal R., Sharma V., *Supply Chain Social Sustainability: A Comparative Case Analysis in Indian Manufacturing Industries*, cit., p. 235.

⁴⁹ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 236.

⁵⁰ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ Cfr. Macchion L., Da Giau A., Caniato F., Caridi M., Danese P., Rinaldi R. & Vinelli A., *Strategic approaches to sustainability in fashion supply chain management, Production Planning & Control*, cit., p. 10.

⁵² Cfr. *Ivi* p. 11.

⁵³ Cfr. D'Ambrogio E., *Workers' conditions in the textile and clothing sector: just an Asian affair? Issues at stake after the Rana Plaza tragedy*, European Parliament Research Service, 2014, p. 2.

advent of ‘fast fashion’, or low-cost fashion clothing that is sold in major retail chains, has caused the need to find ever-cheaper labor, as the domestic workforce has become prohibitively expensive. This outsourcing of labor to India and Bangladesh, as well as newly capitalist countries like Poland, not only results in a longer supply chain, with subcontractors pushing responsibility and duty of care for workers’ health and well-being further away, but it also creates a greater distance between Western consumers and Eastern and Southern producers, putting them ‘out of sight, out of mind’.⁵⁴ Even though not all work places where workers’ rights are violated are dark, filthy sweatshops (in fact, according to Parker,⁵⁵ some, but certainly not all, current workplaces are of modern industrial factory design with high ceilings, ample space, bright lighting, and adequate ventilation), this does not mean that just by meeting certain health and safety criteria workers’ rights are protected.⁵⁶ The research carried out by NGOs such as the Clean Clothes Campaign⁵⁷ and international institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO)⁵⁸ provides significant evidence of abuses of a multitude of workers’ rights in fashion supply chains in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Western, central, and Eastern Europe. Also the labor standards that are supported by such organizations give the most prominent reference points for workers’ rights in national labour law and corporate codes of conduct.⁵⁹

Using such standards as a reference the following areas are commonly regarded as the main issues related to workers’ rights in consumer product supply chains:⁶⁰

- (1) Low living wage: The vast majority of garment employees work extraordinarily long hours for extremely low pay. Sweatshop wages can be found all over the world, from Asia to Eastern Europe to Latin America, with mainstream companies admitting that almost none of their employees are paid a decent wage.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Cfr. Entwistle J., *Sustainability and fashion*, in Fletcher K. and Tham M., *Routledge handbook of Sustainability and Fashion*, Routledge, New York 2015, pp. 25-32, pp. 26-27.

⁵⁵ Parker L., *Fashion brand and workers rights*, cit., p. 211.

⁵⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ <https://cleanclothes.org/>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.ilo.org/global/lang--en/index.htm>.

⁵⁹ Cfr. Parker L., *Fashion brand and workers rights*, cit., p. 211.

⁶⁰ To assemble this list, I referred to the issues that the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Fair Wear Foundation face, using content from their websites that explain the social issues they address while working with fashion brands and factories.

⁶¹ Cfr. <https://cleanclothes.org/fashions-problems>.

- (2) Unsafe and unhealthy working spaces: the fashion's quest for the lowest costs often weighs on workers' health and, in some cases, their lives. Other dangers, such as the use of hazardous chemicals or sandblasting, the noise, the heat, and the lack of proper ventilation are also present. Then there's also the problem of harassment and abuse in the workplace.⁶²
- (3) Bad contracts and no job security: In this industry, subcontracting and avoiding legally binding employment relationships is the standard. Workers are given a series of short-term contracts, if not none at all, rather than a normal contract. The use of labor-only contracting or apprenticeship systems, without any intention to impart skills or offer regular work, is fairly frequent.⁶³
- (4) Forced or compulsory labour: a lot of vulnerable groups like women, children, migrants and refugees are often victims of abuse and exploitation.
- (5) Union busting: the majority of production occurs in countries with the lowest incomes, as well as the worst records in terms of freedom of association and collective bargaining. The majority of garment producing countries, such as China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, Turkey, and Vietnam are among the worst countries for employees to organize in.⁶⁴
- (6) Child labour: in a lot of Eastern countries' production chains the problem of child labor is still very persistent. The age for admission to employment is often lower than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage, serfdom, and forced or compulsory labour are still a common phenomenon.⁶⁵
- (7) Discrimination in employment: the processes for recruitment, wage policy, admittance to training programs, employee promotion policy, policies of employment termination, retirement, and other aspect of the employment relationship are often biased with respect to race, skin color, sex, religion, political affiliation, union membership, nationality, social origin, deficiencies or handicaps.⁶⁶
- (8) Excessive amount of working hours: the hours of work often do not comply with applicable laws and industry standards. Workers are required to work in excess of 48 hours per week and

⁶² Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁶³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ Cfr. <https://www.fairwear.org/about-us/labour-standards/4-no-exploitation-of-child-labour/>.

⁶⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

are not provided with day offs on a regular basis. Overtime is often compulsory and not compensated with an increased rate.⁶⁷

Looking back to the first chapter's analysis, it is possible to see how each of these eight problems can be understood through the definition of the concept of social sustainability I elaborated at the end of the chapter; these eight issues provide concrete examples of how and under what circumstances social sustainability issues arise in the context of working conditions (in this case in the specific context of the fashion industry). More specifically, I have defined social sustainability as a context-dependent concept which addresses the living conditions of current and future generations by:

(1) meeting their basic human needs and enabling human flourishing: this is closely related to almost all of the eight issues listed; not having a decent salary, not working in safe conditions for physical or mental health, forced and child labor and all the other issues listed are all conditions that hinder human flourishing and also, more importantly, frequently jeopardize some basic human needs (I will explain more on how this happens in the next chapter);

(2) ensuring a minimum degree of social homogeneity, an equitable distribution of income, and equal access to resources and social services: this is linked specifically to the issue of discrimination described in item 7 as regarding gender discrimination (I will be more specific about this in the next paragraph), but it can be applied also to other contexts of discrimination towards other vulnerable social categories (e.g., children, migrant workers);

(3) guaranteeing the continuity of a human rights regime: the list of issues described is inextricably linked to the preservation of human rights, as each problem is related to one or more human rights that are jeopardized. As stated in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*⁶⁸, everyone has the right to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work which ensure: I) Fair wages and equal remuneration for work of equal value, without distinction of any kind, (with women, in particular, guaranteed working conditions equal to those enjoyed by men, with equal pay for equal work). II) A decent living for themselves and their families. III) Safe and healthy working conditions. IV) Equal opportunity to be promoted to a higher level of employment,

⁶⁷ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ United Nations General Assembly resolution 2200A(XXI), *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 16 December 1966. Link to the document: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cescr.pdf>

subject to no considerations other than seniority and competence. V) Rest, leisure, and a reasonable limitation of working hours, as well as paid periodic holidays and public holidays.

(4) allowing for stakeholder participation on the question of how social sustainability is conceptualized and implemented: this is correlated specifically to the issues of *union busting* (item 5) since workers are unquestionably stakeholders in the context of social sustainability issues concerning working conditions. Therefore restricting workers' freedom to organize themselves in associations or protest collectively deprives them of the opportunity to participate in the discussion about how social sustainability is to be conceptualized and implemented in concrete circumstances affecting them.

