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Designing fashion without harm: a practical health and safety toolkit for fashion designers

Contents

03 Introduction

04 Why this matters

06 Taking action

07 Prevention of harm

08 Worker rights

09 Accountability

09 Commitment

10 Collaboration

11 Evidence-driven risk mitigation

11 Knowledge provision

13 Learning and improvement

13 Rehabilitation

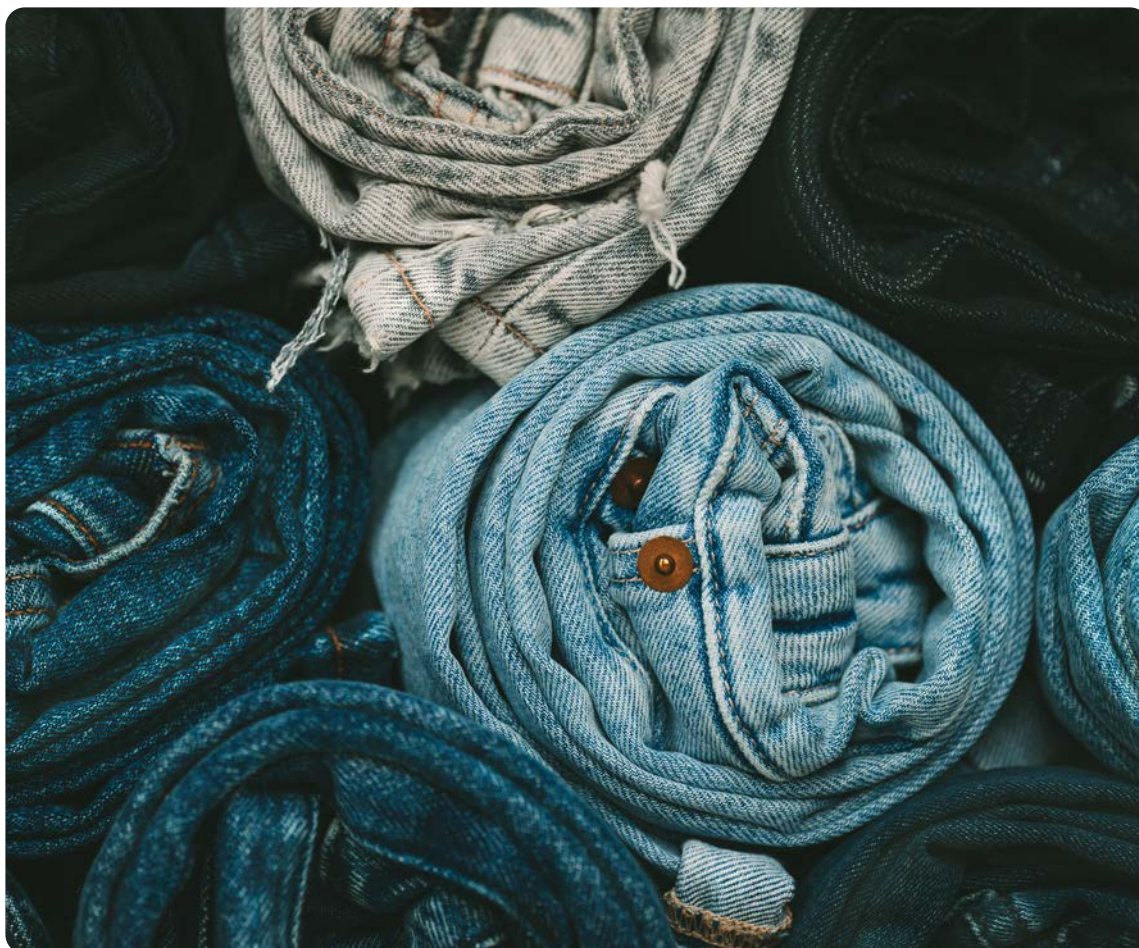
14 Ethical values

15 Red flags

15 Final thoughts

16 Checklist

18 About this toolkit



Introduction

Every fibre carries a human story. Every fabric reflects the realities of work. Every thread represents someone's effort, skill and livelihood.

