**Statement: The impact of COVID-19 on the people who make our clothes**

As the world faces this pandemic in unified isolation, we at Fashion Revolution aim to shed a light on how the unfolding situation is affecting the people who make our clothes. Retailers are shutting their doors around the world, encouraging their customers to shop online instead. Yet the reality is that as we are forced to stay in our homes many of us are financially burdened by layoffs or new childcare responsibilities, and the desire to buy new clothes feels like a distant dream.

For Fashion Revolutionaries, this unique set of circumstances can hopefully bring about the #LovedClothesLast movement that we have been pushing for many years. Given the level of clothing overproduction that preceded this crisis, we hope that our days indoors can bring about revolutions in caring for our clothes better, mending and making clothing, and adopting a mindset of longevity when it comes to our wardrobes.

While we have been encouraging an end to overconsumption for many years, we also know that in the face of this unexpected halt in manufacturing, it is the most vulnerable, lowest paid people in the fashion supply chain that feel the worst effects. IndustriALL, the global trade union which works to give workers around the world a voice, says that millions of garment makers have already lost their jobs as a result of the virus and have no access to social or financial safety nets to help them weather this storm. Writing for the [Business of Fashion](https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/opinion/op-ed-why-fashion-must-help-factories-and-their-workers-survive-coronavirus), Bangladeshi garment manufacturer Mostafiz Uddin reminds us, “Poverty is a killer too, and many more people die from poverty than from COVID-19”.

In the global fashion industry, brands typically pay their suppliers weeks or even months *after* delivery, rather than upon order. This means that suppliers usually pay upfront for the materials or fibres used to make the products brand buy from them.

In response to the pandemic, many major fashion brands and retailers are cancelling orders and stopping payments for orders already placed, even when the work has already been done, [taking no responsibility for the impact this has on the people working in their supply chains.](http://www.industriall-union.org/covid-19-an-existential-crisis-for-the-garment-industry) Factories are left with little choice but to destroy or keep hold of unwanted goods already made and lay off their workers in droves.

[Bloomberg reports](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-23/europe-retailers-cancel-1-billion-of-bangladesh-garment-orders) that about 1,089 garment factories in Bangladesh have had orders cancelled worth roughly $1.5 billion due to the coronavirus outbreak. The [AWAJ Foundation](http://awajfoundation.org/) says that many factories in Bangladesh have been shut down indefinitely. Some workers were given less than a month’s salary as severance and many others have received nothing at all. Nazma Akter the executive director of AWAJ explains, “These workers now don’t know how they will take care of their families in the coming days – how they will manage costs for food, rent and other necessities. They can’t even imagine what they’ll do if they or a family member needs medical treatment for COVID-19. The meager income these workers earned was barely enough to cover their living costs, and as a result, they have little to no savings set aside to deal with a crisis such as this.” Meanwhile, [Labour Behind the Label estimates](https://labourbehindthelabel.org/brands-must-urgently-take-steps-to-minimise-impact-of-the-coronavirus-on-garment-workers-health-and-livelihoods/) that 10% of factories in Yangon, Myanmar are now closed.

On the other side of the world a similar situation is unfolding. The Garment Worker Center describes how garment makers in Los Angeles are often not eligible for unemployment benefits. This is partly because the underground nature of the industry, such as “off the books” work, makes applying for paid family leave or disability insurance uniquely challenging in the face of the pandemic.

[IndustriALL](http://www.industriall-union.org/covid-19-an-existential-crisis-for-the-garment-industry) reports that while many fashion brands are offering compensation packages for retail and office workers who face layoffs due to this crisis, they are failing to protect the workers in their supply chains who are also suffering from the loss of income. Furthermore, the [Solidarity Center](https://www.solidaritycenter.org/covid-19-maquila-workers-shouldnt-bankroll-employers/) believes that the inability to meet together in-person will inhibit workers’ abilities to unionise and collectively bargain for their rights.

Of course, fashion isn’t just created in factories. Fashion is craft, artisanship and things that are often made by hand in informal environments. According to the [Artisan Alliance](http://www.artisanalliance.org), artisanal craft is the second largest source of employment across the so-called developing world. [WIEGO](https://www.wiego.org/covid19crisis) estimates there are around two billion informal workers around the world that lack basic labour, social and health protections. As a result of COVID-19 threatening global trade flows, workers cooperatives, artisan groups, local crafts-based communities, home-based workers, agricultural workers and farmers face desperate economic circumstances.