2.2 Gender discrimination, the condition of women in the global supply chain

Now that we have a comprehensive understanding of the major issues related to workers' rights in fashion consumer goods supply chains, I believe it's crucial to focus the attention on one particular issue that is intertwined with all of them. Such issue is the gender discrimination that women workers experience in the garment industry supply chains. The garment industry is and has historically been one of the most female-dominated industries in the world. Today, there are between 40 and 60 million garment workers in the world, with millions more working in other sectors of the supply chain, such as cotton fields and stores. Women make up the majority of those workers, making them the backbone of a business worth millions of dollars per year.⁶⁹ In this scenario, two opposite kinds of consequences can be observed:

- On the one hand, some argue that, despite the conditions in which women often have to work, this is a necessary step toward female emancipation. Women's inclusion into paid work has historically been one of the major causes driving emancipation and increasing gender equality. The globalized garment industry has an empowering effect because it allows women from low-income families to find work and earn a living wage. For example, Naila Kabeer, in an analysis about the working conditions of women in the garment industry of Bangladesh⁷⁰, underlines how

⁶⁹ Cfr. Iglesias T., Haverhals E., De Wee T., *The fashion industry needs to break with its gender and women rights problems*, in "Fashion Revolution", 2021. Link to the article: <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/the-fashion-industry-needs-to-break-with-its-gender-and-womens-rights-problems/>

⁷⁰ Kakuli A. & Risberg V., *A lost revolution? Empowered but trapped in poverty. Women in the garment industry in Bangladesh want more*, Swedwatch, Stockholm 2012.

having a job in cloth factories has helped women to gain recognition by their families as contributing economically to the family; it has also helped women to transform their mindset making them more conscious of their rights and giving them the opportunity to build a future of their own that didn't need to include marrying someone they didn't want.⁷¹

- On the other hand, even if it's important to acknowledge these positive gains, there are still a lot of unjust practices going on in this context. Factory owners take advantage of women's unequal status in society and of cultural stereotypes – to which women are often forced to conform – that portray women as passive in order to create a workforce that is even cheaper, more docile, and flexible. As a result, rather than challenging their social subordination, work in the clothing business reinforces it. Women's exploitation has allowed European fashion businesses to generate great profits while denying the most fundamental rights to the employees who make their garments. In this way these European firms have the possibility to step away from their responsibilities and pit producers against each other to acquire the best and most profitable contract by outsourcing production.⁷²

Therefore, the garment industry could really have great potential as an emancipatory force for women but it's crucial to understand that work is not sufficient in and of itself to promote development and combat gender inequality; the circumstances of such work is just as fundamental and must be reconsidered seriously and urgently.⁷³ Let's analyze more in depth what are the particular issues faced by women who work in the garment industry supply chains.

2.2.1 Gender gap in wages and job opportunities

The first tangible aspect of women's labor that is influenced by gender in the global textile industry is the living wage. In many countries minimum wage levels are barely above poverty wages, determined by what the market will pay rather than what families actually need. As a result, many women are unable to make enough money in a typical week's labor.⁷⁴ According to a 2019 report from the International Labour Organization, which investigated the garment sector in nine different

⁷¹ Cfr. *Ibidem* p. 23-24.

⁷² Cfr. Schultze E., *Exploitation or emancipation? Women workers in the garment industry*, in "Fashion Revolution", 2015. Link to the article: <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/exploitation-or-emancipation-women-workers-in-the-garment-industry/>

⁷³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ Cfr. Raworth K., *Trading Away Our Rights. Women working in global supply chains*, Oxfam International, Oxford 2004, p. 23.

Asian countries, the average raw gender pay gap in the garment sector is over 18%.⁷⁵ In Cambodia, for example, roughly 80% of the workforce in the garment sector is female, and the raw gender pay difference is approximately 4.5%. Similarly, around 58% of garment workers in Indonesia are women, with a raw gender pay disparity of approximately 6.8% in the industry. Moreover, we can find a much higher raw gender pay gap in Pakistan's clothing industry, where it is over 57.3%. In all these contexts age, education, and experience provide minimal explanatory value for reported gender salary differentials in the Asian garment sector, meaning that gender-based wage discrimination is likely to account for a large portion of the observed gender pay gap.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the industry tends to be male dominated and hostile to women also regarding the opportunities to fill higher profile jobs in the supply chain, such as management or leadership roles. Although the share of women in logistics and supply chain management roles at the manager and above level is increasing, it is still far below the percentage of men in the field.⁷⁷

The explanations for this kind of gender gap in wages and opportunities can be found in different factors, that can be categorized as material and non material constraints/obstacles:

- (1) Non material constraints/obstacles: these are the constraints related to the consideration that is given to the role of women traditionally in the different societal contexts. In fact, a big role in the determination of women's wage is played by the traditional roles that are assigned to them as a custom in many societies. Since women are perceived as doing less skilled jobs or needing less money in many cultures (as opposed to men who are seen as family supporters), it is acceptable to pay them less. This problem is frequently worsened by racial stereotypes that affect women belonging to minority or oppressed races, who end up being classified as capable of doing less skilled jobs and therefore not deserving the same amount of pay as the people belonging to the majority race. These kinds of stereotypes have an impact on the entire industry, as managers tend to hire women of a given race who can be paid less and controlled more easily.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Cfr. International Labour Organization, *Promoting Decent Work in Garment Sector Global Supply Chains. Highlights and Insights from the ILO project. Labour Standards in Global Supply Chains: A Programme of Action for Asia and the Garment Sector (LSGSC)*, Bangkok 2019, web version: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/projectdocumentation/wcms_681644.pdf.

⁷⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ Cfr. Zinn W., Goldsby T. J., Cooper M. C., *Researching the Opportunities and Challenges for Women in Supply Chain*, in "Journal of Business Logistics", Vol. 39, Issue 2, pp. 84-86, p. 84.

⁷⁸ Cfr. Tager S., *Women in the Global Clothing and Textile Industry*, Program in International Comparative Studies, Duke University April 18, 2016, pp. 25-26.

(2) Material constraints/obstacles: these are the constraints related to the practices and processes of the work field that are biased by traditional patriarchal mechanisms. For example, in many cases women may be subject to various limitations on their ability to optimize production on the job, such as domestic and care-taking demands. Issues of work-life balance seems to be still more problematic for women since research indicates that the time that women invest in parenting has increased in recent decades resulting in a persistent gap between the time mothers and fathers spend on parenting (according to statistics, women are taking care of their children for over a third of the time, while men are in charge for only 8% of the time).⁷⁹ Such limits may also restrict women's ability to look for better-paying employers to the same amount as males, giving companies monopolists dominance in labor markets and allowing them to lower salaries.⁸⁰ Moreover such constraints often inhibit the skill acquisition that results in being slower for women than for men, which results in less possibilities of getting promotion for better paid positions. This happens because not only factories tend to invest more in male workers by providing them with greater opportunities for training in new skills, but also women in the field have less possibility to be part of formal and informal professional networks. Since the majority of leadership roles are still filled by males, crucial networks are also dominated by men and the exclusion from such networks has a significant impact on women-owned enterprises as well as individual women's business careers. Managers are more likely to strike deals with professional colleagues they are familiar with. Although this is typically done for practical reasons (since interacting with people or companies you know is less risky), women frequently lack these ties.⁸¹

2.2.2 Gender and employment terms

As previously mentioned the garment industry in the last decades has created jobs for millions of women workers and in many contexts such jobs are desperately needed by them and their families. For many individual women their jobs have provided them with financial independence, increased equality in the household, and personal empowerment. But, at the same time, the business model

⁷⁹ Cfr. Zinn W., Goldsby T. J., Cooper M. C., *Researching the Opportunities and Challenges for Women in Supply Chain*, cit., p. 85.

⁸⁰ Cfr. Menzel A., Woodruff C., *Gender wage gaps and workers mobility: evidence from the garment sector in Bangladesh*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA 02138, June 2019, p. 1.

⁸¹ Cfr. Zinn W., Goldsby T. J., Cooper M. C., *Researching the Opportunities and Challenges for Women in Supply Chain*, cit., p. 85.

adopted by the fashion industry in the last decades, which centered on corporations outsourcing production through global supply chains that need low-cost and flexible labor, has caused national labor laws to be weakened or even not implemented in many nations. As a result, millions of women and men at the end of supply chains work in precarious employment positions with short-term contracts and limited access to social protection.⁸²

Precarious employment has long been a reality for poor people, especially in developing countries, but the impacts of this reality fall particularly hard on women. This happens for various reasons:

- Women in their families often have less education, land, and savings than their male counterparts and because of such inferior position, they are left with the major obligation for caring tasks at home and are more reliant on any paid work they can find.⁸³
- They are often stuck in low-skilled, low-paying occupations, which make them less able to renegotiate their domestic duties, so they are forced to do both paid and unpaid work. This compromises their struggle for more equality at home and in society, and leaves them with little time to participate in workers' organizations and social support groups.⁸⁴
- Precarious contracts typically lack the protections and benefits that women need to support their families, such as overtime limitations, rest days, sick leave, accident coverage, and maternity leave. The strain sometimes compromises their own health and well-being, as well as the futures of their children, if they do not receive this help, either from the government or from their employment.⁸⁵

Women are more likely to be recruited for short-term, seasonal, casual, or homework contracts that get renewed every year, every three months, or even every day and they end working long hours without the security and support that long-term employment provides.⁸⁶

In addition, benefits such as maternity leaves, medical leaves and pensions are very scarcely given to women hired on short term contracts since pregnancy and illness are considered as impediments to the profit of the company, resulting in unproductive employees who can be replaced. What happens then is that women who get pregnant, unwell, or who are getting too elderly, can be looped

⁸² Cfr. Raworth K., *Trading Away Our Rights. Women working in global supply chains*, cit., p. 17.

