

## ETHICAL SOURCING PRACTICES IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

**Prof. Binaya Bhusan Jena**

Professor & Chairperson

Department of Fashion Management Studies

National Institute of Fashion Technology, Bhubaneswar, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

### **Abstract**

*Ethical sourcing has become a central concern for the fashion industry because garments and textile products are commonly produced through geographically dispersed supply chains involving fibre cultivation, raw material processing, spinning, weaving, dyeing, garment manufacturing, logistics, retail, and end-of-life recovery. At each stage, decisions about price, lead time, supplier selection, purchasing volume, material choice, and production location can influence labour conditions, human rights, environmental performance, and the distribution of economic value. Ethical sourcing therefore refers to a responsible approach to procurement that seeks to prevent harm, respect worker dignity, improve workplace safety, support fair and transparent supplier relationships, and reduce environmental and social risks across the value chain.*

*This review-based study examines ethical sourcing practices in the fashion industry through the interconnected perspectives of responsible purchasing, human-rights due diligence, supply-chain transparency, worker protection, environmental stewardship, and accountability. It synthesizes evidence from scholarly research, international labour standards, sustainability reports, voluntary certification systems, due-diligence guidance, and responsible-business frameworks. The paper considers how sourcing practices affect factory workers, home-based workers, farmers, migrant workers, women workers, supplier firms, local communities, and consumers, while also assessing the limits of audit-led compliance systems.*

*The analysis indicates that ethical sourcing is most effective when it moves beyond occasional social audits or public commitments and is integrated into everyday commercial practice. Key requirements include traceable supplier networks, realistic costing and lead times, stable purchasing relationships, protection of freedom of association, living-wage progress, gender-responsive safeguards, grievance and remedy mechanisms, environmental due diligence, and meaningful disclosure of progress and limitations. A credible ethical sourcing strategy combines buyer responsibility, supplier capability, worker voice, regulatory oversight, and transparent measurement. Strengthening these elements can help the fashion industry contribute to decent work, resilient communities, responsible production, and sustainable value creation.*

**Keywords:** *Ethical sourcing; Fashion industry; Responsible purchasing; Supply-chain transparency; Labour rights; Human-rights due diligence; Sustainable textiles; Worker voice; Supplier relations; Corporate accountability*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The fashion industry is characterised by complex supply chains in which a single finished product may pass through multiple countries, firms, intermediaries, and production processes before reaching a consumer. Fibres may be grown or produced in one region, transformed into yarn and fabric in another, dyed or finished elsewhere, and assembled in factories that serve international brands and retailers. This structure can create employment and economic opportunity, but it can also separate commercial decision makers from the workers and communities affected by

production. Ethical sourcing is therefore increasingly important as a framework for connecting purchasing choices with responsibilities for human rights, labour conditions, environmental protection, and fair economic participation.

The need for ethical sourcing is especially visible in parts of the fashion sector where short lead times, frequent style changes, cost pressure, informal subcontracting, and fragmented production reduce the ability of workers and suppliers to negotiate fair terms. In such contexts, the effects of commercial practices may include excessive overtime,

wage insecurity, unsafe workplaces, limited worker representation, delayed payments, production volatility, and weak access to remedy. Risks can be higher for women, migrant workers, temporary workers, homeworkers, and other groups whose employment is less visible in formal supplier records. Ethical sourcing requires companies to understand these risks rather than treating them as problems that belong only to direct suppliers.

A responsible sourcing approach also includes environmental considerations. Textile and apparel production can involve intensive water use, chemical inputs, energy consumption, waste generation, and pressure on land and ecosystems. Environmental harm can create social harm when it affects worker health, community water access, agricultural livelihoods, or local air quality. For this reason, ethical sourcing cannot be limited to social compliance alone. It should address how material selection, chemical management, production planning, waste reduction, and circular design influence both people and the environment.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the principles, practices, challenges, and improvement pathways associated with ethical sourcing in the fashion industry. The discussion emphasises that ethical performance is shaped by the relationship between brands, retailers, suppliers, workers, civil-society organisations, regulators, and consumers. Sustainable change depends on shifting from a narrow compliance model to a collaborative model in which commercial conduct, transparent governance, worker participation, and long-term supplier development are treated as core business responsibilities.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Research on fashion supply chains has expanded from traditional concerns about cost, quality, and delivery to a broader examination of social and environmental responsibility. The literature identifies several linked themes: global value-chain governance, labour rights, social auditing, supplier development, traceability, responsible purchasing, sustainable materials, circularity, and disclosure. A common conclusion is that visible factory-level compliance is not

sufficient to ensure ethical outcomes because many risks are created or intensified by upstream sourcing decisions, informal subcontracting, weak bargaining power, and the commercial expectations imposed on suppliers.