At Fashion Revolution, we have always tried to be honest with our community about the problems that persist within the global fashion industry. Having formed in response to major human catastrophe - the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 - we are no strangers to exploitation or disparity within the industry. But we have been, and will continue to be, focussed on solutions and dedicated to finding ways for citizens around the world to make a positive difference. We’ve already seen several visionaries within the fashion industry pose the question: what kind of world do we want to see emerge after this crisis is over? For us, the answer lies in our [Manifesto for a Fashion Revolution](https://www.fashionrevolution.org/manifesto/), and we’ll be spending the next months (and years) mobilising our community to take action to build this future of fashion.

Meanwhile, in this current crisis, we believe that our capacity for empathy is strengthened by our shared global experience. While we may be stuck indoors, using social media our voices can still be amplified, especially when we speak up together. That’s why we’re asking our global community to be louder than ever. To ask #WhoMadeMyClothes? and demand that fashion brands protect the workers in their supply chain just as they would their own employees, especially during this unprecedented global health and economic crisis.

If we do nothing, the fashion industry will simply return to business as usual when this is all over. Instead, let’s come together as a revolution and build a new system that values the wellbeing of people and planet over profit. This means that right now we should stand together to protect and support the people who make our clothes.

As Wangari Maathai said in her famous 2004 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, "In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."

In this spirit, we are asking you to take three crucial actions to support the people who make our clothes, especially during this unprecedented global health and economic crisis.

1. Send a letter to your favourite fashion brands and demand that they honour the orders they have already placed with their suppliers and ensure that the workers making their products are protected, supported and paid properly during this crisis. We have created a pre-populated letter template that you can quickly and easily use to contact brands by email or via social media.

|  |
| --- |
| Dear [brand],I am your customer, and I love your style.However, I am very worried about the impact that the coronavirus is having on the people working in your supply chain. Bloomberg News reports that major fashion brands have cancelled orders worth roughly $1.5 billion across more than 1,000 garment factories in Bangladesh since the start of the outbreak. Elsewhere there are reports of fashion brands cancelling orders and stopping payments for orders already placed. What effect is this having on garment makers who are already paid so little and have no social safety net to fall back on?I understand that this is causing an unprecedented economic crisis and that people like me may be buying fewer clothes right now. But, now is not that time to turn your back on your suppliers and their workers.So, please tell me #WhoMadeMyClothes and what you are doing to honour existing contracts and ensure that the people working in your supply chain are protected and compensated throughout this crisis?Sincerely,[Name] |

1. Give money directly to non-profit organisations that are providing support to garment makers that have lost their jobs. We recommend giving money to:
* [AWAJ Foundation](http://awajfoundation.org/) - A non-profit organisation founded and led by garment workers in Bangladesh that provides support to over 740,000 workers. This includes legal aid, healthcare, union organising, labour rights training and industry and policy advocacy. Donations will go directly to workers who have lost their jobs. This will mainly be in the form of cash disbursements to make sure that their basic needs for food and shelter are met. If you would like to make a contribution then please write to: awaj@dhaka.net.
* [The Garment Worker Centre](https://garmentworkercenter.org/) - A non-profit organising and community space in Los Angeles that supports tens of thousands of low paid garment workers, especially immigrant and undocumented workers, women of colour, and their families. 100 of their worker members have sounded the alarm bell about losing their jobs and reduced hours due to COVID-19 as well as lack of hygienic conditions in the factories that are still operating, many now making PPE. You can donate here: <https://garmentworkercenter.org/>
1. [Donate to Fashion Revolution](https://www.fashionrevolution.org/donate/) so that we can continue asking brands the tough questions and mobilising citizens to campaign for a fashion industry that respects workers and protects our planet and continue to amplify the stories of garment workers around the world.

We will be updating this statement daily with news about how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the people who make our clothes. We will also add new fundraising appeals that support garment makers during this time. If you want us to know about any other fundraising efforts, please contact: bronwyn@fashionrevolution.org.