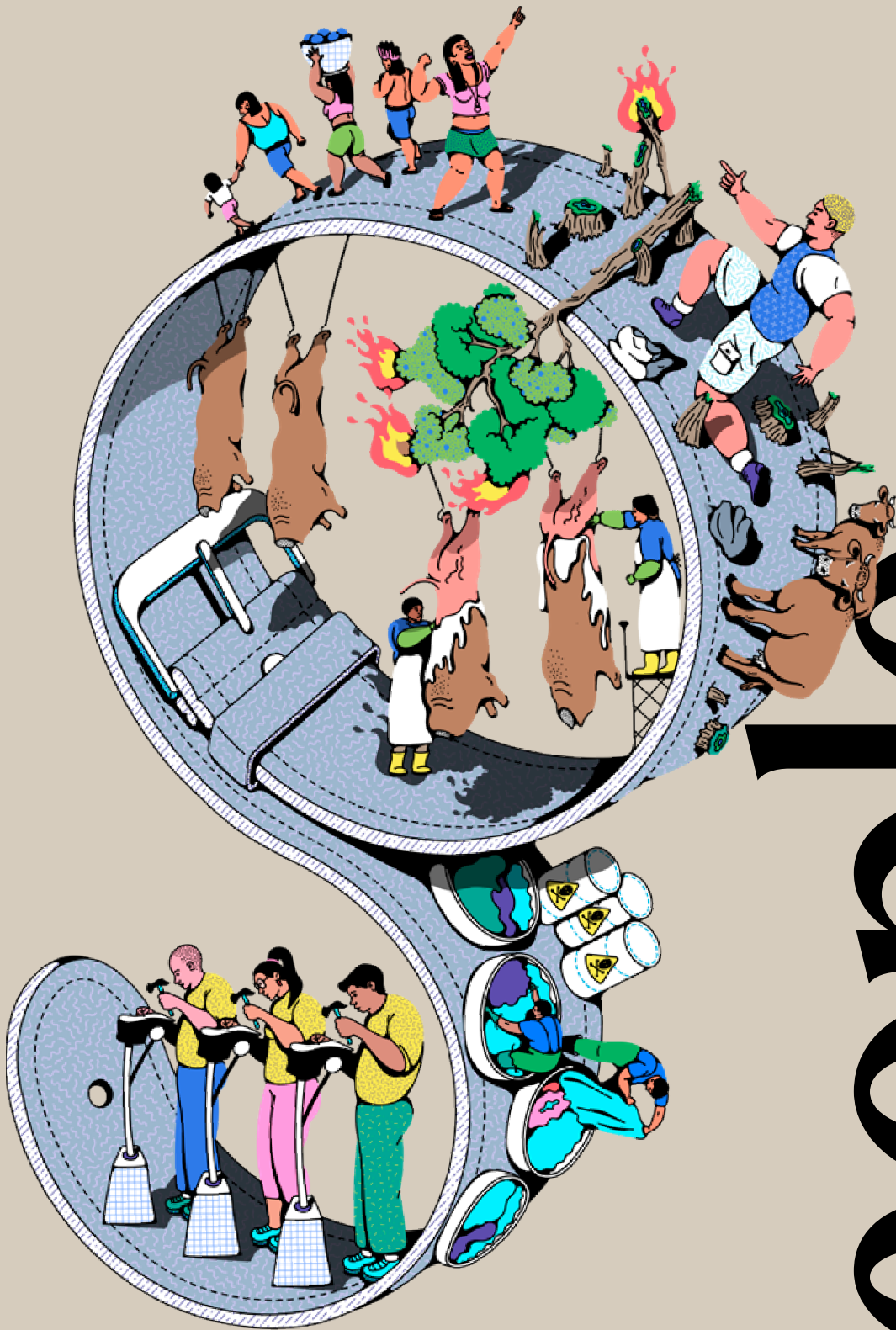


Report summary for  
the fashion industry



Leather's  
impact on —

PEOPLE

# Introduction

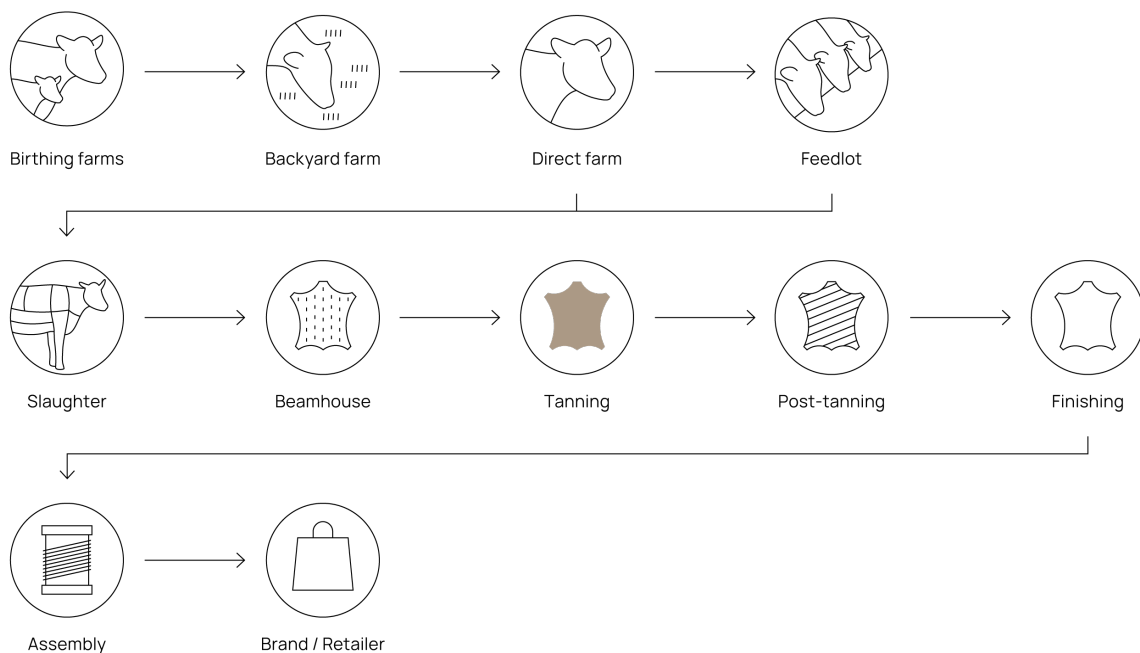
While leather has long been considered an essential part of fashion, the many harms and injustices caused by its production require us to move on.

Today, over 1.4 billion cattle have been bred and stand on once biodiverse land until they are slaughtered for production purposes. Leather is now often coated with plastic or tanned with harsh, carcinogenic chemicals, while the ever-increasing scale of the fashion industry is utterly unsustainable. And leather supply chains are highly industrialised, harmfully implicating many workers and surrounding communities, while making luxury and mainstream brands massive profits.

In the first of our report series, discover the devastating impact of leather production on people and what actions you can take to demand a total ethics fashion system.



# Supply chain overview



## Leather is not a by-product

Despite common misconceptions, leather is not simply a worthless by-product- its a co-product.

While the leather industry likes to claim skins are tanned as a kind of waste reduction initiative, thus supposedly making leather neither cruel nor unsustainable, this is not the case. Leather is a valuable co-product, with even meat and dairy industries labelling it as such. The leather industry itself states the massive income losses involved in losing skin sales, which means the use of leather in products helps to fund harms across the entire supply chain.

## Following the supply chain of human harms

In leather garment, shoe and accessory supply chains, we need to consider not only garment workers, but also tannery workers, slaughterhouse workers and farm workers. Without all of these people, leather products would not exist. Policy-makers must take into account the exploitation of these people.

