



## Module 6

# Ethical Fashion Supply Chains

# Sustainable Fashion Design

## Module 6: Ethical Fashion Supply Chains

6.1 What is Ethical Fashion?

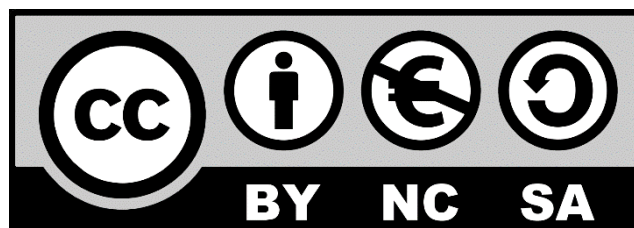
6.2 Building and Managing Ethical Supply Chains

6.3 Fair Labor Practices and Certifications

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## 6.1 What Is Ethical Fashion?

- Ethical fashion is about designing, producing, and purchasing clothing in a way that prioritizes **ethical treatment of people, animals, and the environment**.
- It encompasses a range of practices and standards aimed at addressing issues like **fair labor, sustainable materials, waste reduction, and animal welfare**.
- Ethical fashion is often seen as a movement within the fashion industry that challenges the conventional practices of fast fashion.





# Key Elements of Ethical Fashion

1. Fair Labor Practices	Ethical fashion brands ensure that workers involved in the production process are paid fair wages, work reasonable hours, and operate in safe, healthy conditions.
2. Sustainable Materials	Ethical brands prioritize materials that are renewable, biodegradable, or recycled to minimize harm to the environment and reduce waste.
3. Eco-Friendly Manufacturing	Ethical fashion emphasizes reducing pollution, energy use, and water consumption throughout the production process. The aim is to implement a cleaner and greener manufacturing process.
4. Transparency	Ethical brands provide consumers with transparency about their sourcing, manufacturing processes, and company practices. This allows consumers to make informed decisions about where they spend their money.
5. Animal Welfare	Ethical fashion avoids the use of animal products or ensures that any animal-derived materials are sourced from farms and suppliers that treat animals humanely, like using cruelty-free wool or vegan leather alternatives.

What Ethical Fashion Should Be:

*‘A total ethics fashion system prioritises the life and wellbeing of people, animals and the planet before profit. It doesn’t accept the protection of some at the expense of others, or a sterile definition of environmental protection which ignores the lives of those who live on this planet, whether human or non-human’.* Hakansson, E. (2022)

## What total ethics looks like now

- We use the term 'ethical fashion' but how ethical are these fashion brands? Brands talk about sustainable materials yet the workers producing these garments have been underpaid.
- As seen in the diagram:
  - Ethically produced shoes made from toad skin.
  - Ethically made vegan bags made of toxic PVC.

So one may ask - How ethical are ethical brands?

Required reading: *Total Ethics Fashion: Bringing the Planet, People and Animals Together*





- Environmental Protection:** By supporting ethical fashion, consumers and companies can reduce the industry's environmental impact and work towards a more sustainable future.

- Social Responsibility:** Ethical fashion prioritizes fair labor, allowing workers to earn a living wage and work in safe environments.

- Economic Fairness:** By supporting ethical brands, consumers are investing in businesses that often prioritize community and local craftsmanship, benefiting small communities and economies directly.

- Animal Welfare:** Ethical fashion reduces harm to animals, promoting alternatives like vegan leather or ethically sourced wool.

- Empowered Consumers:** Increasing transparency empowers shoppers to support brands that share their ethical standards, creating a culture of accountability within the fashion industry.

## Why is Ethical Fashion Important ?







*“Ethical fashion benefits those working along the supply chain and creates a better future for everyone.”* Stanton, A (2024)





## 6.2 Building and Managing Ethical Supply Chains

### What is an Ethical Supply Chain?

- An ethical supply chain in fashion is a system that ensures every step in the production process adheres to principles of fairness, transparency, sustainability, and respects all involved parties. This includes the sourcing of raw materials right through to the delivering of the final product.
- It focuses on ethical treatment of workers, environmental sustainability, and supply chain transparency, creating a foundation for responsible production and consumption in the fashion industry.

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# Key Elements of an Ethical Supply Chain in Fashion

## Fair Labor Practices

- An ethical supply chain guarantees that all workers, including those in developing countries, are paid a living wage, work reasonable hours, and operate in safe, sanitary conditions.
- Ethical supply chains support workers' rights to organize, form unions, and negotiate terms of employment without fear of retaliation.
- Ethical supply chains enforce strict standards against forced labor, human trafficking, and child labor, prioritizing ethical sourcing practices.