A second body of work examines the limits of private standards and monitoring systems. Codes of conduct, supplier audits, certifications, and public reporting can create common expectations and help identify certain risks, but they may not reveal hidden production, wage theft, retaliation against workers, or other problems that require trust, worker voice, and access to remedy. Studies increasingly argue for approaches that combine due diligence, regulatory requirements, union engagement, purchasing-practice reform, and supplier-worker dialogue. This integrated perspective is particularly relevant in fashion because commercial contracts, pricing structures, seasonal demand, and design decisions are closely connected to social and environmental conditions at production sites.

### **2.1 ETHICAL SOURCING, TRANSPARENCY, AND TRACEABILITY**

Ethical sourcing can be understood as the use of procurement and supply-chain management practices that seek to prevent adverse impacts on people and the environment while promoting fair, lawful, and accountable business relationships. In the fashion industry, this includes assessing risks across direct and indirect suppliers, setting clear expectations, maintaining traceable sourcing records, engaging with affected stakeholders, and taking corrective action when problems are identified. The approach is preventive rather than reactive: it asks companies to identify potential harm before it becomes embedded in production decisions or commercial contracts. Transparency is an important foundation for ethical sourcing because it enables stakeholders to understand where and how production occurs. Public disclosure of supplier facilities, product categories, sourcing regions, and policy commitments can support scrutiny by workers, trade unions, researchers, investors, civil-society groups, and consumers. However, transparency should not be treated as an end in itself. A published supplier list

does not automatically demonstrate decent work, fair pricing, or environmental responsibility. Its value depends on whether it is paired with reliable due-diligence processes, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and evidence of corrective action.

Traceability provides the operational capacity to follow materials and products through the supply chain. In fashion, traceability may cover fibre origin, farm or raw-material source, yarn and textile mills, dye houses, cut-and-sew factories, subcontractors, logistics providers, and recycling or reuse partners. Better traceability can help firms identify unauthorised subcontracting, assess the origin of high-risk materials, respond to chemical or quality incidents, and communicate more accurately with customers. Yet traceability systems must be designed carefully so that data collection does not become an administrative burden that shifts responsibility to smaller suppliers without providing financial or technical support.

The strongest models combine disclosure with shared governance. Brands and retailers should use information from traceability systems to improve supplier relations, support remediation, reduce harmful purchasing pressure, and make sourcing decisions that reward responsible performance. Suppliers, workers, and local organisations should have opportunities to challenge inaccurate information and raise concerns about conditions that may not be visible in company data. Ethical sourcing therefore depends on the quality of relationships and decisions behind the information, not only on the existence of a digital record or reporting platform.

## **2.2 LABOUR RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY, AND SUPPLIER RELATIONS**

Labour rights remain a central dimension of ethical sourcing. Workers require safe workplaces, fair wages, reasonable working hours, secure employment conditions, freedom from discrimination and harassment, and the ability to organise and bargain collectively. These rights are interconnected. A factory may meet certain visible safety requirements while workers still experience wage insecurity, unpaid overtime, intimidation, or unstable contracts. Ethical sourcing must therefore evaluate both formal policies and the lived

experience of workers, including those who are not easily reached through conventional audits or management interviews.

Commercial purchasing practices can either support or undermine labour standards. Late design changes, unrealistic lead times, sudden order cancellations, price reductions, and delayed payments may shift financial risk to suppliers. Suppliers under severe pressure may respond by extending working hours, using unauthorised subcontractors, reducing wages, or compromising safety and quality controls. Responsible buyers should instead plan orders realistically, provide clear specifications, pay on time, avoid unfair contract terms, and recognise the costs associated with legal wages, safe production, and environmental compliance. Ethical sourcing begins with the principle that commercial conduct should not make decent work economically impossible.

Environmental responsibility is also closely linked to sourcing decisions. Material choices influence land use, water demand, biodiversity, greenhouse-gas emissions, chemical exposure, and waste. Processing stages such as dyeing, finishing, and laundering can create substantial environmental impacts where facilities lack adequate treatment systems or monitoring. Ethical sourcing therefore includes responsible material procurement, chemical management, water stewardship, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and safe handling of inputs. It also requires attention to the communities living near production sites, whose health and livelihoods may be affected by pollution or resource depletion.