Behind every product and service are real people, working in real conditions. Good design should protect them, not put them at risk. The choices designers make about materials, suppliers, production processes and pricing can directly affect the health, safety and wellbeing of people throughout the supply chain.

While sustainability discussions may focus on environmental harm, there's a human dimension which can't be ignored.

Workers throughout fashion supply chains can face risks, including unsafe working conditions, excessive working hours, low pay, discrimination, exploitation and modern slavery risks.

Designers themselves are not exempt from these harms. When considering your supply chain, there are some key questions that will help you make an informed decision which in turn can help reduce harm and contribute to safer, healthier and decent work.



Designer: Kaushik Velendra

Why this matters

As leaders come together at the 2026 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), there's a focus on accelerating partnerships, investment and sustainable prosperity for a more sustainable Commonwealth.

With a new strategic plan, targeting democratic, economic and environmental resilience, there is also a need to focus on people, particularly those within global supply chains.

Working conditions vary significantly across Commonwealth nations and global supply chains. There are different health and safety and labour regulations, and workers may face different health, safety and wellbeing risks depending on local labour protections, climate conditions, economic pressures and workplace practices.

Understanding these realities enables designers to look beyond cost, quality and delivery times, and consider the potential human impact of sourcing and production decisions. Doing so can help prevent harm, support decent work and contribute to stronger, more resilient brands that are increasingly expected to demonstrate responsible business practices.

Fashion designers and small businesses play an important role in supporting safer, healthier and decent work throughout global supply chains.

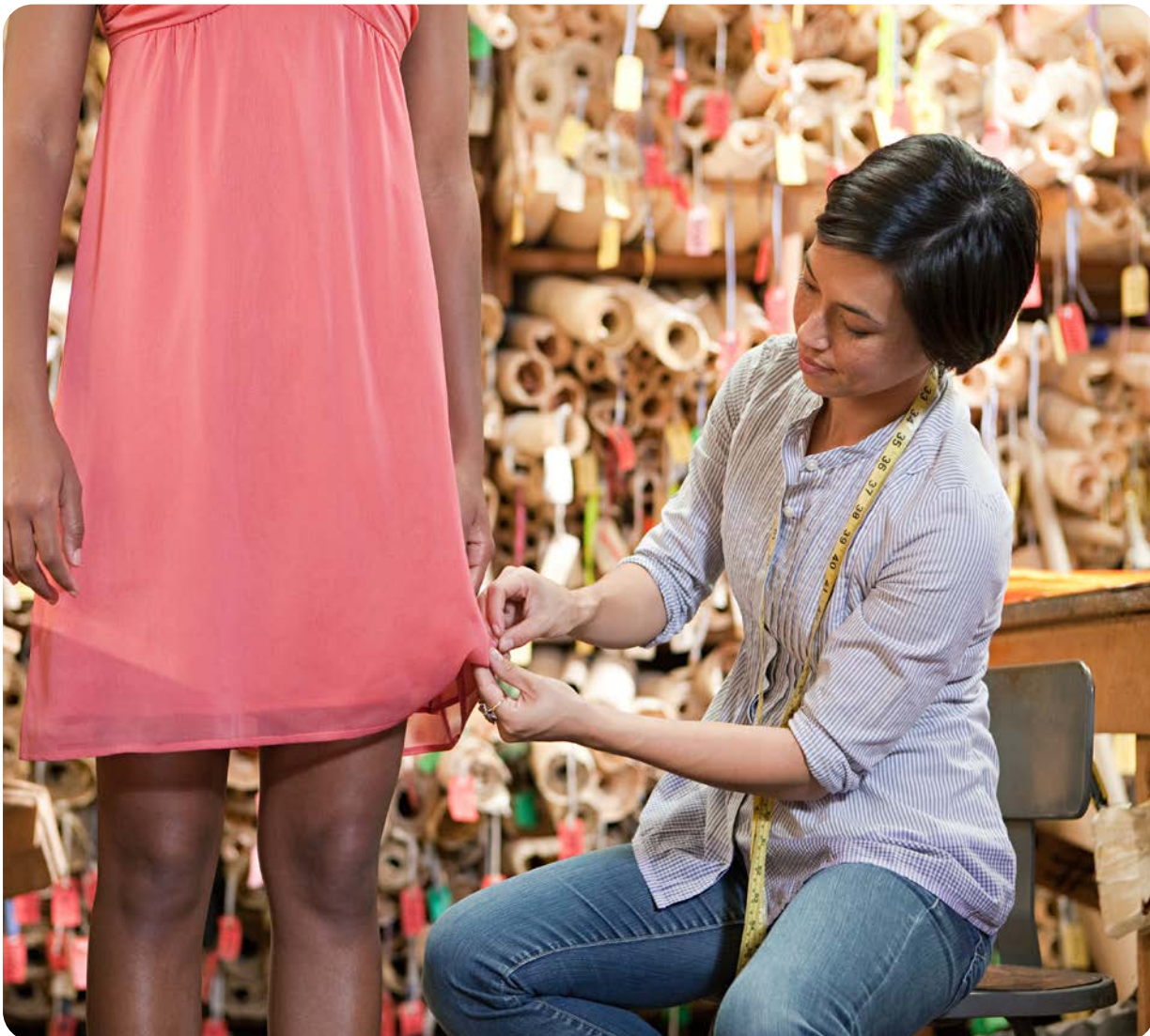
By considering the impact of design and sourcing decisions, designers can contribute to delivering the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including:

- SDG 3 on good health and wellbeing;
- SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth;
- SDG 10 on reduced inequalities;
- SDG 12 on responsible production and consumption.

This toolkit provides practical tips on how to move from commitment to action.

The opportunities for change and impact will differ between independent designers, small fashion labels, and multinational fashion houses, everyone involved in the design process can help reduce harm by considering the human impact of their choices from the earliest stages of design. Although the content is tailored to fashion designers, the principles can be applied to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in other sectors.

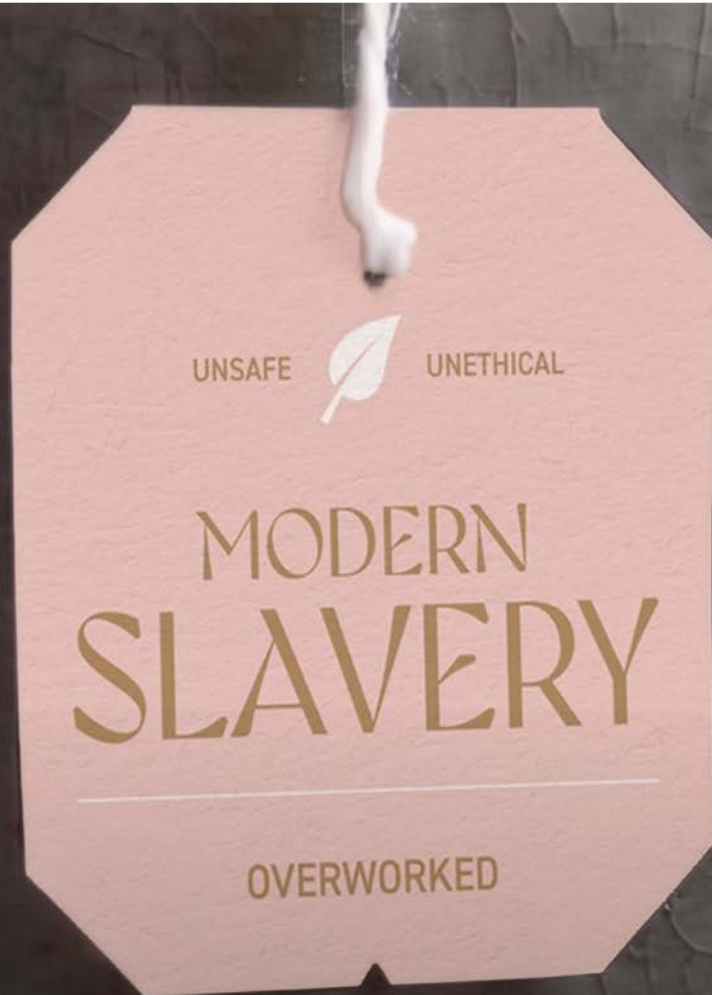
**Scan the QR code
to find out more**
[or click here to access](#)



Taking action

Contents

Using the IOSH 10 principles of good occupational safety and health for independent fashion designers



**What if the
label told the
whole story?**

Source: IOSH, campaign 2026

1. Prevention of harm

Think ahead and design out harm where possible.

