

## Testimony regarding Bill ref: T2021-7395

My name is Emma Hakansson, I am the Founder and Director of the non for profit named Collective Fashion Justice. Our mission is to create a total ethics fashion system, one which values the safety and life of humans, non-humans and the planet, before profit and production. We refer to a 'total ethics fashion system', rather than to 'ethical fashion', as too often the latter phrase is used in a way which lacks intersectionality of issue – when we speak of justice, we truly mean it to be for everyone.

I'd like to thank the New York City Council for discussing such an important topic as fashion, by introducing this Bill, referenced today (April 21) as T2021-7395. Fashion is so often seen as frivolous or shallow, but we all get dressed, and we all express something to those around us, and to ourselves, when we do. Moreover, we all have an impact on our surrounding world and those we share it with, when we buy clothing, shoes and accessories. This impact is, unfortunately, regularly and greatly underestimated.

I, representing Collective Fashion Justice, am strongly in support of this Bill. This is a piece of legislation which allows for understanding and transparency around what city purchasing supports – whether knowingly or not – so that said purchasing can become more sustainable and just. In a time in which the Green New Deal has been so celebrated, and in which the United States has [banned](#) products made in whole or in part of cotton produced under forced labor in Xinjiang, China – of which a [reported](#) one in five cotton products globally are complicit in – it only makes sense that greater awareness and action around textiles and their significant and complex impact, be a priority.

I'd like to take some time to convey the full scope of what goes into a garment, from a postal worker's shirt to a police officer's shoes. Leather shoes come from a particularly murky kind of supply chain full of deforestation, toxic chemical outputs, animal protection issues, work safety hazards and so on. But for now, if we look closer at this shirt, we can assume it is made of cotton – a breathable, easy wear fiber. India produces the largest portion of global cotton, so without certainty of the cotton's origin, we can assume it may be somewhere in [India](#). Some cotton grown in India is rainfed, organic, and produced in a fair trade certified agricultural operation. The majority of cotton though, is none of these things.

As has been in the news for some time, Indian farmers are on strike due to the challenges they face working in an agricultural sector that does not serve them as they serve everyone else. These farmers are not being paid enough money for their crop in order to survive and afford ever increasing operation costs. There is a shocking average of [28](#) Indian farmer suicides each day according to Indian official records, largely due to [financial strain](#). Pesticide use on many cotton farms here is not regulated or sprayed in line with recommended health and safety guidelines due to a lack of access, and this has resulted in [acute poisoning](#) and increased infertility in male workers exposed to these chemicals. A study published in [Environmental Research](#) found that women impregnated by chemically exposed men were more likely to experience still births, neonatal death and [congenital defects](#) as compared to a control population.

This cotton production and related pesticide use is also responsible for notable eutrophication, greenhouse gas emissions, [biodiversity loss](#), soil depletion and other environmental crises in the country, and in many instances, globally.

This cotton is then ginned, exported to be milled into yarn, woven into a fabric, and then sewn into a shirt. There are people involved in each of these processes. According to [Fashion Revolution](#), only 2% of garment workers make a living wage around the world, and so we can assume none of these people are able to properly feed, clothe, and home themselves with the money they are paid for their hard work.

We know too, that the majority of garment workers are women of colour, and that sexual harassment and assault is all too common in this industry. Late last year, the [Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#) reported that a 20-year-old garment worker sewing in a sweatshop supplying H&M, was allegedly raped and murdered by her supervisor. Her fellow female colleagues report a stiflingly misogynistic and abusive work environment. If these conditions are so common, and so if this were the kind of supply chain that produces a public servants' shirt, I ask respectfully, are these conditions the kind of costs that the council is comfortable to pay?