Supplier relations should be viewed as a long-term capability issue rather than a short-term compliance exercise. Suppliers need predictable orders, fair commercial terms, technical support, and access to finance to invest in safer facilities, cleaner technologies, worker training, and stronger management systems. Collaborative sourcing relationships can support continuous improvement, while punitive or exit-focused responses may hide problems or transfer them to less visible factories. Responsible disengagement may sometimes be necessary, but it should be guided by risk assessment, consultation, and efforts to avoid leaving workers without wages, remedy, or alternative employment.

### 3. OBJECT OF STUDY

The primary object of this study is to examine how ethical sourcing practices influence social responsibility, environmental performance, and accountability in the fashion industry. The paper analyses the relationships among sourcing decisions, supplier management, labour conditions, material selection, transparency, and the protection of people and ecosystems across fashion value chains.

The study focuses on key ethical sourcing dimensions, including human-rights due diligence, workplace safety, fair wages, responsible purchasing, supplier traceability, gender equality, worker voice, environmental stewardship, and grievance mechanisms. It evaluates how these dimensions affect workers, suppliers, communities, brands, and consumers, while recognising that risk levels differ across regions, product categories, employment arrangements, and tiers of production.

A further objective is to identify the mechanisms through which commercial decisions become social or environmental risks. These mechanisms include price pressure, unstable orders, short lead times, opaque subcontracting, incomplete supplier mapping, weak worker representation, inadequate remediation, poor chemical management, and limited disclosure. Understanding these pathways helps clarify why ethical sourcing must involve both operational controls and changes to buyer behaviour.

Finally, the study considers practical approaches for strengthening ethical sourcing through collaborative supplier relations, credible due diligence, worker-centred monitoring, transparent reporting, responsible material choices, and public accountability. The objective is not only to describe ethical risks but also to identify realistic directions for building more fair, resilient, and sustainable fashion supply chains.

#### 3.1 DIMENSIONS OF ETHICAL SOURCING

This subsection considers the main dimensions through which ethical sourcing can be assessed in fashion value chains.

- Human-rights due diligence covering workers, communities, and vulnerable

groups across direct and indirect supply relationships.

- Fair wages, safe workplaces, reasonable working hours, non-discrimination, and protection from forced labour and child labour.
- Responsible purchasing practices, including realistic lead times, fair prices, stable commitments, and timely supplier payment.
- Supplier transparency and traceability from raw materials and textile processing through final garment production and distribution.
- Environmental responsibility through sustainable materials, chemical management, water stewardship, energy efficiency, and waste reduction.
- Worker voice, trade-union engagement, grievance mechanisms, remediation, and access to information without fear of retaliation.

The purpose is to understand whether ethical commitments are translated into the everyday commercial and production decisions that shape worker and community outcomes.

#### 3.2 SUPPLIER RELATIONS AND WORKER OUTCOMES

This subsection evaluates the relationship between buyer-supplier practices and the practical conditions experienced by workers and supplier firms.

- Order forecasting, lead-time management, design changes, and cancellation practices that influence production pressure and overtime.
- Pricing structures that account for legal wages, safe production, environmental controls, and supplier investment in improvement.
- Supplier capability-building through training, shared problem solving, technology support, and access to responsible finance.
- Worker participation in monitoring, safety committees, collective bargaining, and grievance systems.
- Gender-responsive safeguards for women workers, including protection from harassment, maternity-related rights, and equal opportunity.
- Responsible remediation and exit planning when serious non-compliance,

closure, or sourcing shifts affect workers and local communities.

These dimensions are used to examine whether sourcing systems distribute risk fairly and create conditions in which improvements can be sustained over time.

### 3.3 GOVERNANCE, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This subsection considers institutional measures that can strengthen ethical sourcing and improve accountability across the fashion industry.

- Supplier codes of conduct aligned with international labour standards, human-rights principles, and environmental expectations.
- Risk-based due diligence that maps supply-chain tiers, identifies adverse impacts, and tracks prevention and remediation actions.
- Public disclosure of supplier information, sourcing policies, targets, progress, and limitations in accessible language.
- Independent worker-centred monitoring, credible grievance channels, and protection for whistle-blowers and worker representatives.
- Regulatory oversight, purchasing-practice expectations, and legal mechanisms that strengthen access to remedy and corporate accountability.
- Multi-stakeholder collaboration among brands, suppliers, unions, civil-society

organisations, governments, researchers, and consumers.

## 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a review-based, descriptive, analytical, and comparative methodology to examine ethical sourcing practices in the fashion industry. The approach brings together perspectives from supply-chain management, labour studies, human-rights due diligence, environmental sustainability, and responsible business conduct. It is designed to identify the links between commercial sourcing decisions, supplier capability, worker conditions, environmental performance, and accountability mechanisms.