⁸³ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 19.

⁸⁴ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁸⁵ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

in and out of the industry due to the uncertain nature of their employment.⁸⁷ Women seeking work in some garment companies are often questioned if they are married, dating, planning to have children, or taking birth control. Some businesses will only hire unmarried women without children, while others may require each woman to sign a contract promising not to have children while working at the factory. To prove they are not pregnant, several industries require female workers to take pregnancy tests or even provide proof of their monthly menstruation.⁸⁸ These practices are in violation of women's rights to equal pay and the ability to make their own reproductive decisions, and they have significant health implications for women workers and their children. Workers who become pregnant may attempt to hide their condition for as long as possible, resulting in inadequate nutrition, poor prenatal care, and possibly exposure to work risks that can result in birth deformities, early birth, low-weight kids, and other health issues.⁸⁹ Therefore women find themselves to be vulnerable as a result of their biological characteristics.

2.2.3 Gender and working environment

Garment factory working conditions are notoriously dehumanizing for all employees, regardless of gender. Inadequate working conditions such as noisy, congested areas with limited ventilation and illumination or exposure to dust and harmful substances, as well as overwork and harassment issues are a danger for the safety of garment workers, both male and female. Nevertheless some of these and other dangers are not shared equally by men and women: due to disparities in gender-based roles and expectations, women garment workers face significant and frequently larger health hazards than males in the same job.⁹⁰

For example, very often, tools, machines and factory furniture are not designed with women workers in mind. Poor ergonomics (how well a particular task fits a worker's body) combined with long hours and unrelenting pressure to reach production quotas can lead to eye strain, fatigue and debilitating overuse injuries that are often left undiagnosed and untreated. Rather than adjusting tools and activities to prevent injuries, supervisors routinely dismiss worker complaints of pain and

⁸⁷ Cfr. Tager S., *Women in the Global Clothing and Textile Industry*, cit., p. 34.

⁸⁸ Cfr. Robbins M., Vickery K., *Sick and Tired, The Impact of Gender Roles on Garment Workers' Health*, in Nina Ascoly & Chantal Finney, *Made by Women Gender, the Global Garment Industry and the Movement for Women Workers' Rights*, Clean Clothes Campaign, 2005, p. 40-41.

⁸⁹ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 39.

discomfort, and fire workers who are unable to keep up with productivity. Workers may also be dismissed for seeking medical attention or recovering from an injury or illness.⁹¹ Moreover, basic hygiene in many factories is also overlooked, with lack of clean water, soap and clean toilets (all things that are especially harmful to women's health since regular access to clean toilets with soap and water during menstruation and pregnancy are a necessity to stay healthy).⁹²

Violence and sexual harassment are also two problems women often face in the workplace that men are usually more able to avoid. Supervisors, employers, police, state security forces, strike breakers, and others routinely threaten or use violence against workers to enforce the systemic violation of workers' rights. For organizing and demanding better working conditions, men and women are frequently harassed, beaten, and even killed. Women workers in particular often face humiliating searches, verbal and physical abuse, and sexual harassment, as well as the persistent threat of assault and rape in their communities.⁹³

Furthermore, many women employees continue to fulfill their gender role as caregivers of children and other family members at home before and after their shifts in the factory. Women employees' physical and emotional health can suffer as a result of their additional responsibility for others' well-being combined with the stressful work routine. Stress-related diseases, such as melancholy, headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, and exhaustion, are frequently caused by the combined pressures of manufacturing jobs and duties at home.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 40.

⁹² Cfr. *Ivi* p. 41.

⁹³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

⁹⁴ Cfr. *Ivi* pp. 42-43.

3. Ranking social sustainability issues

With all the information collected, I will now engage in an ethical assessment around the issues related to the labour standards described in the previous chapters. To do this, I will make use of the capability approach and, in particular, the version proposed by Martha Nussbaum, who focuses on human dignity as a value that can be used to rank the importance of the different capabilities. Therefore, I will firstly provide a brief explanation of Nussbaum's capability approach and her notion of human dignity. Then I will use these concepts to build a ranking of the issues related to workers' rights in consumer product supply chains, explained in the previous chapter, in order to evaluate which issues are more crucial than others and why. Secondly, I will extend my analysis to the gender discrimination issues by evaluating if the ranking proposed can work in the same way when it is related to women working conditions.

3.1 The Capability approach

The capability approach is a broad normative framework used for the analysis and assessment of well-being and social arrangements, policy development, and strategies for societal change. It can be used to assess a variety of elements of people's well-being, including inequality, poverty, an individual's well-being, and the average well-being of a group. It's important to note that the capability approach is not a theory that can explain such issues, it's rather a tool and a framework within which to conceptualize and evaluate these phenomena. The capability approach's defining feature is its emphasis on what people are effectively able to do and be (that is their capabilities).⁹⁵ In other words, the method considers each individual as an end in itself, inquiring not only about overall or average well-being, but also about the opportunities available to each individual.⁹⁶ It focuses on freedom of choice, arguing that the most important benefit that good societies should promote for their citizens is a range of opportunities, or substantive freedoms, which people can then choose to exercise or not.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Cfr. Robeyns I., *The Capability Approach: a theoretical survey*, in "Journal of Human Development", Vol. 6, Issue 1, Published online: 22 Jan 2007, pp. 93-117, p. 94.

⁹⁶ Cfr. Nussbaum M., *Creating Capabilities. A Human development Approach*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 2011, p. 18.

⁹⁷ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

The definition of *capabilities* lies in the answer to the question “What is this person able to do and to be?”. They are a combination of opportunities to choose and act: a person’s capability corresponds to the possible combinations of functionings that are possible for her to achieve. Therefore capability is a type of freedom linked not only to a person’s internal abilities, but also to the possibilities that a mix of human abilities and the political, social, and economic environment creates.⁹⁸

The capability approach is not a theory about human nature, and it does not make normative statements based on it. Instead it tries to evaluate which are, of the numerous things that human beings may gain the capacity to accomplish, the ones we should truly value. Which are the ones that a just society needs to make sure everyone can achieve?⁹⁹

3.1.1 The notion of human dignity

In order to decide how we should establish which capabilities we should focus on, which ones we should value more, Nussbaum introduces the notion of *human dignity*.¹⁰⁰ Her idea is that some living conditions provide people with a life that is worthy of their human dignity, while others do not. She claims that there are some areas of freedom that are so important that their absence makes life unworthy of human dignity. So considering the multiple spheres of human life in which people can choose and act, what does a life worthy of human dignity require? In order to answer this question Nussbaum gives a list of ten capabilities that must be provided to all citizens by a just political system (in particular by the government that is in charge of enabling people to have a decent and minimally flourishing life):¹⁰¹

1. Life: being able to live to the end of a standard human life; not dying prematurely or before one’s existence has been reduced to the point where it is no longer worth living.
2. Bodily health: being able to maintain good health, including reproductive health; being adequately nourished; and having proper housing.

⁹⁸ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 20.

⁹⁹ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 28.

¹⁰⁰ Cfr. *Ivi* p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Cfr. *Ivi* pp. 32-33.

3. Bodily integrity: being able to move freely from one location to another; being safe from violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic abuse; and having possibilities for sexual fulfillment and reproductive choice.
4. Senses, imagination and thought: being able to utilize senses, imagine, think, and reason and doing so in a manner that is informed and nourished by proper education. Being able to use imagination and thought to experience and produce works and events of one's own choosing, whether religious, literary, musical, or otherwise. Being able to make use of the mind in ways that are protected by guarantees of freedom of expression, including political and artistic discourse, as well as religious freedom. Being able to enjoy pleasant experiences while avoiding non-beneficial pain.
5. Emotions: being able to form attachments to things and people outside of ourselves; loving, grieving, and experiencing longing, appreciation, and justified resentment without having an emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.
6. Practical reason: being able to develop a concept of the good and participate in critical reflection about one's life planning. (This includes protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance).
7. Affiliation: (a) being able to live with and toward others, to express concern for other people, to participate in many forms of social interaction. (Protecting this capability implies safeguarding the institutions that create and sustain such affiliations, as well as the freedom of assembly and political speech). (b) Possessing the social foundations of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be recognized as a dignified being of equal worth to others. This includes non-discrimination regulations for race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, and national origin
8. Other species: being able to live in harmony and care for non-human animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. Play: being able to laugh, play, and engage in recreational activities.
10. Control over one's environment: (a) political: being able to effectively participate in the political decisions that govern one's life, to participate in politics, and to enjoy the right of free speech and association. (b) Material: being able to possess property and have property rights on an equal level with others; have the right to seek occupation on an equal basis with others; and being free from unreasonable search and seizure. Being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason, and forming genuine relationships with coworkers.