If we consider shoes again, to further our understanding of the nuanced and immense issues that the fashion industry faces, we should talk about the Amazon Rainforest. Across New York City, thanks particularly to the work of Mr Eric Adams and his team, we are seeing initiatives that work to reduce the consumption of red and processed meats, often due to the environmental impact of such a food. The leading producer of beef in the world, tied to the company JBS, is Brazil. The environmental science community recognises not only the enormous emissions associated with beef production, but the devastation brought upon the Amazon due to our hunger for it. We ought to recognise too then, that as [Brazil](#) is one of the leading cow hide production countries, it is also leather that burns the lungs of the earth.

It is on these cattle ranches that turn sentient animals into both lunches and laced up shoes, that [60%](#) of Brazil's so-called 'Dirty List' of employers tied to labor trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labor go about their business. It is in the darkness of non-transparent supply that bovine individuals are commodified, documented to be [face branded and beaten](#). It is in these cheap, multi-national leather supply chains that [slaughterhouse workers](#) are likely to suffer perpetration induced traumatic stress, all the while working under employers who bet on which worker will get COVID-19 first. It is in these same supply chains that [tannery workers](#), children amongst them, get needlessly sick and die young due to carcinogenic exposure, working in facilities moved out of the United States to avoid environmental oversight penalties.

When shoes and belts are among the final product of these injustices, I must ask again, respectfully, whether or not the council is comfortable buying into such a supply chain?

The introduced legislation allows us to understand what we do not know about supply chains that the New York City Council may buy into. In turn, it allows opportunity for accountability, for change, and indeed for justice.

America has a thriving cotton industry that is full of many innovative farmers dedicated to constantly improving the sustainability of their fiber. Countless American scientists and designers have worked together to create new, sustainable and animal-free materials that are free from the many woes of cow skin leather. New York City is the home of fashion, full of talented garment workers, many of whom are working in genuinely fair conditions. The American economy, and more so, the American people, deserve the financial support of Government councils like New York City.

This Bill allows for such an exciting opportunity to support Americans, and to support sustainable development in line with the relevant United Nations goals, of which there are many. There is a wealth of innovation in the textiles and fashion sector, and the task force established by this legislation would have a timely opportunity to consider changing city purchasing, in order to support production that is less negatively climate impactful, that is recycled, that better protects native flora and fauna, as well as the individuals who live and work to make up these clothes themselves.

With the valuable and important opportunity for positive change that this task force has, comes the need to ensure a task force that can work without bias. It is for this reason that I firmly believe clauses (C) and (D) under point '5. (i) (1)', regarding the nine appointed members of such a task force, stay intact, so as to protect industry interest from potentially interfering with the outcome which is most genuinely ideal for the majority.

If we look more closely at the Bill, there are other clauses that strengthen the intersectional approach to 'total ethics fashion' that is so needed. For example, Task 5 of the task force includes the need to consider 'social costs', such as to understand what information or lack of is available regarding the workers who produce certain apparel. While the majority of the impact this Bill would have is specifically on the environmental impact of city purchasing, we must recognise that work for true sustainability understands environmental justice as interconnected to and serving us all. We as humans and other animals are not separate from nature, but a part of it, and so to remove any mention of social costs in this Bill would be disappointing.

Further following this intersectional approach, it is worth recognising too, that the environmental impacts to be considered with the greatest weight under Task 2, are tied significantly to the production of animal-derived materials. This is shown chiefly by data from the HIGG Material Sustainability Index – which is diligent and detailed, and [made public and visually accessible online by our organisation](#). It is worth considering which city purchases and which potential material or supplier changes may make the most impact through total ethics and climate justice lenses. It would be a shame for the task force of such a Bill to not produce the greatest overall impact possible.

While the insights of the fashion industry I have outlined today are grim, it is in this that we may find fuel to work for something better. I am certain that should this Bill be passed, any lack of information available about city purchases and the supply chains behind those, and any information which may arise that we wish were not the true, can be used to inform a more totally ethical and sustainable future of New York City purchasing. I am sure too, that

the council agrees that city purchasing should not cost the earth, or the wellbeing and life of individuals. This Bill will help to put such a sentiment into action.

Thank you for your time and work towards a better future.