

## The Reality of Ethical and Sustainable Fashion in Africa

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How ethics and sustainability are struggling to take hold of the African fashion industry



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## | Introduction |

The African fashion scene is robust and deeply complex with embedded cultural symbolism. The discourse about sustainable and ethical fashion is often Eurocentric, leading to a one-sided view of its reality in other parts of the world. It is important for scholars to have a holistic, globalized understanding of sustainable and ethical fashion to analyse how its principles are implemented in the African continent.

To put it simply, sustainable and ethical fashion is an approach that aims to minimize the fashion industry's negative impact on the environment. Furthermore, it involves maximizing the benefits of the fashion industry to promote the ethical treatment of workers. This is done through allocating fair wages to all labourers involved in the design and manufacturing process. It also includes the production of high-quality fashion products that last for a long time and can either be upcycled or wither back to their organic state when discarded.<sup>3</sup> These authors describe it perfectly:

“Sustainability involves complex and changing environmental dynamics that affect human livelihoods and well-being, with intersecting ecological, economic, and socio-political dimensions, both globally and locally.”<sup>4</sup>

The above description emphasizes the complexity of sustainability and its relation to the global fashion industry. The African fashion industry should be highlighted because it is often

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<sup>3</sup> On the compostability of fibers, Interview with Ria Ana (Brand owner and designer at Lila Bare), Nairobi Kenya, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Maria Angela Maina (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 10 November 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Joy A, Sherry Jr, J F Venkatesh, A Wang, J & Chan R, ‘Fast Fashion, Sustainability, and the Ethical Appeal of Luxury Brands (Fashion Theory, 2012), <<https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340749707123>>, p 274 accessed on 11 December 2020.

overlooked. While African fabrics are highly sought after by foreign fashion brands and designers, the cultural significance and narratives of the locals are specifically omitted from the current buzz about sustainability.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the demand for ethical fashion is a niche market, consisting of about 1% of the global fashion industry.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, the African continent currently accounts for 1.6% of global trade with its fashion industry valued at 1.3 trillion US dollars.<sup>7</sup>

During our research and interview process with various African fashion designers, it was clear that issues involving sustainability ran deeper than we initially predicted. This paper analyses the challenges African fashion designers face.

### | **Attitudes about Sustainability** |

To get to the root of sustainability, it is important to understand how people in East Africa are educated on the matter. Most public schools do not teach about environmental issues, so there is little awareness in the community regarding this. Africans are rarely penalized for littering or doing things that could potentially harm the environment. Many East Africans express that they do not deeply think about their consumer habits until they become well travelled and highly educated.

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<sup>5</sup> Africa.com, 'African Fabrics Have Shaped Global Fashion But Are Often Overlooked This Conference Aims To Change That' (Africa.com February 2020) <<https://africa.com/african-fabrics-have-shaped-global-fashion-but-are-often-overlooked-this-conference-aims-to-change-that/>> accessed 13 December 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Crane D, 'The Puzzle of the Ethical Fashion Consumer: Implications for the Future of the Fashion System,' (International Journal of Fashion Studies, 2016), <[https://doi.org/10.1386/inf.3.2.249\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/inf.3.2.249_1)> accessed 11 December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> African Development Bank Group, 'African Economic Outlook 2020' (African Development Bank Group 2020) <<https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/african-economic-outlook-2020>> accessed 12 December 2020.



Simple things like using reusable bottles, paper grocery bags, or reusable cutlery are seen as an unnecessary effort. For instance, you can drive through Kampala, Uganda and throw an empty bottle of water out of your car window with no consequences whatsoever. Many local Ugandans view this as a sort of ‘freedom’ to do as they please because their environment is prodigious and they do not think small things like that could harm it. When you see this kind of attitude towards environmental sustainability, it comes as no surprise that many African consumers do not see the value of sustainable fashion. The main goal is to get something that looks expensive and stylish but costs little money.

Fashion brands that practice ethical fashion can barely break-even compared to those that give consumers cheap, low-quality products. The principle of consumer sovereignty comes into play here because when the demand is for cheap products, then the supply has to meet that expectation.<sup>8</sup> If the suppliers fail to do that, then their businesses suffer.