## Environmental Sustainability

- Ethical supply chains **prioritize sustainable materials**, such as organic cotton, bamboo, and recycled polyester, that have lower environmental impacts compared to traditional options.
- Responsible supply chains **work to minimize waste and pollution** at each stage, using non-toxic dyes, reducing water and energy usage, and implementing recycling or waste-reduction strategies.
- Ethical supply chains may **use renewable energy sources and efficient transport** solutions to minimize the environmental impact of production and distribution.



## Transparency and Traceability

- Ethical supply chains **emphasize transparency** by ensuring that each stage, from raw material sourcing to production and shipping, is traceable. This enables brands to verify that their ethical standards are maintained throughout the supply chain.
- Ethical brands provide transparency about the **origins of their products**, including information about materials, factories, and labor practices. This empowers consumers to make informed purchasing decisions.



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## Commitment to Animal Welfare



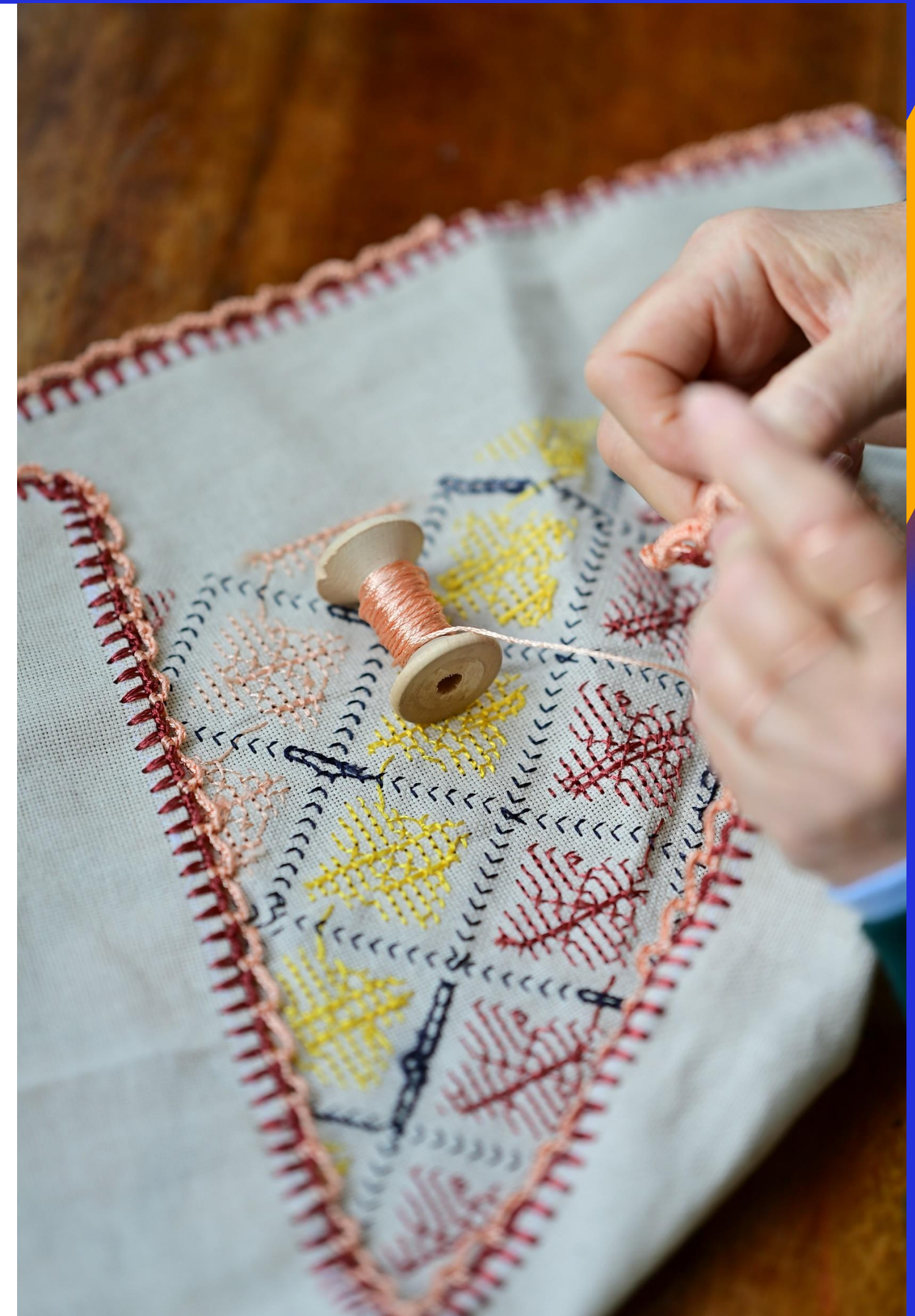
- The use of animal-derived materials like wool, leather, or silk, an ethical supply chain ensures that these products are sourced in a manner that **prioritizes animal welfare.**
- Many ethical brands are adopting alternatives like vegan leather or plant-based materials to reduce the need for animal-derived products, **promoting an animal-friendly supply chain.**



## Support for Local and Small-Scale Suppliers

- Ethical supply chains often collaborate with local artisans, small-scale farmers, or community-based workshops, promoting fair business practices and **empowering local economies**.
- Ethical supply chains value and respect the cultural heritage and craftsmanship of local communities, recognizing and **supporting traditional skills and practices**.