# Supply chain tiers explained

**Fashion and leather supply chains are made up of several tiers, with each step farther away from consumers and even brands themselves becoming more murky and hard to trace.**

**Here's where products come from before they are ready for sale:**

Tier 1: Where clothes are made



This is where finished leather is stitched into shoes, jackets and bags.

Tier 2: Where finished materials are made



If we're really simplifying things, this is where raw hides are turned into leather (though this often occurs over a number of facilities and even countries, breaking up the tier further).



# Supply chain tiers explained

Tier 3: Where raw materials are processed



If we were talking about a plant-based material like cotton, this would be 'ginning', but for leather, this is a slaughterhouse.

Tier 4: Where raw materials are made



This is the 'farm level', where cattle graze before their slaughter. Again, this tier can be broken up further, with cattle moving from farms to feedlots, and with 'breeder farms' involved.

Fashion Revolution's 2022 Fashion Transparency Index found that of the 250 largest brands and retailers, just 48% disclose where their first tier manufacturing occurs (where garments are made). Just 32% share information on their material processing facilities, and a shocking 12% disclose where their raw materials are sourced from. This lack of transparency is concerning, given how common exploitation is across fashion's (leather) supply chains.

Leather tannery workers face disproportionately high rates

of cancer due to their work, slaughterhouse workers are more likely to battle with a mental illness similar to PTSD and people working on cattle ranches in leading bovine skin production countries like Brazil are known to be trapped in a system of forced labour. Members of the public surrounding each tier of the leather supply chain are troubled by the overflow of the industry's issues, too, particularly through pollution.

While human exploitation is unfortunately far from unique to leather supply chains, and is

instead the reality across the majority of fashion production, some of the harms caused across leather production are uniquely dangerous and unavoidable. While wages and working conditions can and should be improved across all fashion supply chains, some issues can only be stamped out of fashion by moving beyond particular modes of production. While worker safety in tanneries and the rights of farm workers can and must be improved, only a just transition away from leather will solve the industry's harms to humans.

## Garment workers and leather

The exploitation of garment workers is an industry-wide issue, with leather goods being no exception. Whether cheap fast fashion or expensive and supposedly luxurious supply chains are explored, there is often illegal employee treatment, underpayment and abuse.

- While it is more common to hear about human rights violations in fashion supply chains across countries such as Bangladesh and China, similar issues exist in western countries that are sometimes portrayed as 'more ethical'.  
including those used by brands selling more expensive leather goods should not be assumed to always use fair labour, either. Brands including Burberry and Chloé have been tied to allegations of serious worker exploitation in Italy, where their leather goods are made.
- Italy is a major producer of shoes. The 'Made in Italy' label has become synonymous with fine artisan crafting, and in turn, assumptions of ethical labour are wrongfully made.
- While cheaper materials used by fast fashion brands such as Zara and SHEIN are more commonly known to be linked to unjust labour, luxury materials

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## Tannery workers

“They make you work more than normal, they kill you at work and then send you away. You come home from work with a sore, aching body”

– Mbaye, 41-year-old migrant tannery worker in Italy.