Consider:

Could this design create health, safety and wellbeing risks to workers?

Actions

- Minimise unnecessary production stages like reliance on hazardous machinery and equipment, chemicals and activities.
 - Consider fabric types, dyes, and ways to reduce fabric waste.
 - Think about the work involved in adding embellishments and whether this could cause undue strain.
- Allow realistic production times to prevent fatigue, stress and unsafe behaviours, and avoid creating pressure for long working hours and excessive overtime.
- Review your suppliers to identify how they control risks to workers health, safety and wellbeing.
 - Can they demonstrate understanding of, and compliance with, national and industry regulations?

For example, do they follow certified schemes such as [ISO 45001](#), [SA 8000](#), [SMETA by Sedex](#), [OEKO-TEX](#), [Bluesign](#), or [Certified Regenerative](#)?
 - Certification is not a guarantee of perfection, but it can provide useful evidence of commitment and continuous improvement. It can also provide assurance that suppliers comply with relevant legislation, which varies across the Commonwealth.

2. Worker rights

Everyone has a right to a safe and healthy working environment and to decent work.

Consider:

How are workers treated throughout the whole value chain, not just direct suppliers? Where are they based, where are materials sources, who is involved in the production, and what risks do they face to produce the materials I use?

Actions

- Look beyond direct (tier 1) suppliers and consider the wider value chain, including raw material sourcing, processing, manufacturing, subcontractors and home-based work where relevant.
- Ask suppliers whether they have visibility of their own suppliers and the steps they take to identify and address worker harm.
- Can suppliers prove that all workers are employed legally and voluntarily? Avoid suppliers linked to worker exploitation and modern slavery.
- Ask suppliers about working hours and conditions.
- Seek evidence about whether workers can raise concerns safely.



3. Accountability

Who has accountability and responsibility for health and safety.

Consider:

How do you check that suppliers are meeting their performance requirements?

Actions

- Agree who has accountability and responsibility.
- Plan a proportionate approach to due diligence and ongoing monitoring for each supplier, considering the different risk levels they could pose to workers and to your business.
- Set clear expectations with suppliers and how you will audit and monitor them. Where possible, agreements with suppliers should include:
 - Sustainability commitments.
 - Health and safety requirements.
 - Worker rights expectations.
 - Reporting processes.
 - Agreed improvement plans.
- Follow up concerns when they are raised.

4. Commitment

People are important. It isn't just about the garment.

Consider:

Would I use this supplier if my customer knew how it was made?

Actions

- Prioritise ethical suppliers and embed ethical commitments into purchasing decisions.
 - Reward suppliers committing to sustainability, with repeat business and recommendations. Strong supplier relationships are a foundation of successful business.
- Follow up concerns when they are raised.

Work with others to ensure health, safety and wellbeing of workers.

Consider:

Who do I work with? How can they help me make improvements?
How can we make improvements together?

Actions

- Identify sector bodies, universities and technical institutes (etc.) in the countries in which you are sourcing and build relationships to help you understand the work that goes into your product.
- Build working relationships with other designers, and with your suppliers, and see how you can collectively reduce risk.
- Identify how workers are consulted on matters affecting their safety, health, and wellbeing and how concerns and feedback are raised and actioned.
- Share good practice with other designers and those in your supply chain.



Designer: Sophie Boylan

6. Evidence-driven risk mitigation

The decisions you make are based on evidence.

Consider:

How do I really know if my supplier is ethical and responsible?

Actions

- Ask questions. *Refer to the checklist at the end of this document for initial key questions to ask yourself* For a more detailed supplier due diligence checklist, visit the link below, the more detailed version includes questions you can use when selecting and reviewing suppliers.
- Seek and review evidence and information regularly to find out about materials and production methods, about emerging risks to workers, etc.
- Ask suppliers what preventative action they take.

Scan the QR code for
the supplier checklist
[or click here to access](#)



7. Knowledge provision

Keep learning.

Consider:

What don't I currently know? What do I need to know?