It is important to underline the fact that capabilities “belong first and foremost to individual persons”¹⁰² since this approach promotes the idea of each person as an end and not a means. This means that the purpose is to develop capabilities for each individual, not to exploit some people as a vehicle to develop the capabilities of others or the entire population.¹⁰³

The fundamental idea is then that respect for human dignity requires that every individual is provided with a reasonable threshold of capabilities, within all the ten areas mentioned above.¹⁰⁴

3.1.2 Urgent and less urgent capabilities

As we can observe a lot of the capabilities mentioned in this list proposed by Nussbaum are closely related to the social sustainability issues that have been described in the previous chapters. In particular they provide an idea of some of the capabilities that people are missing when they are dealing with issues related to their working conditions. Nevertheless, even if in Nussbaum’s theory the capabilities’ irreducible heterogeneity is vitally important (each is distinctive, and each must be secured and protected in individual ways) not all of the elements of the capability list seem to have the same weight in term of importance and urgency if we think about them in reference to our field of interest, that is labour conditions. Then, it seems crucial at this point to distinguish between elements that are truly essential and items that are important but not fundamental to determine the fairness of labor conditions:¹⁰⁵

Table 2 Urgent and less urgent capabilities

Urgent capabilities	Important but <i>less urgent</i> capabilities
Life	Emotions
Bodily health	Practical reason
Bodily integrity	Other species
Senses, imagination and thoughts	Play

¹⁰² *Ivi* p. 35.

¹⁰³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ All ten capabilities are important for workers’ overall well-being, but five of them are essential for workers’ individual well-being, while the others are not.

<i>Urgent capabilities</i>
Affiliation

<i>Important but less urgent capabilities</i>
Control over one's environment

While the first four fundamental capabilities are associated with the possibility for a person to function as a ‘normal’ human being, in the sense of being able to exercise the physical and mental potentialities that are available to every single individual, the last point regarding affiliation needs some further explanation. In the context of labour conditions, affiliation has an important role in enabling people to exercise their freedom of association and collective bargaining which are fundamental means for workers to fight for their rights. Rights that can include all of the other areas of capabilities described in the list. This means that *affiliation* plays a sort of architectural function, in the sense that it guarantees that workers can reclaim the other capabilities. In other words, when people are able to create workers’ associations or organizations for workers’ rights, they have a possibility to fight for all the other capabilities that are jeopardized in bad working environments. Also, I think that it’s important to note that the capability of *play* even if I consider it to be non-fundamental (when we look at it from a more general perspective on the category of workers), it will need to be reconsidered when I will analyze the issue of child labour, because in that case it gains a different value.

3.2 Ranking labour standards using Nussbaum list of capabilities

The division of capabilities into two lists should not be interpreted as considering non-urgent issues as not important, but rather as a way to assess which priority should be given to the problems that have to be solved, in order to be able to formulate the most effective and efficient strategies. All of the capabilities outlined by Nussbaum are significant for the life of individuals, but some of them, when they are jeopardized, have a greater impact on the proper development of human flourishing of employees in the garment industry and therefore need to be addressed with greater priority.

I will now focus on the list of fundamental capabilities in order to rank the issues related to labour standards, using the value of human dignity as a guiding principle to determine which living conditions (related to my area of interest, working conditions) provide people with a life that is worthy of their human dignity.

3.2.1 Life and health

It is a good starting point to begin by considering how we would analyze the list of issues considering *life* as the most fundamental capability. The capability of *life*, intended as the ability to live to the end of a standard human life and not dying prematurely (or before one's existence has been reduced to the point where it is no longer worth living) is the most essential feature to human existence to subsist as such. Nevertheless, this capability seems to be closely intertwined with *bodily health* and *integrity* since when the conditions for being able to maintain a good health and a body that functions in the best way possible do not subsist then the capability of *life* is at risk. So I think it's wise to consider these three capabilities as a whole, since its component parts often overlap with each other. Given this, what are the issues related to working conditions that jeopardize these three fundamental capabilities?

I think that the condition of *unsafetiness* and *unhealthiness of the working spaces* (item 2 in my list in chapter 2) that workers often face is the issue that has the biggest role in determining the non realization of the three fundamental capabilities described above. If there is too little attention (or none) given to all the things that could become dangerous for the health and safety of the workers (for example the safety of the building, of the equipment, noise exposure, correct ventilation) then the lives of workers are not protected and they're not given the importance they should have if they were considered according to the value of human dignity. We're not only talking about the immediate dangers that could be caused by poorly constructed buildings or inefficient equipment but also the long-term effects on workers' health that can be caused by exposure to risky conditions for prolonged periods (such as toxic substances in materials, or unhealthy air, very loud noises for extended time or inadequate workstations). For example, exposure, inhalation or even skin contact with hazardous substances can have very dangerous consequences on the health in the long term, in the same way in which a bad workstation that forces the worker to stay in an uncomfortable position for many hours can lead to serious problems in the years to come.

These kinds of problems regarding the health state of workers are also closely related to the issue of the *excessive amount of working hours* (item 8) that workers are often asked to cover. Working long hours is currently acknowledged to be the risk factor with the highest occupational illness burden, accounting for around one-third of the overall estimated work-related burden of disease.¹⁰⁶ WHO

¹⁰⁶ Cfr. World Health Organization, *Long working hours increasing deaths from heart disease and stroke: WHO, ILO*, 17 May 2021. Link to the article: <https://www.who.int/news/item/17-05-2021-long-working-hours-increasing-deaths-from-heart-disease-and-stroke-who-ilo>

and ILO estimate that 398 000 people died from stroke and 347 000 died from heart disease in 2016 as a result of working at least 55 hours a week in a first worldwide examination of the loss of life and health associated with working long hours. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of deaths attributable to heart disease and stroke grew by 42 percent and 19 percent, respectively. Furthermore, the number of people working long hours is rising, and it now accounts for 9% of the global population.¹⁰⁷ As a result of this tendency, even more people are at risk of work-related disability and early death, both endangering the capability of *life* and *bodily health* capabilities.

3.2.2 *Bodily health and bodily integrity*

Also related to health issues caused by working conditions is the issue of *child labor* (item 6) as the International Labor Organization describes child labor as “work that deprives children of their childhood, potential and dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development”.¹⁰⁸ This term includes any work that is harmful to children’s mental, physical, social, or moral well-being, or that interferes with their education. Despite a significant decrease from 1995 to 2000, child labor remains a big concern. In 2016, it was reported that around 150 million children under the age of 14 were working around the world, with the majority of them working in conditions that deny them a fun childhood and threaten their health.¹⁰⁹ According to research examining the effects of child labor, there are various links between child labor and negative health outcomes. Child labor is linked to specific exposures, such as toxic materials industries and HIV infection in prostitution. Furthermore, because child labor is linked to maternal illiteracy and poverty, children who work are more likely to suffer from malnutrition, which puts them at risk for a variety of illnesses.¹¹⁰ These circumstances clearly interfere not only with the capability of *life* of children and their *health* and *bodily integrity* capabilities but also with their capabilities of *imagination*, *thought* and *play* that are all extremely important capabilities for the harmonious development of the child.