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## Certification and Auditing

- For ethical standards, many brands work with third-party certifications like Fair Trade, Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), or OEKO-TEX, these verify sustainable practices, fair labor, and safe working environments.
- Ethical supply chains conduct frequent audits, to ensure compliance with their ethical commitments. This monitoring helps identify areas for improvement and ensures ongoing adherence to ethical standards.



# Why an Ethical Supply Chain is Important in Fashion

- An ethical supply chain **helps mitigate environmental harm** by minimizing pollution, conserving natural resources, and reducing carbon emissions.
- Ethical supply chains **advocate for workers' rights**, provide fair compensation, and support better working conditions, contributing to social equity.
- Brands that commit to an ethical supply chain **earn the trust and loyalty of consumers** who prioritize transparency and responsibility in the products they buy.
- Ethical supply chains align business goals with sustainability, helping fashion brands transition from exploitative, resource-intensive practices to a model **focused on long-term sustainability and responsible growth**.
- By working with local artisans and small-scale producers, ethical supply chains **contribute to community development** and the preservation of traditional craftsmanship.



# Challenges in Building an Ethical Supply Chain

Creating an ethical supply chain is challenging, especially given the complexity of global supply networks. Many brands may face:

- **Higher Costs** due to fair wages, environmental standards, and ethical practices which often costs more than conventional methods. This may result in **higher retail prices**.
- Due to the complexity of today's globalized industry, tracing every step of a product's journey can be very difficult. Having to maintain **high ethical standards** of numerous suppliers, subcontractors, and logistics providers, may **impact profit margins**.
- Many brands see these challenges as an investment and essential for building a sustainable and respected brand.

## Examples of Ethical Supply Chain Practices

**Patagonia:** Known for its commitment to fair labor and environmental responsibility, Patagonia uses recycled materials and practices full supply chain transparency, providing consumers with detailed information about the origins of their products. [www.patagonia.com](http://www.patagonia.com)

**Eileen Fisher:** This brand emphasizes fair wages, responsible sourcing, and sustainable fabrics. It also has take-back programs to reduce waste, encouraging customers to return used garments for recycling. [www.eileenfisherrenew.com](http://www.eileenfisherrenew.com)

**Everlane:** Everlane's "Radical Transparency" model allows customers to see exactly where their products are made, detailing the factories and practices involved. [www.everlane.com/about](http://www.everlane.com/about)



## 6.3 Fair Labor Practices in the Fashion Industry



*“Although the value of apparel and textile trade exceeds \$700 billion dollars a year, millions of workers are subject to substandard conditions and labor rights violations. These include poverty wages, excessive working hours, poor health and safety conditions, precarious and unstable employment, routine violation of the right to freedom of association, and sexual harassment.” Arengo, E. (2019)*



# Fair labor practices

Fair labor practices are policies and standards that have been designed to **ensure that all workers are treated fairly, respectfully, and ethically**, including the fashion sector, which has historically faced challenges related to labor rights.

These practices have been developed to:

- Protect workers' rights.
- Ensure safe and healthy working environments.
- Promote fair wages and hours across industries.

Recommended Reading: *Future of Fashion: Worker-Led Strategies for Corporate Accountability in the Global Apparel Industry.*

# The Fair Labor Practices

## 1. Fair Wages

- A fair labor practice ensures that all workers must **earn a living wage**, which must cover basic living expenses such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education, beyond the minimum wage that might be set by local laws.
- A fair labor practice should provide workers access to benefits like **health insurance, sick leave, maternity or paternity leave**, and other social protections that contribute to workers' overall well-being.



## 2. Safe and Healthy Working Conditions

- A fair labor practice should involve providing a safe, hazard-free working environment. Safety protocols should be in place where employers provide necessary safety equipment and training in order to prevent workplace accidents and injuries.
- All workers should have access to clean drinking water, sanitary restroom facilities, and adequate ventilation.
- All employers should regularly train employees on safety protocols, enabling them to handle emergencies. They must also provide fire exits and emergency evacuation plans.