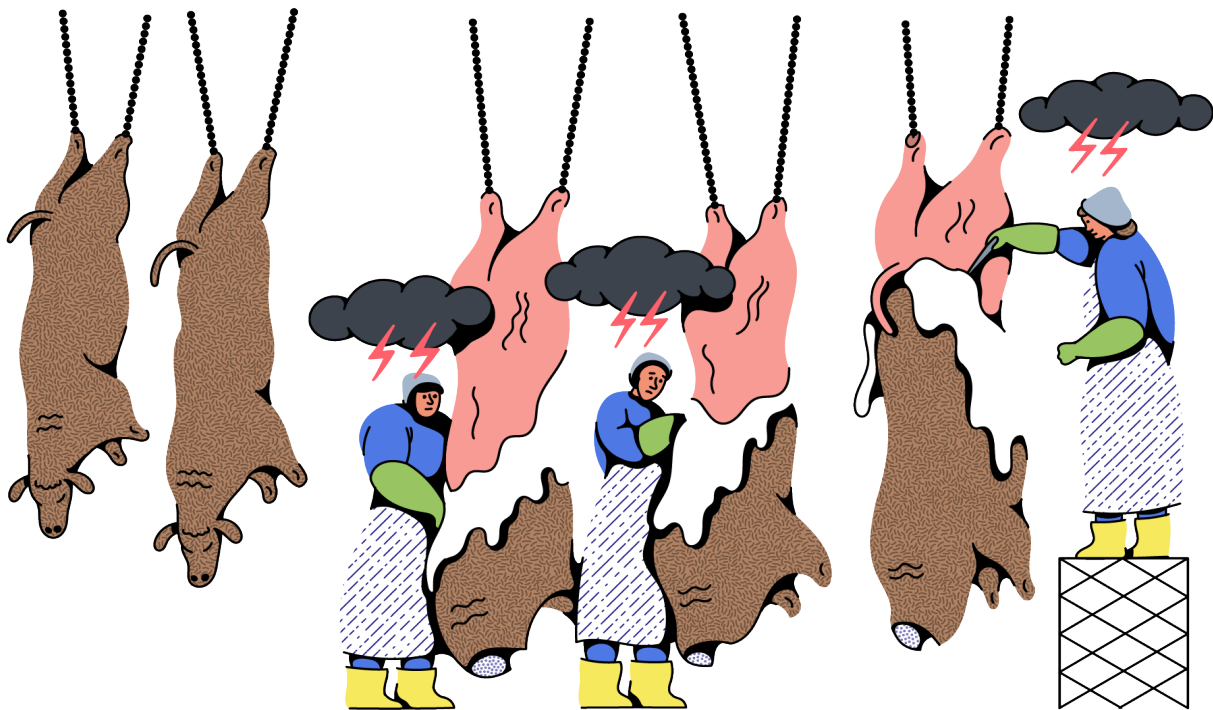
- As with garment making, Italian production of leather and Italian tanneries are assumed to be ethical. However, reports built on ground-work interviews and analysis show serious health risks, racial discrimination and unjust payment are all rife issues.
- Chinese communities in areas which rely on waterways polluted by tanneries and other industries have been referred to as ‘cancer villages’ due to the impact of heavy metals in the water. While government efforts to cut heavy metal pollution have been made, this issue is not resolved, and many people have reportedly either ‘died or moved away to protect their health’.
- A review of global studies on the health implications of tannery work has shown these people to face increased risks of lung cancer, pancreatic cancer, skin cancer, kidney cancer, bladder cancer, sinonasal cancer, testicular cancer and soft tissue sarcoma.
- Tanneries in India, the second largest leather producing country after China, also cause major community health risks. Nearly 40 million litres of untreated wastewater full of carcinogenic substances are dumped into the Ganga River each day, and this waterway is considered sacred, relied on for both bathing and drinking. Child labour is also documented here.
- Tannery certifications such as the Leather Working Group use terms like ‘ethical leather’ in their marketing, yet these certifications currently do not involve worker safety assessments or auditing.



## Slaughterhouse workers

The skins pulled off of animal carcasses to be transformed into leather – seen as a valuable commodity – could not exist without slaughterhouse workers; people who often suffer through a job most would desperately avoid.

- Vulnerable community members are more likely to work in slaughterhouses, such as those who are (undocumented) migrants, refugees, people with less education or who are at a financial disadvantage, as well as Black and Brown people.
- A large number of slaughterhouses in top cattle skin producing countries are owned by JBS, a company known for fraud and corruption, as well as unjust and even forced labour practices. JBS also owns tanneries throughout the world.
- The inherently violent nature of killing animals for a living sees workers more likely to suffer with perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS), a condition often suffered by soldiers. PITS is similar to PTSD, with a fundamental difference: for these workers suffering with the mental health condition, trauma comes not from being a victim of violence, but from being 'the direct reason for another being's trauma'.
- Unfortunately, the trauma of slaughtering animals extends beyond its impact on slaughterhouse workers. While further research is required, data has shown that across over 500 US counties, communities surrounding slaughterhouses fall victim to disproportionately high numbers of violent offences, including sexual assault and rape.