¹⁰⁷ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ Hilowitz, J., Kooijmans, J., Matz, P., Dorman, P., de Kock, M., & Alectus, M., *Child Labour: A textbook for university students*. International Labour Office, 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Cfr. Ibrahim, A., Abdalla, S. M., Jafer, M., Abdelgadir, J., & de Vries, N. (2019). *Child labor and health: a systematic literature review of the impacts of child labor on child's health in low- and middle-income countries*, in “Journal of public health” Volume 41, Issue 1, Oxford (England) March 2019, pp. 18–26. Link to the article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdy018>

¹¹⁰ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

Another major issue that puts the capability of *bodily integrity* at risk is *forced labour* (item 4). Forced labour is defined by the International Labour Organization as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily”.¹¹¹ More specifically it can be understood as work that is done involuntarily and under threat of punishment. It refers to situations in which people are forced to work through violence or intimidation, or through more subtle means such as manipulated debt, the retention of identity papers, or threats of deportation to immigration authorities.¹¹² This form of modern slavery affects millions of individuals worldwide and it exists at all stages of the supply chain, from the picking of raw materials (like cotton) to the manufacturing of goods (like garments), and finally to the shipping and delivery to consumers.¹¹³ It is most common in industries with a large number of workers and little regulation, such as the clothing manufacturing supply chain and it frequently affects the most vulnerable and excluded groups, such as women, girls, children and migrant workers (the latter because they frequently do not speak the language, have few friends, have few rights, and rely on their employers).¹¹⁴ This issue clearly jeopardizes individuals’ *bodily integrity* because they are forced to work against their will, often without the protection of a contract, which does not guarantee a minimum number of hours. Furthermore, because the victims frequently fall into particularly vulnerable categories, they are frequently subjected to verbal and physical violence.

3.2.3 Bodily health and proper housing

If we take into consideration the capability of a person to live in proper housing and be adequately nourished, then the issues of *low living wages* (item 1) and *job security* (item 3) seem to be the most problematic. Issues of non-payment, underpayment or delayed payment of wages (all issues that can be and often are related to circumstances of absent job security like in cases of subcontracting or no contract at all) are still a common practice that often become a very big obstacle for workers to be able to provide for themselves and their families. A living wage is a human right recognized by the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: “Everyone who works has the right to just

¹¹¹ Cfr. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/definition/lang--en/index.htm>

¹¹² Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹¹³ Cfr. <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/slavery-in-global-supply-chains/>

¹¹⁴ Cfr. <https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/forced-labour/>

and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity”. More specifically, a living wage is a wage that is sufficient to cover a worker’s and her family’s basic needs while also providing some discretionary income.¹¹⁵ Such wage:

- applies to all workers, implying that there is no salary below the living-wage level
- Must be earned in a regular work week of 48 hours (not more)
- Is the basic net salary, after taxes and (where applicable) before bonuses, allowances or overtime
- Provides for a worker’s and their dependents’ basic necessities
- Includes an additional 10% of the costs for basic needs as discretionary income.¹¹⁶

However, despite this clear definition of the meaning of a just living wage, workers in the garment and sportswear industries are paid significantly less than this and still live in extreme poverty all over the world. Solutions to this problem cascade to plenty of other issues for workers, including excessive overtime, inadequate housing, inadequate nourishment and health concerns, the risk of child labor, and so on.

3.2.4 Freedom of expression

When we consider the capability that enables people to make use of the mind in ways that are protected by guarantees of freedom of expression (including political and artistic discourse, as well as religious freedom), the most prominent issues interfering with the realization of these capabilities appear to be both *unsafe working conditions* (item 2) and *union busting* (item 5). More specifically, what I’m referring to are the issue that arise when no attention is given to creating an environment where worker feel safe and free to speak their minds, a place free from any type of intimidation by the employer or other workers (physical abuse, threats of physical abuse, unusual punishments or discipline, sexual and other harassment). These kinds of issues are closely related not only to the *bodily health* and *integrity* capabilities but also to the possibility for the workers to be guaranteed the right of freedom of expression.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, union busting is particularly harmful to free expression because it deprives workers of the ability to form worker associations in order to assert their rights. When one or more rights are

¹¹⁵ Cfr. Bryher A., *Tailored Wages 2019, The state of pay in the global garment industry*, Clean Clothes Campaign Report, June 2019, (pdf: file:///Users/ele/Downloads/TailoredWages-FP.pdf), p. 10.

¹¹⁶ For this list Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁷ In particular in the list provided by Nussbaum this is also included in the description of the capability “control over one’s environment”, more specifically as the “political control over one’s environment”, to say it in Nussbaum terms.

violated, the union of several voices has more clout and can garner much more attention than a single worker's complaint. This is particularly important in situations where cultural or social biases come into play in the process of claiming rights, making it more difficult for people to express themselves when they are in difficulty (perhaps because they believe it is not important or that it is normal to bear certain abuses or fear consequences in the moment that they raise the issue)¹¹⁸. For all of these people, having someone who speaks for them and claims their rights is very important, because it can make their voice heard in situations where they are unable to make themselves heard for whatever reason.

3.2.5 Affiliation

Regarding the capability of *affiliation* I think that the most problematic issues related to the context of labour standards are the ones related to *freedom of association* and *collective bargaining* (related to item 5) and to discriminatory practices¹¹⁹ (both in the recruitment process and in the practices inside the workplace). As mentioned above, the possibility of exercising the right to associate, to protest, to strike and to collective bargaining has a crucial role for the safeguarding of the entirety of workers rights. The trend of governments and employers restricting workers' rights through violations of collective bargaining and the right to strike, as well as excluding workers from unions, has been aggravated in 2020 by an increase in the number of countries that make it difficult for unions to register, denying workers both representation and rights.¹²⁰ Workers in various nations have been subjected to disease and death as a result of government suppression of unions and failure of governments to respect rights and engage in social discussion.¹²¹ This, even if it's not a direct threat to the life or health of the workers, is a serious jeopardy to their possibility to defend themselves and their right to be provided with working conditions that are worthy of their human dignity.

3.2.6 Final ranking

¹¹⁸ There is an extensive literature on this subject, which is commonly referred to as "adapting preferences". Cfr. Golden L., Altman M., *Why do people overwork? Oversupply of hours of labour, labour market forces and adaptive preferences*, in Burke R. J., Cooper C. L., *The Long work hours culture, causes, consequences and choices*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2008, pp. 61-83, p. 62.

¹¹⁹ item 7.

¹²⁰ Cfr. *2020 ITUC Global Rights Index, The World's Worst Countries for Workers*, International Trade Union Confederation Report (pdf: https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_globalrightsindex_2020_en.pdf), p. 4.

¹²¹ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

Given the previous analysis, it is useful to provide a final ranking by dividing the problems analyzed into those that are *extremely important* and must be solved with greater urgency than the others and those that are *important* but require less urgency. This ranking can be helpful for companies and other stakeholders in making decisions about the feasibility and urgency of policies that can improve the conditions of garment workers:

Extremely important:

Unsafe and unhealthy working spaces

Excessive amount of working hours

Child labour

Forced and compulsory labour

Important, but less urgent:

Low living wage

Bad contracts and no job security

Union busting

Discrimination in employment

3.3 Comparative assessment of gender discrimination issues

Given all the data provided in chapter two regarding the majority of garment workers to be women, it would be unreasonable to not include a reflection about the specific condition of women in this analysis. Is this evaluation about labour standards different when we talk about women workers? Are some issues different in terms of importance and urgency for women? Are some issues affecting some capabilities for women to a bigger extent than they're affecting the same capabilities for men workers? My answer is yes, when it comes to particular labour standards and the category of women we need to resort to some different evaluations. This is due to the fact that women have different needs in some circumstances because of:

- their natural physical conformation that puts them in the position of having different needs than men;

- the social role that is traditionally assigned to women that brings with it not only discriminating stereotypes but also duties outside of work that men often do not have to face.

But let's dive deeper into such aspects and see what different considerations we have to make when we consider working conditions standards in relation to women workers.

3.3.1 Health needs and bodily integrity

The analysis about the condition of women workers in the garment industry made in chapter two highlights several reasons why women, due to disparities in gender-based duties and expectations, face significant and often higher health risks than men in the same workplace. Inadequate working conditions, as well as overwork and harassment issues, pose a greater risk to women garment workers than they do to males. More specifically, there are two major issues that endanger the realization of women workers' capabilities of *health* and *bodily integrity* (and consequently also the capability of *life*):

1. Hygiene conditions of workplaces: in order to stay healthy during periods of menstruation and pregnancy women need to have access to clean water, soap and clean bathrooms
2. Inappropriate equipment: women workers' 'features' are rarely considered while designing tools, machinery, and manufacturing furniture. One example of this may be the arrangement of the workstations not suitable for pregnant women who often find themselves having to maintain uncomfortable positions, which can be particularly difficult as well as harmful during pregnancy. In the long run, this, combined with poor ergonomics (how well a particular task fits a worker's body) and long hours of labor, can contribute to a variety of health complications.
3. More vulnerability (in comparison to male workers) to sexual assault and violence

3.3.2 The "double day"

Because of the social role that in many societal contexts is traditionally assigned to women as caregivers, they continue to fulfill their gender role as unpaid carers of children and other family members before and after hard days and nights in the factory. This mechanism has two major consequences on women capabilities:

1. Their physical and emotional health suffers as a result of their additional responsibilities for others' well-being, preventing the three fundamental capabilities as well as the capability of

emotions (understood as the ability to love and care for other beings without having an emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety) to be fulfilled.