However, one good thing about consumer sovereignty is that it can be swayed. This can be done through aggressive advertising and media campaigns that aim to promote an alternative approach to fashion. This is something that can be implemented in the future, but for now, the education systems are not catering to this need for knowledge about environmental sustainability. More young Africans need to be taught about the consequences of their actions as early as possible. Joel Meshak, brand owner and designer at Naivaa in Kenya shares the same sentiments. In his view, he initially believed that sustainable fashion was solely about

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<sup>8</sup> McNeill L, & Moore R, ‘Sustainable Fashion Consumption and The Fast Fashion Conundrum: Fashionable Consumers and Attitudes to Sustainability in Clothing Choice’ (International Journal of Consumer Studies, 2015) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12169>> accessed on 11 December 2020.



sending out a message through designs.<sup>9</sup> His growth as a designer enlightened him on our individual responsibility to protect the environment from harm. In this regard, he has been upcycling materials from his previous collections and learning how to use plant dye.<sup>10</sup> Thus, teaching young Africans on sustainability will lead them to be more responsible consumers and designers as a result.

### | **Fashion Designers' Moral Dilemmas** |

Generally, fashion designers who try to push ethical fashion practices have a hard time doing so in societies that prefer fast fashion over high-quality and sustainable products. Without a doubt, this also happens within Africa. Albeit the African fashion industry is unique since its operation is intertwined with different interfering factors such as economic performance, politics and societal perceptions of ethics and sustainability. We aim to propose a solution that could improve the state of the African fashion industry in the future. However, this cannot be understood without first analysing the state of affairs today.

We interviewed well-established African fashion designers who expressed the challenges they face in keeping their brands ethical and sustainable. One of the biggest issues they face relates to pricing. When fashion is sold at a reasonable price then workers can get fair compensation for their work. Ethical fashion is fashion that uses long-lasting, reliable material. It is fashion that is designed with skill and expertise to give consumers their money's worth. It is not cheap because good quality materials can be slightly expensive. When all these things are put into

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Joel Meshak (Brand owner and designer at Naivaa), Nairobi Kenya, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Kimberley Mureithi (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 27 November 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Joel Meshak (Brand owner and designer at Naivaa), Nairobi Kenya, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Kimberley Mureithi (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 27 November 2020.



consideration, it is evident that participating in ethical fashion as a consumer could be a privilege that not many people can afford. Due to higher prices, consumers are less likely to engage with ethical fashion brands.<sup>11</sup>

One particular fashion designer, Judy Ngotho, faced great challenges because of this. Her fashion brand specializes in real leather bags that are made with high-quality material. Consumers appreciate the value and durability of her products but few are willing to pay for them. Many consumers would rather buy a replica at 70% less. The appearance of authenticity and exclusivity is highly valued amongst East African consumers, but not many pay for high-quality fashion products. This is problematic because it leaves fashion designers like Ngotho in a moral dilemma. It leaves them with a choice between making profits, and building a sustainable business versus losing potential customers because of high prices.

The efforts of ethical fashion designers are undermined by their counterparts who engage in greenwashing. Greenwashing is:

“The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Crane D, ‘The Puzzle of the Ethical Fashion Consumer: Implications for the Future of the Fashion System,’ (International Journal of Fashion Studies, 2016), <[https://doi.org/10.1386/inf.3.2.249\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/inf.3.2.249_1)> accessed 11 December 2020.

<sup>12</sup> T D Gallicano, ‘A Critical Analysis of Greenwashing Claims’ (2011) PRJ 1, 1 <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305438010\\_A\\_Critical\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Greenwashing\\_Claims](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305438010_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Greenwashing_Claims)>.





The rise in green-living and environmental awareness within the last ten years has caused a shift in the operation of fashion brands and companies that wish to match their products up to this new movement. A 2019 survey by The Harvard Business Review, points out that 65% of people responded positively to purchasing from purpose-driven brands that advocate for sustainability.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is no surprise that some fashion brands would rather disguise their real intentions under the guise of helping save the environment.