The study relies on secondary evidence from peer-reviewed research articles, international labour and human-rights standards, policy documents, responsible-business guidance, industry reports, sustainability frameworks, and selected civil-society assessments. The evidence is interpreted through a thematic framework that considers risk identification, prevention, purchasing practices, transparency, worker participation, remediation, and long-term improvement.

### 4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research follows a descriptive and comparative design to synthesize evidence on ethical sourcing and responsible fashion supply-chain management.

| Component       | Description                                                                                                         |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Research Type   | Review-based, descriptive, analytical, comparative                                                                  |
| Approach        | Ethical sourcing and responsible supply-chain analysis                                                              |
| Data Source     | Research articles, labour standards, policy documents, industry reports, and stakeholder assessments                |
| Analysis Method | Thematic synthesis and comparative assessment of social, environmental, and governance impacts                      |
| Focus Area      | Fashion supply chains, labour rights, purchasing practices, traceability, sustainable materials, and accountability |

### 4.2 SOURCES AND ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES

The study considers the following evidence categories for evaluation:

- Research on global fashion supply chains, labour rights, social compliance, and responsible purchasing.
- International standards and guidance on human-rights due diligence, decent work, sustainable procurement, and responsible business conduct.
- Supplier transparency, traceability, sustainable materials, chemical management, and circularity reports.

- Civil-society, trade-union, worker-rights, and industry assessments of sourcing practices and remediation outcomes.

Each evidence source is analysed based on:

- Type of social, labour, environmental, or governance risk addressed.
- Supply-chain tier, worker group, supplier relationship, or material pathway affected.
- Commercial practices and incentives that may create, reduce, or transfer risk.
- Evidence of transparency, worker participation, prevention, remediation, and independent verification.
- Potential contribution to long-term capability, resilience, accountability, and equitable value distribution.

## 5. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis synthesizes evidence on how ethical sourcing influences outcomes across fashion supply chains. The relationship is examined as a sequence of linked decisions: a brand or retailer sets purchasing expectations; suppliers translate those expectations into production planning; workers and communities experience the effects through wages, working time, safety, environmental exposure, and access to remedy; and the resulting outcomes shape the credibility and resilience of the entire supply chain. This sequence shows that ethical sourcing is not only a policy issue but also a practical form of risk management, stakeholder responsibility, and long-term value creation.

Human-rights risks are often intensified when commercial incentives are disconnected from labour standards. For example, a supplier may be expected to meet requirements on wages, safety, and environmental compliance while also accepting prices and lead times that make those requirements difficult to fulfil. The resulting gap can encourage excessive overtime, unstable employment, unauthorised subcontracting, wage violations, or reduced investment in health and safety. Ethical sourcing addresses this problem by requiring buyers to evaluate the effects of their own terms, forecasts, order changes, and payment practices alongside the performance of suppliers.

Worker voice is a critical source of evidence. Factory inspections and audit records can identify certain visible conditions, but workers are often best placed to describe production

pressure, harassment, wage irregularities, retaliation, informal subcontracting, and obstacles to grievance systems. Ethical sourcing programmes are therefore more credible when they include independent worker interviews, accessible complaint channels, trade-union engagement, safety committees, and protections against retaliation. These mechanisms should be available to permanent, temporary, migrant, home-based, and other workers whose perspectives may not be adequately represented through management reporting.

Traceability and supplier disclosure improve the ability to identify risk but must be used responsibly. Mapping suppliers can reveal concentration in high-risk regions, identify gaps in material origin data, and support faster response when adverse impacts are discovered. Yet a traceability system is valuable only when data are accurate, updated, and connected to decisions. If brands collect supplier information without changing sourcing patterns, supporting remediation, or preventing harmful purchasing practices, transparency may become a reporting exercise rather than a tool for improvement. Effective systems combine verification, dialogue, and commercially meaningful follow-up.

Environmental and social impacts should be assessed together. A sourcing strategy that reduces the use of a particular material may still create social risk if it shifts production to suppliers with weaker labour protections or if it fails to support farmers and workers during the transition. Similarly, cleaner production technologies may reduce pollution but require investment that small and medium suppliers cannot finance alone. Ethical sourcing therefore involves a just-transition approach: environmental improvements should protect worker health, respect community rights, and be implemented through fair cost sharing, training, and long-term commitments.