## Farm workers

Transparency at the farm level is extremely uncommon in leather supply chains, with brands often unable to share information about what goes on at the farms they profit from. The exploitation of farm workers is a problem across the broader fashion industry.

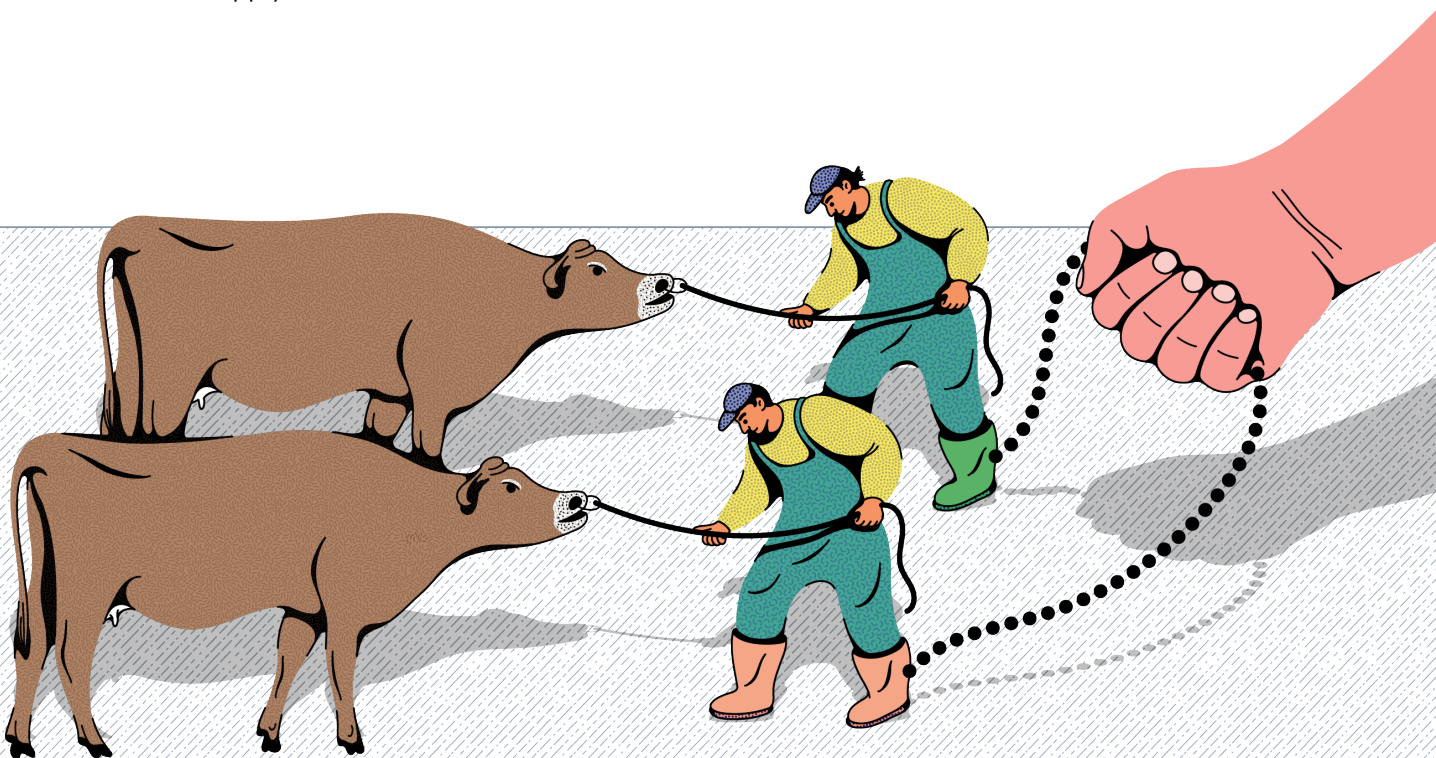
- When it comes to the humans working on these farms, similar mental health struggles as with slaughterhouse workers can occur, especially in cases where farmers mutilate calves and older animals under standard industry practice.
- 60% of Brazil's 'Dirty List' of employers linked to forced labour are from the cattle industry supplying skins for leather. Forced labour has also been documented in Paraguay and Vietnam's leather supply chains.
- Degrading work conditions, 'slavery-like conditions', and a lack of access to toilets, running water and kitchens have been documented on cattle farms in some leather supply chains.