This conundrum is well explained by Ria Ana, the brand owner and designer at Lila Bare in Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>14</sup> Ria explains that consumers have a right to know about a brand's product creation cycle to prevent falling victim to greenwashing. The right to question a brand that claims to be ethical and sustainable only comes from a point of genuine concern from consumers. According to the Global Web Index statistics, 70% of the survey respondents claim that an individual consumer is most responsible for the future of the environment.<sup>15</sup> Consumers actively take part in the sustainability practice by purchasing items with full knowledge of their origin and composition. Greenwashing only propagates the unethical and unsustainable fashion production cycle and reduces the efforts of the brands that practice sustainability religiously. Ria Ana states that ethical and sustainable brands ought to be transparent to pave the way for the true effects of sustainability to be seen and felt.

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<sup>13</sup> K White, D J Hardisty, R Habib, 'The Elusive Green Consumer' (Harvard Business Review 2019) <<https://hbr.org/2019/07/the-elusive-green-consumer>> accessed 12 December 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Ria Ana (Brand owner and designer at Lila Bare), Nairobi Kenya, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Maria Angela Maina (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 10 November 2020.

<sup>15</sup> K Young, 'The Rise of Green Consumerism: What do Brands Need to Know?' (Global Web Index October 2018) <<https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-week/green-consumerism/>> accessed 12 December 2020.



From the above, it is apparent that the odds are stacked against sustainable African fashion brands. Yet, they choose to stay true to their cause against adversity. It is no small feat to choose the right thing to do for the benefit of the environment and society. Nevertheless, these moral dilemmas may only get more complex with the increasing interest in green consumerism and interest in African fabrics, textiles and fashion products.

### | **The Initiatives of African Fashion Designers** |

It is important to note that ethical and sustainable fashion does not begin and end with profit making. True sustainable fashion positively affects society as a whole. One way to achieve this is through providing more stable employment opportunities for women, who prop up the fashion industry and comprise approximately 80% of garment workers.<sup>16</sup> The 2019 Care Impact Report shows that women garment makers benefit equitably from ethical supply chains by brands that are transparent and held accountable for the same.<sup>17</sup>

In this respect, workers' rights are a crucial aspect to take into consideration when evaluating African fashion brands. It is well known that the fashion industry is criticized for its disregard of human rights by subjecting their workers to poor working conditions, low wages and unequal treatment. Ethiopia comes to mind because it has the world's lowest paid workers with the minimum wage capped at 26 US Dollars per month, yet they make supplies for brands such as

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<sup>16</sup> Labour Behind the Brand, 'Gender' <<https://labourbehindthelabel.org/our-work/gender/#:~:text=The%20vast%20majority%20of%20garment,approximately%2080%25%20%E2%80%93%20are%20women>> accessed on 15 December 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Care, 'Made by Women: Impact Report 2019,' (Care, 2019) <[https://care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/mbw\\_impact\\_report\\_2019\\_final.pdf](https://care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/mbw_impact_report_2019_final.pdf)> accessed on 15 December 2020.





H&M and Hanes.<sup>18</sup> Betselot Zewge Tefera, brand owner and designer at Zemenay sheds light on the issue and establishes that she collaborates with other small businesses to help in the creation of her final fashion products to establish fair payment for every job done.<sup>19</sup> Every person then runs his/her part of the production chain enabling him/her to pick a fair price for each job or design done on his/her part.

Other fashion designers who are making an effort to initiate this change through their brands include Frank Wesley's fashion brand that designs a social enterprise where a percentage of profits goes to funding programs for the youth. Another similar effort is seen with Judy Ngotho's work, where she educates her workers on the value of their work and teaches them important skills that give them more employment opportunities.

In addition, Ria Ana observes the ethical treatment of her garment workers by the provision of meals and observation of work hours in the Lila Bare cottage studio. Daniel Ssenyonjo, brand owner and designer at ArnsVille Apparel in Uganda also practices social inclusion by giving each worker an equal amount of profit.<sup>20</sup> Collectively, these efforts are a depiction of what true sustainability looks like through respecting fashion as a socio-cultural enterprise.

