

Fashion With A Purpose: Sustainability, Empowerment, Inclusivity

While the majority of fashion still revolves around trendy, outlandish apparel intended to make a statement, create a sense of exclusivity and incite superficial gossip, it has evolved to become something far more meaningful. Now a vehicle for female empowerment, diversity and to champion environmental issues (a large portion of which admittedly stem from the industry itself), fashion as a tool to unite people and create positive change has never been more worth celebrating.

Environmental devastation throughout the history of the fashion industry has been rampant. Trends come and go at the click of a button and many fast fashion brands have turnover rates of less than a day. But consumers have become increasingly aware of the unethical and unsustainable practices and their purchasing choices have begun to shift - buyers no longer desire flashy and erratic outfits that succumb to fleeting trends. The growing awareness and widespread sharing on social media of the absurd levels of textile waste, water pollution and greenhouse gas emissions caused by the industry have resulted in fast-fashion brands taking a huge hit - H&M closed down 160 stores last year, announcing in March 2018 that it had US\$4.3 billion worth of unsold inventory.

A majority of consumers, particularly from the younger generations, have become eco-conscious, opting instead for sustainably produced apparel which they are willing to pay a premium for. According to a Nielsen poll surveying 30,000 consumers across 60 countries, 73% of Millennials have demonstrated a willingness to pay more for products that are sustainable. These generations and their determination to stand for the environment and for their future has been a beacon of glittering hope, with Millennials and Gen Z as the largest pioneers in the shift towards sustainable fashion, urging for transparency across all steps of the manufacturing process. Brands such as Stella McCartney, Eileen Fisher and Mara Hoffman make things easier for these generations to carve a path for an environmentally sustainable future in fashion, pushing to use upcycled textiles whilst cutting carbon emissions and water use. The movement towards a less wasteful future is not without the help of recent internet sensation Marie Kondo, who shuns the idea of buying into trends for one or two wears. Rather, she encourages individuals to look for quality, durable materials in timeless silhouettes and shades that can be cherished and reworn year after year, regardless of trend. Her minimalist closet approach prompted a global closet culling as Millennials and Gen Z scrambled to remove whatever did not "spark joy" in their lives.

Aside from efforts to reduce textile waste and to combat harmful environmental impacts, fashion has also become instrumental in empowering women and encouraging equality. Just this past September 2019, Meghan Markle Duchess of Sussex launched a workwear-based clothing collection in collaboration with Smart Works, Marks and Spencers, Jigsaw and John Lewis to give women entering the workforce the confidence to approach their work wholeheartedly and unrestrained. For each item of clothing purchased, one will be donated to Smart Works, helping a woman look and most importantly feel her best for job interviews or work. In combination with the Markle effect, whereby everything Markle is seen wearing instantly sells out, this 1:1 model will enable Smart Works to provide a professional wardrobe to their clients for at least the next year, as well as highlighting the brands that are contributing to sustainability in fashion.

Causes like these speak volumes for the future of fashion, proving how fashion can be used as a force to unite and empower the future of our workforce, equipping an upcoming generation with the confidence and tools to succeed. Likewise, Karlie Kloss, supermodel, entrepreneur and philanthropist, has also been hard at work as a catalyst for change and female empowerment, founding Kode with Klossy in 2015. Kode with Klossy runs a free two-week coding programme over summer for young women looking to explore the world of tech. Although this project is not explicitly fashion-related, Karlie Kloss is a seasoned veteran of the fashion world, and a notable figure in the industry. Her efforts to confront stereotypes and clear the path for women to explore opportunities in STEM encourages other figures to do the same and use their platform in the industry as a force for good. In 2019 alone, Kode with Klossy gave free coding opportunities to over 1,000 young women in 16 countries. And her impacts have had widespread knock-on effects: two sisters that attended her coding camp were determined to spread their newfound perspective with others, founding Code Equal in Princeton. Code Equal, which works with girls and under-represented minorities, has gone on to provide classes to over 200 students, year-round.

Kloss likely took a hint from Emma Watson, the youngest A-lister to be appointed UN Women Goodwill Ambassador. Watson has been calling for equality and female empowerment for quite some time - in 2014 she launched the #HeforShe movement, a call to action to all men to stand as allies to women and help create a more equal playing field. Her speech in 2014 set internet records for the amount of shares and views surrounding the movement, and her earnestness and genuine outlook has been instrumental in creating discussion and propelling change.

But how has fashion worked to recognise and be inclusive of its wearers, the unique and diverse array of consumers that keep the wheels of the industry turning? What used to be a shock when more than one 'ethnic' model walked the runway during fashion week is now the norm. Rihanna broke the internet with her game changing Savage x Fenty show in September, a colourful and diverse spectacle celebrating people as people - in a mismatched array of all body shapes and skin tones. But Rihanna took it upon herself to go one step further. While most designers are quick to throw in the token plus-size or minority model to tick the box of diversity, Rihanna made sure to include senior models, trans models, paraplegic models and models from a whole host of unique backgrounds and experiences to ensure as much representation as possible.

And esteemed fashion houses have begun to take note. Designer Pierpaolo Piccioli of Valentino recently appointed South Sudan born Adut Akech as the new face of the brand. Piccioli acknowledges that there was a time, not too long ago, where black women could never have lived out their sartorial fantasies or become spokespeople for respected fashion houses. But he seeks to make a change now, and to do his part to fight for inclusivity, commenting on how perceptions and harmful stereotypes can shift simply by seeing black women in couture, what he refers to as "the highest point of fashion".

On a similar strain of thought, Jameela Jamil, actor, activist and cover star for the British Vogue September issue this year, calls for radical inclusivity and body positivity. Through the instagram account @i_weigh, Jamil seeks to amplify, advocate and "pass the mic" on important issues regarding diversity and inclusivity, where she is also quick to call out celebrities or other notable figures that hinder the movement and cultivate harmful and discriminatory ways of thought. By prompting dialogue and speaking up, Jamil sets the tone for how future generations can and should be a voice for change, and it seems to be working so far - @i_weigh has grown to become an outspoken community of almost one million individuals that are unapologetically and authentically themselves.

Consumer-driven change has led to increasingly positive impacts on company structures, as shoppers zero in on company values, ethics and their manufacturing processes. Female empowerment is preferred. Sustainability is ideal. And inclusivity is a must. Yet, fashion has barely scratched the surface of the positive impact it can make on the planet, with potential for change on a global scale propagated by changemakers and future generations. Although the future of fashion may have appeared bleak, figures such as Rihanna, Karlie Kloss, Jameela Jamil and Meghan Markle have done wonders to amass their

followings in support of critical and transformative movements, injecting much-needed hope and positivity as we look towards the future, and beyond.