2. Working a job and then returning home to handle all of the domestic labor is a great burden that prevents access to many of the other capabilities on the list, such as employment, political engagement, physical and emotional health, and a variety of friendships.¹²²

¹²² Cfr. Nussbaum M., *Creating Capabilities. A Human development Approach*, cit., p. 36.

4. Practical solutions for improving social sustainability in the fashion industry

As a conclusion of my analysis about labour conditions and my ethical assessment of them, I want to conclude my reflection by trying to give an overview of some practical solutions for the improvement of labour conditions that could make a difference in terms of social sustainability if implemented on a large scale. Hence, in this chapter I will first engage in an analysis about what it entails for a fashion brand to be socially sustainable in order to identify the best solution/strategy that can address working conditions. To do this, I will take inspiration from a method developed by the *Fair Wear Foundation*, which is a non-profit organization that has developed a method to assist brands in improving working conditions.

Secondly I will talk about a tool that was recently introduced in the fashion world and that, if applied on a large scale, could lead to great improvements in the context of social problems related to the garment industry supply chain. This tool is the digital passport for clothes, which many companies are already starting to use and which is already attracting a lot of interest from both fashion brands and consumers.

So the first part of the chapter will focus on what brands and manufacturers in the garment industry can do to take action towards social sustainability; while the second part will focus on a solution that brings into play both the brands and the consumers themselves, pushing them to produce and buy in a more responsible way, taking into account the origin of the garments and the working conditions of those who made them.

4.1 Who are the defenders of garment workers rights?¹²³

Thanks to the knowledge gained from the contents and analyses of the preceding chapters it is now possible to draw some conclusions regarding social sustainability in the fashion industry. First of all, for both developed and (particularly) developing countries, the global fashion industry is a vital source of employment, money, and development. Therefore, we can claim that the garment sector plays a significant role in many countries' potential economic and social growth. In particular, on a social level, employment in the garment industry supply chain has provided jobs for many people living in poverty; moreover, women's inclusion in paid work in this context has been one of the

¹²³ Part of the content of paragraph 4.1 and 4.1.1 are taken from an article I've written for Manufy. Cfr. Saylon E., *Garment Worker's Standards: 3 Organizations That Are Helping Businesses Do Better*, Manufy, May 31 2022. Link to the article: <https://www.manufy.com/blog/garment-workers-standards-3-organizations-that-are-helping-businesses-to-do-better/>

major causes of emancipation and increasing gender equality in many developing countries, as it has enabled women from low-income families to find work and earn a living wage.

Secondly, while it still is important to recognize such beneficial developments, there are still many unjust practices taking place in this context. The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013 brought to light the issues surrounding garment industry working conditions in a dramatic way, raising the awareness of both fashion brands and society by pushing them to question where their garments came from. That event served as a wake-up call and a starting point for many organizations and companies, with the issue of improving the safety and working conditions of apparel employees becoming a primary concern and goal from that point onwards.

Since then, throughout the years, various organizations have arisen in response to human rights breaches impacting workers all over the world, particularly in the garment industry. Such organizations are working tirelessly to improve the lives of garment workers all around the world and to help them achieve a better future as quickly as possible. They do so by focusing on humane supply chains, exposing thoughtless practices, and putting pressure on big players to rectify things in this context. Many of these organizations are actively pressing corporations and governments all around the world, notably in Southeast Asia, Africa, Central America, and Eastern Europe, to take responsibility for their employees and residents.¹²⁴ Their shared goal is to not only take quick action on labor-related issues, but also to set a standard for the industry, showing fashion brands what fair working conditions and worker rights should look like.

4.1.1 The Fair Wear Foundation

One of the most famous and most influential European-based organizations working for the improvement of garment workers labour conditions is the *Fair Wear Foundation*.¹²⁵ Founded in 1999 in the Netherlands, Fair Wear was created with the goal of assisting in the development of a society where workers' human rights are respected, where freedom of association drives change, and where the global value chain is a source of safe, dignified, and fairly rewarded labor.¹²⁶ They

¹²⁴ Cfr. RCGD Team, *7 Organisations working to improve labour conditions in fashion amid the Covid-19 crisis*, 17th April 2020. Link to the article: <https://www.rcgdglobal.com/2020/04/17/7-ngos-working-to-improve-labour-conditions-in-fashion-amid-the-covid-19-crisis/>

¹²⁵ <https://www.fairwear.org/>

¹²⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

focus in particular on the sewing, cutting, and trimming processes in the context of garment manufacture, as these are the most labor-intensive components of the supply chain.

They work as a multi-stakeholder project connecting and gathering brands, factories, employees, trade unions, NGOs, and other industry influencers because they believe that ambitious alignment is required to enable the garment sector to become more equitable for all.¹²⁷ More specifically, they work in collaboration with a network of 140 brands in the fashion industry who are dedicated to discovering a fairer way to produce clothes; together they build practical solutions and show how improvement can be realized. The foundation of the collaboration between Fair Wear and all of its members is the *Code of Labour Practices*¹²⁸ (or Labour Standards). Eight labor standards (the same eight issues I have described in the second chapter) originating from ILO Conventions and the UN Declaration on Human Rights form the backbone of this code.

The method developed by Fair Wear proposes a three-level check strategy for gaining actual insight into members' performance on the eight labour standards:

1. At brand level, to determine whether present business practices and management decisions are likely to generate problems in the future;
2. At factory level, to support better labour conditions and inspect the working place and the working environment;
3. And finally, by speaking with and hearing directly from garment workers.

These comprehensive evaluations enhance the credibility of its member companies and serve as a springboard for actual transformation. Dwelling on the analysis of the steps of this strategy can help us understand how, thanks to the help of organizations such as Fair Wear, fashion brands can take action towards social sustainability in the garment industry supply chain.

4.2 How fashion brands can take action on social sustainability

In its mission to achieve fair labour standards while collaborating with different stakeholders in the fashion industry, Fair Wear focuses on the shared responsibility between factories and brands conscious about the fact that together they influence labour conditions. They provide support to brands to help them analyze how they are performing with respect to labour standards in the

¹²⁷ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹²⁸ Cfr. <https://www.fairwear.org/about-us/labour-standards>

factories where they produce their clothes.¹²⁹ They do this both by giving them informative material to increase their awareness about the problems related to the working conditions of the people that produce their product and by providing them with corresponding training. Managers, supervisors, and employees receive training in order to enhance their understanding of workplace norms as well as effective communication and dispute resolution strategies. Moreover, Fair Wear brands perform audits of their suppliers' working conditions and the results of these audits allow brands and factories to agree on how to address the issues that were discovered during the audits.¹³⁰ The Fair Wear method combines these three instruments (information, training and audits) into building a strategy for each labour standard to be improved.

4.2.1 Methods and tools to improve each labour standard¹³¹

Let us analyze more in depth, using the Fair Wear method as an example, what brands can do in order to improve their performance with regard to each of the eight labour standards:

1. Payment of a fair living wage

Both Fair Wear and brands are conscious of the fact that paying a fair living wage to garment workers is going to have a positive impact both on the factory side and the workforce side. It is not in the workers' best interests for the factory to go bankrupt, and it is not in the factory's best interests for workers to be forced to work long hours simply to make ends meet. Moreover, paying living salaries makes sense from a business point of view as well since workers that are well-rested, well-fed, and healthy just perform better. They are more likely to be loyal to their employer, and the quality of their work performance improves as a result. Therefore a good strategy to improve a brand's performance with regard to living wages is first to communicate more with their workers (employees are the best judges on how much they need to survive), so that managers should be able to cooperate with workers and workers' representatives to agree on salary levels that work the best for both parties involved. Secondly, Fair Wear provides brands with an online tool called the *Wage*

¹²⁹ Cfr. <https://factoryguide.fairwear.org/factory-guide/chapters/chapter-1/about-this-guide/>

¹³⁰ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹³¹ The content of this paragraph and each point of labour standard is taken from the Fair Wear Method explained in the Fair Wear Foundation Factory Guide.