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<sup>18</sup> AT Editor, 'Fashion brands benefit, but report finds Ethiopians are world's lowest-paid workers' (Africa Times, May 2019) <<https://africatimes.com/2019/05/08/fashion-brands-benefit-but-report-finds-ethiopians-are-worlds-lowest-paid-workers/>> accessed 15 December 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Betselot Zewge Tefera (Brand owner and designer at Zemenay), Ethiopia, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Maria Angela Maina (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 26 October 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Daniel Arnold Ssenyonjo (Brand owner and designer at ArnsVille Apparel), Uganda, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Maria Angela Maina (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 4 November 2020.



## | **Wealth Inequality and its Effect on Sustainable Fashion** |

The continuous growth of wealth inequality is evident in many African countries where the upper middle class and the wealthy are financially able to consume sustainable fashion products. This is not always a possibility for low-income people, and unfortunately, this means that the majority of Africans end up missing out on high-quality and long lasting products.

It is important to remember that not all Africans are unwilling to pay for high-quality, long-lasting fashion products. In fact, not all of them are unaware of the impact their actions have on the environment. The higher their economic status, and the more education they obtain, the more likely they are to live sustainable lifestyles and support fashion brands that align with those beliefs. The problem, however, is that they are the minority, and we need a bigger portion of the population to deliberately change consumer spending habits to promote a more sustainable lifestyle.

Leaving out the middle class and lower class consumers is unwise because they are the majority in most African countries. The issues in the fashion industry are not just about the way fashion designers handle their businesses, consumer behaviour also plays an important role in maintaining sustainable and ethical fashion in a country.

## | **The Possible Future of Sustainability** |

Something needs to be done in order to reach the hearts and minds of young people. Educating them on the importance of sustainable and ethical fashion before they join the field could greatly influence the future of African fashion. Many of them just jump into the fashion industry by trial and error. Passion drives them and money sustains them, but education could



transform their approach to the fashion industry for decades to come. There has been extensive research on the subject of sustainable fashion. However, current studies do not have an academic understanding of sustainable fashion from a holistic perspective.<sup>21</sup>

A short online course on ethical practices in fashion could be used to certify people who are new to the fashion industry. In this way, they would gain the right information from **the start**. This online course is a great option because it means that busy parents or businesspersons can find the time to study anywhere in the world. The aim is to make sure that they learn the important practices and principles that keep fashion sustainable and ethical. These things are not taught to many fashion designers in Africa. Those who can afford to go to private schools can get this information, but others cannot. Even tailors and manufacturers should be made aware of the importance of their work because, without them, fashion would just be an idea. If key players are well equipped with this knowledge, the major issues within the sustainable fashion movement could gradually disappear.

Consumer sovereignty is another aspect that should be considered because consumers can be swayed according to what marketers want. If sustainability is pushed as a media agenda, it could influence millions of Africans to re-think their day-to-day decisions that have a negative impact on the environment. In this way, the media can act as a curator of taste to slowly shift narratives about sustainability. If it is presented as something responsible, fashionable, and cool, perhaps people will be more willing to think twice before burning their used clothes in their backyards or buying clothes worth less than 1 US Dollar.

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<sup>21</sup> Henninger C E., Alevizou P J, & Oates C J, 'What is sustainable fashion?' (*Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 2016).



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### **Fashion Designer Interviews**

Interview with Betselot Zewge Tefera (Brand owner and designer at Zemenay), Ethiopia, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Maria Angela Maina (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 26 October 2020.

Interview with Daniel Arnold Ssenyonjo (Brand owner and designer at ArnsVille Apparel), Uganda, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Maria Angela Maina (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 4 November 2020.

Interview with Frank Wesley (Brand owner and designer at Frank Wesley Africa), London, UK via Zoom platform. Conducted by Pearl M. Kasirye (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 21 October 2020.



Interview with Joel Meshak (Brand owner and designer at Naivaa), Nairobi Kenya, via Zoom platform. Conducted by Kimberley Mureithi (researcher at The Thinking Watermill Society) on 27 November 2020.

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