The analysis also indicates that measurement must move beyond the number of audits completed or policies issued. Useful indicators include the quality of supplier relationships, payment timeliness, order stability, worker-reported conditions, grievance resolution, wage progress, collective-bargaining access, subcontracting controls, environmental performance, and the effectiveness of

remediation. Quantitative indicators should be complemented by qualitative evidence because not all ethical outcomes can be understood through checklists. A meaningful assessment asks whether workers and communities experience greater safety, dignity, agency, and security as a result of sourcing practices.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that ethical sourcing in fashion must be treated as a shared responsibility across the value chain. Suppliers are expected to manage production responsibly, but buyers also influence working conditions through price, planning, sourcing duration, and contractual expectations. A model that places all responsibility on factories while ignoring buyer behaviour is unlikely to deliver sustained improvement. Ethical sourcing requires commercial practices that allow suppliers to meet social and environmental standards without transferring excessive costs or risks to workers.

One important observation is that audit-based compliance has practical limits. Audits can help identify some health and safety issues, documentation gaps, or policy weaknesses, but they may not capture hidden subcontracting, informal work, retaliation, or the everyday effects of intense production pressure. Workers may hesitate to speak openly when interviews are controlled by management or when grievance channels are not trusted. Stronger systems therefore combine audits with worker-led evidence, independent monitoring, anonymous reporting, trade-union engagement, and transparent remediation processes. The goal is not simply to identify violations but to create conditions in which problems can be raised and corrected without harm to workers.

Responsible purchasing is a central leverage point. Brands and retailers should build ethical requirements into sourcing calendars, costing tools, contracts, and supplier-performance evaluation. This includes allowing realistic lead times, limiting last-minute changes, paying suppliers promptly, avoiding unfair order cancellations, and recognising the cost of legal wages, safe facilities, environmental controls, and social protections. When responsible purchasing is measured and rewarded internally, ethical sourcing becomes

part of core commercial management rather than a separate sustainability activity.

The discussion also highlights the importance of inclusion. Women comprise a large proportion of the garment workforce in many production regions, yet they may face gender-based discrimination, harassment, unequal promotion opportunities, inadequate maternity protections, and barriers to representation. Migrant and temporary workers may face additional risks related to recruitment fees, document retention, unstable accommodation, language barriers, and fear of reporting concerns. Ethical sourcing should use gender-responsive and migrant-sensitive approaches that recognise how risk is experienced differently across worker groups and that ensure remediation is accessible to those most affected.

Environmental responsibility should be integrated with labour and human-rights priorities. Cleaner materials, lower-impact processes, wastewater management, chemical safety, circular design, and reduced waste can protect ecosystems and improve community health. However, environmental targets should not be pursued in ways that weaken employment security or shift costs to suppliers and workers. A credible transition to more sustainable fashion requires investment, training, technology sharing, fair contracts, and planning that supports both environmental improvement and decent work.

Finally, governance and public accountability remain essential. Voluntary commitments can stimulate innovation, but they are most credible when supported by clear standards, due-diligence expectations, transparent reporting, worker access to remedy, and regulatory oversight. Collaboration among brands, suppliers, trade unions, civil-society organisations, governments, and researchers can improve knowledge and align incentives. The long-term objective is to build a fashion system in which commercial success is compatible with human dignity, environmental protection, and equitable development.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ethical sourcing is a necessary foundation for responsible practice in the fashion industry. Because fashion products are produced through complex and often fragmented supply chains, companies

must understand how sourcing decisions influence workers, suppliers, communities, and the environment. Ethical sourcing requires more than supplier codes of conduct or occasional inspections; it involves due diligence, transparency, responsible purchasing, worker participation, environmental stewardship, remediation, and accountable governance.

The analysis shows that adverse impacts can arise through interconnected pathways, including price pressure, short lead times, unstable orders, opaque subcontracting, weak worker voice, inadequate grievance systems, and incomplete supply-chain visibility. These pathways can undermine wages, safety, employment security, dignity, and environmental protection. The most effective responses address the causes of risk while also strengthening the ability of workers and suppliers to participate in solutions.

A credible ethical sourcing framework should combine traceability with meaningful action,

audit processes with worker-centred evidence, environmental goals with just-transition principles, and supplier expectations with fair commercial terms. Brands and retailers should recognise that their purchasing practices are part of the ethical performance of the supply chain. Suppliers should receive the stability, support, and financial conditions needed to invest in improved labour and environmental outcomes.

Future progress in ethical sourcing will depend on transparent accountability, stronger access to remedy, collaborative supplier relationships, inclusive worker representation, and alignment between business incentives and human-rights responsibilities. By embedding these principles into everyday sourcing decisions, the fashion industry can contribute to decent work, safer communities, more sustainable production, and long-term trust among all participants in the value chain.

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