*Ladder*¹³² which allows members to compare the wages earned at any factory to a variety of salary benchmarks creating a clear visual that illustrates where a factory's salaries fall short of these benchmarks. In this way brands, suppliers, and workers' representatives can compare current salaries to living wage projections, and begin discussions about how to boost wages in regular increments.¹³³

2. *Employment is freely chosen*

During the investigation of the status quo of brands and factories in Fair Wear's production nations, one of the most common findings is that factories often have no formal and written policy regarding the "Employment is Freely Chosen" labor standard. The best thing brands and factories can do is to work together to create one, taking into consideration the main issues that need to be protected by such policies, for example:¹³⁴

- The worker works in this factory because he or she wants to, and he or she has the option to leave whenever they want or need to.
- Overtime is done at the workers' request, not against their will.
- Family members of the worker are free to visit during working hours in the event of an emergency.
- Security personnel keep an eye on the movement of persons both inside and outside the factory. Workers will not be forced to remain in the factory.

3. *There is no discrimination in employment*

Managers are increasingly recognizing that effectively decreasing discriminatory practices is a key tool for enhancing efficiency and productivity. Employers must uphold the human right to equal and fair treatment for all garment employees. Therefore brands and factories should ask themselves if they already have a hiring policy in place that includes clear non-discrimination and equal opportunity procedures. And if the answer is no, the best starting point for them to begin to improve on discrimination issues is to reflect upon the main points a fair hiring policy should have regarding such issues, for example:

¹³² Cfr. <https://www.fairwear.org/resources-and-tools/wage-ladder>

¹³³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹³⁴ Examples taken from the Fair Wear *Factory Guide*. Link: <https://factoryguide.fairwear.org/factory-guide/chapters/chapter-1/about-this-guide/>

- All factory workers are hired and promoted based on their ability, not their gender, cultural background, race, religious views, social position, or nationality.
- Employees are recruited using the factory's existing workforce's network. This reduces the possibility of prejudice by external recruiters since the existing workforce's network can apply a fair recruiting method that has been developed within the company and keep evaluating it on a constant basis.
- Female workers are not compelled to take a pregnancy test during recruiting or employment, and there is no wage discrimination; workers are allowed to pick their working positions if they demonstrate competence.

4. *No exploitation of child labour*

In a lot of developing countries, in low-income families in which parents are unable to provide adequate food for the family, it is natural that the children assist by working as well. Therefore some garment firms hire children because they want to provide people the chance to get out of poverty; other factories do it unintentionally because children use fake IDs. Child labor is not permitted, regardless of the employer's intentions or the wishes of the parents. It is illegal, and rightfully so, to deny children their right to play and attend school.¹³⁵ Putting children to work is not a long-term solution to poverty. Moreover, child labor can affect a business by scaring away potential consumers and tarnishing the reputation of present customers.

So, what can companies do if they discover child labor in the factory? First of all, do not simply send the children away; the employer is somewhat accountable for what happens to them next because they are in fact employees. Secondly, collaborate with your customer(s) (the companies/brands) to get the kids out of the factory; the Fair Wear Foundation asks that its member companies help their suppliers in this process and do not 'cut and run' when issues arise. As a result, collaborate with the brand and FWF to answer questions that will aid you in understanding and changing the problem, for example:

- Who are these children?
- Who are their families?
- What is the status of their family?
- Are there any schools in the area? And are they available?

¹³⁵ I am aware of the fact that there is an ethical debate ongoing around child labour and the fact that in some cases, declaring child labour illegal, might have negative consequences for the children involved. Cfr. Krummel D., Siegfried P., *Child labour ethics through the prism of utilitarianism and deontology*, Published in: "Open Access Library Journal" (OALJ), Vol. 8, No. 2, Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 2021, pp. 1-14.

- How can I get them (back) to school?
- Why did they get hired? And who is responsible for this?
- What can you do to improve your hiring process?

5. *Freedom of association and collective bargaining*

It is easier to handle labor issues when there is a good and effective communication channel between workers and employers. When employees have the freedom to communicate their needs and claim their rights, it is simpler for employers to collaborate with them and find solutions that work best for all parties involved. More specifically:

- Allowing employees to bargain (collectively) about their working relationship allows them to express their contract desires. Collective bargaining through unions allows the employer to include all of his or her employees' requests without having to spend a lot of time negotiating individual contracts. Unions can assist workers in learning about their rights and responsibilities by providing training and information.
- The best wages are those negotiated between workers - or their representatives - and factories. Negotiating with a union rather than individual workers is more effective if the employer and his or her customers want to get closer to paying livable wages. Moreover, when employers negotiate with unions rather than individual employees, the resulting contract (about wages, discrimination of any kind, or any other issue concerning working conditions) is more stable.
- Safety measures alone will not suffice to avert tragic occurrences. Factory workers should be engaged and informed, and they should have an independent voice to highlight issues and enforce remedies.
- Reporting on discrimination issues through unions offers workers a voice and allows plant management to discuss issues with unions and maintain a steady workforce. Workers can learn more about this topic by joining a trade union. It will help the atmosphere and productivity if employees feel comfortable to discuss this topic.
- When unions are formed, they can act as a focal point for discussing and agreeing on issues of long working hours and adjusting shifts so that the workload does not require overtime.

6. *No excessive working hours*

In order for the brands to receive transparent information about what is going on in their factories it is necessary to establish a good partnership relationship with the suppliers. It is the factory that has the role of planning shifts and production timetables, so for the brand to be aware if workers are

working for an excessive amount of hours it is necessary to have good communication between the two parties. In this way, the brand can understand in what way the production and placing of orders can be adjusted in order to not put too much labor on the shoulders of garment workers.

7. Safe and healthy working conditions

Both physical safety and the feeling of being in a safe environment are very important in the workplace. So it's crucial to focus the attention on all the things that could become dangerous for the health and safety of the workers (for example, the safety of the building, of the equipment, noise exposure, correct ventilation). This can be done via three approaches:

- a. Engineering solutions: reducing the source of exposure by replacing or changing equipment, ventilation systems, and processes. (Examples: Choose low-noise machinery, lubricate equipment, place a sound wall or sound curtain.)
- b. Administrative approach: includes adjusting work schedules, policies, and work practices. (Examples: limit the length of time workers spend near a noise source, reduce noise exposure through distance, and provide quiet locations where workers can take a break, according to the law.)
- c. PPE solutions: When neither an engineering nor an administrative strategy is practicable, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that can reduce chemical or noise exposure is used. Workers will need to be trained on how to use personal protective equipment.

The same level of attention should also be given to creating an environment where workers feel safe and free to speak their minds, a place free from any type of intimidation by the employer or other workers (physical abuse, threats of physical abuse, unusual punishments or discipline, sexual and other harassment). This can be done using different strategies, for example:

- Implementing anti-harassment policies and committees
- Creating workers helplines (so that workers have a reference when they have question about their rights or want to file a complaint anonymously)

8. Legally binding employment relationships

The lack of legal contracts in garment factories is often linked to an unstable relationship between the brand and the suppliers. If there is lack of communication and a factory doesn't know the specifics about upcoming orders, it can not have a precise idea of the amount of people that will be needed to get the job done, and this will lead to less job security for those people because depending

on orders more or less workforce will be necessary. Hence, for brands the best solution to this problem is to engage in long-term, solid partnerships with the factories with whom they collaborate. They are considerably more likely to commit to frequent orders if they communicate freely with the brands and work jointly to improve labor conditions.¹³⁶ This will make it easier to provide more security to employees.

4.2.2 Why is a ranking of social issues useful for companies?

These practical strategies provided by the Fair Wear Foundation offer companies and brands the possibility to analyze in a structured way any problems that may arise at a social level in the supply chain and propose practical solutions to begin solving any issues that arise during this analysis. What is lacking, in my opinion, is a priority order to be followed when deciding to tackle the problems described above - one at a time - with the goal of solving them. In addition to the strategies proposed by Fair Wear, I believe that the ranking of problems provided in the third chapter can be an extremely useful tool for companies that decide to commit to improving labor standards. I believe that companies and brands can benefit from addressing these issues in a priority order because they do not always have the financial or structural resources (for example, enough specialized staff dealing with these issues or manpower on the field in the case of factories in foreign countries) to address and resolve all the issues that arise. I also believe that, even if a company is committed to improving working conditions for its workers, the list of problems to be solved can be very long and complex, which can be overwhelming when viewed as a whole. If, on the other hand, it is approached with a structured and ethically motivated order of priority, the work to be done may be less overwhelming and more feasible, because the ranking can serve as an action-guiding tool.