Actions

- Keep up to date with information distributed across your network, including from sector bodies, organisations and professionals as highlighted in point five.
- Learn about worker health, safety and wellbeing and human impact, including modern slavery.
- Ask your suppliers about learning and skills development of their workers, and how they ensure their workers have received relevant health and safety awareness and information.



Designer: Isabelle Pennington (left)

8. Learning and improvement

Learning and improvement is ongoing, not a one-time event.

Consider:
What can I improve?

Actions

- Review suppliers regularly.
- Identify and learn from issues and concerns. Responsible brands do not simply walk away when concerns arise; they work with suppliers to improve practice wherever possible.
- Make improvements and measure impact.

9. Rehabilitation

How are workers supported.

Consider:
Are workers supported if injured, ill, pregnant, have pre-existing medical conditions or have a disability?

Actions

- Ask suppliers how they support workers.
- What arrangements do your suppliers make for workers to eat, use the toilet, and maintain good hygiene while at work?
- Think about all workers, especially those who are vulnerable due to health needs, age or other factors.

10. Ethical values

Dignity for all.

Consider:
Who could be affected by my decisions?

Actions

- Consider the impact on all workers, communities and users.
- In decision making, think about people as well as cost – the cheapest supplier is not always the most cost-effective.
 - Unsafe working conditions increase risk to production as well as workers. Suppliers who cut corners and disregard health and safety are less reliable, which weakens your supply chain and could harm your reputation.
- Support fair and responsible business practice.
- Seek suppliers who can clearly explain how they manage health, safety and worker wellbeing.



**Designer: Palesa Mokubung,
Founder and Creative Director of Mantsho**

Red flags

[Contents](#)

Be cautious if suppliers:

- cannot explain where materials originate
- offer unusually low prices
- promise unrealistically short lead times
- refuse to discuss worker health, safety, welfare or wellbeing matters
- lack documented policies or procedures or provide documents but cannot show evidence of how they control risks to workers' health, safety and wellbeing.

A final thought

As a designer, your influence reaches far beyond the sketchbook. Every choice about materials, construction, sourcing and deadlines shapes the experiences of people throughout the fashion value chain.

Sustainable and responsible design is not about limiting creativity and innovation; it is about ensuring creativity creates value without causing harm.



Checklist

[Contents](#)

Key initial questions to ask yourself

Question	Yes/no
Have I considered how this design affects workers across my value chain?	
Do I know who is in my supply chain?	
Do I know how the raw materials are being sourced and by who?	
Do I know all the suppliers being used in the supply chain to make my final garment?	
Do I know who is involved in the production and shipping process?	
Have I asked about the working conditions of all workers?	
Are production times realistic?	
Do workers have a way to raise concerns safely?	
Have I checked for modern slavery risks?	
Have I used evidence rather than assumptions on worker health, safety and wellbeing matters?	
Have I asked for, and reviewed, supplier performance recently?	
Would I be comfortable explaining my choices publicly and will I be able to demonstrate sustainably-driven decisions that also consider people who could be harmed?	
Am I committed and continuously improving my approach?	



Designer: Sophie Boylan

VIBE Commonwealth Fashion 2025: Sophie Boylan, a sustainability innovator who has developed an eco-friendly alternative to petroleum-based sequins, preserving aesthetic appeal while reducing environmental harm.

About this toolkit

Contents

This toolkit was developed by combining expertise from Leeds Beckett University and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) to help fashion designers and small and medium-sized businesses identify the human costs involved in bringing their products to market, and their role in minimising these costs.

It has been created with reference to the Organisation for [Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\) framework and guidance on due diligence in supply chains](#). These encourage companies to prioritise their most significant impacts and engage with business partners and stakeholders to create meaningful improvement over time.

This toolkit will also help businesses to understand how compliance and continuous improvement support achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

They are valuable tools for small businesses in all sectors, and a helpful accompaniment to this toolkit.

The toolkit is not intended to replace national legislation or local regulatory guidance but should be considered a helpful guide to promoting good health and safety practice, adaptable to different contexts.

Further information

Visit our website on the [human costs of supply chains](#). We are also aware that we have used many different terms throughout this toolkit, so please also review our Glossary of Terms.

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