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# 60%

of Brazil's 'Dirty List' of employers linked to forced labour are from the cattle industry supplying skins for leather.

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## Environmental racism and pollution

**Environmental racism is the targeting of people of colour to bear the disproportionate burdens of health hazards and ecosystem collapse, often caused by the demands of outside wealthier populations. Unfortunately, environmental racism is deeply rooted in leather production and the use of leather in fashion.**

- Near tanneries across China and India, agricultural land is poisoned by chromium and other substances, including arsenic, sulfuric acid, sodium chlorate and formaldehyde.
- Tanneries appear on the US Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list more than any other type of business, and 95% of once-US tanneries now operate overseas to avoid environmental oversight penalties, exporting the problem.
- Slaughterhouses – particularly in leading hide production locations – are often poorly or practically unregulated, resulting in complications such as the pollution of land, air and water with untreated waste.
- The disposal of waste from slaughterhouses often causes health concerns for communities, who tend to be poorer and, in leather supply chains often made up of people of colour. Peer-reviewed studies ranging from India to America show health and environmental outcomes in these communities are worse than others.

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## Environmental justice and land rights

The raising of cattle for beef and leather production within the fashion industry is an environmental justice issue resulting in native land destruction and harm to frontline communities. Around the world, this industry is a driving force behind crucial ecosystem destruction and the brutalisation of Indigenous and other marginalised people.

- At least 80% of Amazonia's deforestation is due to cattle rearing. Indigenous land and forests are being decimated by cattle ranching and associated clearing from The Gran Chaco forest spanning Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina to Native American land in the the United States and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land in Australia.
- In Australia, cattle production accounts for 73% of all deforestation, rising to 90% in the Great Barrier Reef catchment area. Traditional Owners have reported illegal cattle grazing on sacred land sites, and have referred to the colonialist destruction of land, often led by the industry leather as 'devastating' and 'shattering'.
- In 2020, highly conservative estimates found that 227 people were killed for their work as environmental defenders, with many others facing intimidation, surveillance, sexual violence and criminalisation. These attacks have disproportionately impacted Indigenous people. In Brazil and Peru, 70% of environmental defenders were protecting forests, with 30% of these tied to 'resource exploitation', including large-scale agriculture like cattle ranching.

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## Actions for policy-makers:

- **Avoid ethics-washing any leather goods**  
being sold or promoted by refraining from labelling animal-derived leather as 'responsible', 'ethical', 'fair' or 'sustainable'. Following Collective Fashion Justice's magazine guidelines for green-washing may be useful.
- **Publicly commit to reducing leather use by at least 50%**  
by 2027, fully phasing out leather no later than 2035. These timelines should be used as conservative targets, with more immediate change being critical and achievable for many brands. Degrowth should be included in this strategy to make this possible.
- **In phasing out animal-derived leather, brands should embrace alternatives that shift the fashion industry**  
away from a reliance on fossil fuels, and towards greater circularity.
- **Invest in the research and development of leather alternative material innovation,**  
ensuring these materials consider the need for a just transition, and are open-source and available for wider industry use.
- **Consider the people in their current leather supply chains**  
in their transition beyond leather while supporting broader industry transition.







Under their skin - Volume 1  
Leather's impact on people

Download [full report here](#)

A report by the Center for  
Biological Diversity and  
Collective Fashion Justice's  
CIRCUMFAUNA Initiative