4.3 How consumers can contribute to social sustainability

Now that we have an overview of practical solutions that can be implemented by the brands in order to improve labour conditions, it is useful to focus on the side of the consumer. Even if consumers have a smaller role in determining the conditions of garment workers, they can make a difference if

¹³⁶ I acquired this information from a conversation with one of my collaborators, who works as a content creator at the company where I interned this year. This statement is based on her personal work experience at Manufy, a start-up that works in the field of sustainability in the fashion industry.

they are informed about what is behind the clothes they're buying and therefore have the means to make more conscious choices. Nevertheless a necessary condition for them to do so is to have access to the information regarding the labour behind each item they're planning to buy. A possible solution for bringing more transparency about the supply chain not only to the final consumer but also to brands themselves (to keep track of the journey of their products) has recently appeared on the market.

4.3.1 The digital passport for clothing: a possible solution for supply chain transparency¹³⁷

When we buy something, we don't always know where it was made, what processes it went through, or how it impacted the environment. This is due to the fact that often not even the brands themselves are aware of such information. Only a small portion of brands have complete awareness of their whole supply chain, and even then, they don't always make it public. Only a few fashion firms publish some of their raw material suppliers, while others reveal their processing facilities further down the supply chain so that relevant information on the production process is missing.¹³⁸ However, this is not entirely attributable to unethical brand conduct, as huge businesses may find it difficult to maintain control over their sourcing operations due to their size and complexity. They place orders from numerous sources at the same time to ensure that they have enough hands to meet their requests. Often, the manufacturers with whom they collaborate give their approval, even though they lack the capacity to meet all of the demands made by the brands, so they outsource, and the brands lose control over who creates their garments. This type of approach, which may be a genuine struggle for businesses, has become standard in the industry.

Fortunately, technology is on its way to assisting us in finding a solution to this issue. It will enable us to give clothes their own digital identity, allowing consumers to be informed about the garment's life cycle from both an environmental and social standpoint. What I am talking about here is the concept of giving each fashion item a digital passport in the form of a QR code that provides detailed information about the product and shows the consumer the path it took to get into his or her hands. Consumers may unlock the garment's history by just opening up their phone camera, revealing details about the product's origin, purchasing, manufacturing method and ethics,

¹³⁷ Cfr. Saylon E., *Digital Passports For Clothing: A Possible Solution For Supply Chain Transparency?*, Manufy, May 11th, 2022. Link to the article: <https://www.manufy.com/blog/digital-passports-for-clothing-a-possible-solution-for-supply-chain-transparency/>

¹³⁸ Cfr. <https://theidfactory.com/>

environmental impact, transportation, and aftercare.¹³⁹ The continuous identification and monetization of clothing products through circular business models such as renting, repairing, reselling, and recycling will be possible with this kind of product information. More precisely, information regarding the material components of clothes, such as fibers and colors, can aid towards more efficient material management during the disassembly and recycling phases.¹⁴⁰

This new revolutionary solution has the potential to be a very useful tool for firms looking to improve their long-term procedures. Not just to gain a better understanding of their manufacturing processes and to understand the environmental and social impact of each item, but also to build a more trustworthy relationship with product users. This tool allows companies to add value to their products by supplementing them with a media channel that ties the consumer to the item's history. In this way, a more lasting and trustworthy relationship can be established between the buyer and the product, as well as with the brand, which may utilize it to communicate its values and promote sustainability and circularity.¹⁴¹

If implemented on a large scale (and not only in the fashion industry but also for many other consumer goods) this can really become an instrument that can make a difference in the impact of products on both social and environmental sustainability. Moreover, it is an innovative way to give more power to the consumer who will have the possibility to decide responsibly and ethically what they're buying and who will also have a role in directing the market towards more sustainable solutions.

4.3.2 Why should consumers feel responsibility towards social issues?

The digital passport for clothing can be a useful tool for people (in this case, consumers) to become aware of their connections to complex global production processes, which frequently involve inequalities in labor conditions along the supply chain. By becoming connected to unfair labor practices through their purchasing behavior, they acquire special additional moral responsibilities to contribute to reforming such practices or addressing the hardships suffered by victims of

¹³⁹ Cfr. Hanson J., *Brands are now communicating to consumers about sustainability through QR codes - here's how*, in "Forbes", May 25 2022. Link to the article: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janehanson/2022/05/25/brands-are-now-communicating-to-consumers-about-sustainability-through-qr-codes--heres-how/?sh=3c09ec89c917>

¹⁴⁰ Cfr. <https://www.eongroup.co/circular-product-data-protocol>

¹⁴¹ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

wrongdoing as a result of them.¹⁴² However, the moral significance of individual consumer responsibilities has received little analytical examination.¹⁴³ Why should we believe that such responsibilities exist? Why should consumers feel responsible for the social issues associated with the clothes they purchase?

One way to answer this question is by considering Iris Marion Young's *social connection model*¹⁴⁴ which is a method of allocating political responsibility that holds people accountable for addressing structural injustice when their actions contribute to the processes that produce unjust outcomes.¹⁴⁵ Responsibility for structural injustice is thus grounded in the fact that people are linked to one another through processes that occur both within and across state borders. In particular, the specific example of global supply chains connects producers in developing countries with consumers in developed countries.¹⁴⁶ According to Young, political responsibility for structural injustice necessitates that the actions of individuals, as well as institutional actors such as businesses and governments, be constrained with "regard to [that action's] cumulative effect on others" and informed by an obligation "to promote the well-being of less powerful and privileged actors".¹⁴⁷

I believe that the digital passport for clothing can be a good complement to the strategies proposed by Fair Wear because it would include consumers' commitment by proposing a way for them to also contribute to the improvement of labor standards.

¹⁴² Cfr. Barry C., Macdonald K., *How Should We Conceive of Individual Consumer Responsibility to Address Labour Injustices?*, in Dahan Y., Lerner H., Milman-Sivan F., *Global Justice and International Labour*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 1.

¹⁴³ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁴ Young I. M., *Responsibility for Justice*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, p. 95.

¹⁴⁵ Cfr. Barry C., Macdonald K., *How Should We Conceive of Individual Consumer Responsibility to Address Labour Injustices?*, cit., p. 4.

¹⁴⁶ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁷ Young I. M., *Responsibility for Justice*, cit., p. 151.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I investigated the major issues concerning working conditions in the fashion industry's supply chain and then determined, through an ethical assessment, which of these issues require to be solved most urgently and for what reasons. I started my reflection by focusing on the definitions of the key concepts of the matter at hand: I first examined the concept of sustainable development before narrowing my focus to the more specific aspect of social sustainability. Then, I concentrated my analysis on social sustainability issues related to the fashion industry. As a result, I compiled a list of eight labor standards issues, which I then examined one by one. Once I had a clear picture of these issues, I undertook an ethical assessment of each with the goal of determining a priority scheme in terms of labor standards. I did this by applying Nussbaum's capability approach, using her list of ten capabilities to determine which capabilities were affected (and to what extent) by each of the problems related to working conditions in the fashion industry. I ended up with a ranking of what I believe are the most urgent problems to be solved because they put some fundamental capabilities at risk, and those that are important but not so fundamental (as they jeopardize some capabilities that are less fundamental). During my research, I decided to pay special attention to the working conditions of women in the fashion industry because women make up more than 80% of the workforce in this industry. I investigated the issues (related to working conditions in the fashion industry) that women faced more than men as a result of their unique natural characteristics and those stereotypically assigned to them on a social level. Furthermore, during my ethical evaluation, I assessed the differences in priority to be given to labor standards to be resolved in the specific case of female workers, i.e. how some problems relating to working conditions put women's fundamental capabilities at greater risk than men's.

Finally, I wanted to incorporate a practical component into my ethical reflection in order to discuss the applicability of my recommendations. Therefore, I dedicated my final chapter to describing practical strategies that companies and brands can use to take action on social sustainability issues. In doing so, I was inspired by the method developed by the Fair Wear Foundation, an organization that works to help brands improve labor standards in their supplier factories. I concluded that using an order of priority to solve the numerous issues, such as the ranking I proposed in the third chapter, can make the Fair Wear method even more efficient. I then described a second practical solution to the problems of social sustainability in the fashion industry, the digital passport for clothes, which involves not only brands but, more importantly, consumers. I argued that it is critical that consumers become aware of their responsibility in relation to these issues by employing Iris Marion Young's *social connection model*.

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