### 3. Reasonable Working Hours

- Fair labor practices has **set working hours**, often 8 hours per day or 40 hours per week, with voluntary and fairly compensated overtime if required.
- All workers must be provided with **regular breaks**, including meal breaks, and should not be overworked without proper rest.
- Fair labor standards include **access to paid leave** for holidays, illness, and personal reasons, contributing to a healthy work-life balance.



## 4. Freedom of Association

- All workers should have the right to join labor unions or worker associations without fear of retaliation from employers.
- All workers and unions should be able to engage in negotiating wages, benefits, and working conditions.
- Employers should not discriminate against employees who participate in union activities or who advocate for labor rights within their workplace.

## 5. No Forced or Child Labor

- Fair labor practices strictly **forbid forced labor**, including human trafficking, bonded labor, and other forms of coercion.
- Children under the minimum working age (often defined by international and local regulations) **should not be employed**, especially in hazardous work. This protects children's rights to education and development.
- Fair labor practices aim to **eliminate exploitative practices**, including excessive hours, withholding wages, or restricting workers' ability to leave.



## 6. Non-Discrimination and Equal Opportunity

- All workers must be hired, promoted, and compensated **without discrimination** based on gender, race, religion, age, disability, nationality, or other personal characteristics.
- A fair labor practice states that the workplace must **protects its workers** from harassment, abuse, and bullying, whether from supervisors or colleagues.
- Fair labor standards often encourage employers to **foster a diverse and inclusive work environment** where all employees feel respected and valued.



## 7. Transparent and Ethical Recruitment

- Fair labor practices prohibit recruitment agencies or employers from charging workers fees for obtaining employment, which can lead to debt bondage.
- Workers must be provided by their employers **clear written contracts** outlining their job roles, wages, benefits, and working conditions in a language they understand.
- Migrant workers, must also have **equal access** to fair labor protections, including safe housing, fair wages, and freedom to leave employment.

## 8. Worker Rights Awareness and Education

- Workers should be made aware of their rights and responsibilities under fair labor practices, enabling them to advocate for themselves if needed.
- Employers should provide workers with accessible and confidential ways to voice complaints or concerns without fear of retaliation. This could be through a worker's representative, a union, or an internal complaint system.



## 9. Monitoring and Compliance

- Fair labor practices require **regular audits and inspections** to ensure that labor standards are met and maintained across the supply chain.
- Some brands and factories undergo **third-party audits** to verify compliance with fair labor practices, often resulting in certifications like **Fair Trade, SA8000, or WRAP** (Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production).
- When violations are identified, fair labor practices call for **corrective action plans** to address and resolve issues promptly.

# Fair Labor Standards and Organizations

<b>International Labour Organization (ILO)</b>	Sets international standards for fair labor practices. This includes conventions on child labor, forced labor, safe working conditions, and fair wages.
<b>Fair Labor Association (FLA):</b>	Works with companies and universities to promote fair labor practices, offering guidelines, training, and independent assessments.
<b>Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI)</b>	ETI's Base Code is based on the ILO standards and widely adopted across industries to improve labor rights, wages, and working conditions.
<b>SA8000 Standard:</b>	A leading certification focused on social accountability, ensuring compliance with fair wages, safe working environments, and no child or forced labor.

Required Reading : *The Fair Labor Association Promotes Human Rights at Work*

Recommended Reading: *SA8000 Standard*



# Fair Labor Standards and Organizations

<b>Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP)</b>	An independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting safe, lawful, humane, and ethical manufacturing practices. It primarily focuses on the apparel, footwear, and sewn products sectors.
<b>Fair Trade Organizations</b>	Fair trade organizations set standards that aim to improve livelihoods, protect the environment, and support economic development in producer communities.
<b>Better Work Program</b>	A partnership between the ILO and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). It aims to improve labor standards in garment factories.
<b>Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO)</b>	Organizations like Clean Clothes Campaign, Labor Behind the Label, and the Fashion Revolution advocate for workers' rights and ethical practices in fashion. They push for transparency, accountability, and improvements in the treatment of garment workers globally.

# The Importance of Fair Labor Practices

Fair labor practices are important for establishing an ethical, humane, and responsible working environment. In doing so a fashion business can:

1. **Protect its workers** from exploitation, ensuring they are treated with respect and dignity.
2. Prevent exploitation and **promote safe conditions** as many fashion supply chains operate in low-income countries with fewer regulations.
3. **Gain trust and loyalty from consumers** by showing commitment to fair treatment of workers.
4. **Sets a benchmark** for the industry, encouraging others to follow fair labor practices.
5. Aid in the social and **economic development of communities and nations**, by reducing poverty and inequality.



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