

Key takeaways from the Global Fashion Summit: More diversity, more collaboration

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By Bella Webb

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HER ROYAL HIGHNESS
The Crown Princess of Denmark





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Circularity, carbon, community and pre-competitive collaboration, the four C's of sustainability, dominated this year's Global Fashion Summit in Copenhagen. The resounding message? Urgently needed progress is reliant on the industry working together to achieve it.

“To go faster, the entire industry has to be mobilised behind sustainability targets,” says Francois Souchet, global head of sustainability and impact at New York consulting and communications agency BPCM, who attended the summit with 900 members of the fashion industry across Kering, the United Nations, Burberry and Nike. If it wasn't already clear that sustainability is incredibly complex, this summit proved it, he says.

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Ahead of the Global Fashion Summit in Copenhagen this week, the non-profit organisation has launched the GFA Monitor, a report to guide fashion towards a net positive future.

By [Maliha Shoaib](#) and [Bella Webb](#)

This year's theme was “alliances for a new era” but high-level pacts and promises can only go so far, says Fashion Innovation Agency's Moin Roberts-Islam. “Bold, visionary statements give the industry a North Star, but they often don't change the situation on the ground. Real progress will come from brands collaborating with their competitors and meeting solutions providers, sharing successful case studies for others to learn from and replicate.” To this end, many criticised a lack of diversity, and particularly speakers from within the supply chain, at the forum.

The fashion industry does have several alliances at play, but they are disjointed and mostly voluntary. [The Fashion Pact](#), which includes over 75 groups and companies, with brands from Gucci to Chanel, has promised to stop global warming, restore biodiversity and protect the oceans, but is not legally binding. Similarly, the [UN Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action](#) has levels of membership, with some signatories committed to its clauses and others for whom implementing change in their own supply chain is not a condition of entry.

Select attendees were given a masterclass on the new GFA Monitor report, and how to take action from it.

Photo: Courtesy of Global Fashion Summit: Copenhagen Edition



There were some positives: universal standards and shared industry values were core to the GFA Monitor, a new report to guide fashion brands towards a net positive industry by the event organiser, Global Fashion Agenda (GFA). GFA also unveiled the Global Circular Fashion Forum, a global initiative to scale the recycling of post-industrial textile waste in textile manufacturing countries. Supply chain transparency and traceability platform TrusTrace released an open-source traceability playbook in collaboration with campaigning organisation Fashion Revolution and Amsterdam-based change agency Fashion for Good, whose partners include Kering and PVH.

But there is work to do. Hotly discussed topics were decarbonising the supply chain, sustainability in the metaverse and garment worker rights. Challenges that persist include a lack of funding for significant change and representation from the communities on the frontlines of fashion's impact.

Several major fashion brands took the opportunity to introduce new business models; a common thread was the concept of “timeless design” that is no longer seasonal as a sustainability solution. Ralph Lauren's new circularity strategy, announced exclusively on *Vogue Business*, positions seasonless items designed with longevity in mind as a key driver of rental, resale and repair services. At Kering-owned cult favourite Bottega Veneta, CEO Leo Rongone says timeless designs like its intrecciato handbags are core to its founding values. The brand will be re-releasing handbags from previous collections at their original full price, which Rongone says reflects their “enduring value”.

Global Fashion Agenda CEO Federica Marchionni giving the opening address.

Photo: Courtesy of Global Fashion Summit: Copenhagen Edition

The overall mood was a sense of unity after a turbulent pandemic period — this marked the first in-person event in two years. Whether that will move the needle remains to be seen, and participants agreed that more diverse voices are still needed at the table. “We all turned inward during the pandemic,” says Allbirds head of sustainability Hana Kajimura. “It has been great to see the big picture again, and get a pulse on where the rest of the industry is.”

Collaboration took centre stage

A bombshell came from Liz Ricketts, founder of The Or Foundation, a non-profit based between the US and Ghana, which advocates for environmental justice and awareness around the impact of thrown-away fashion burdening Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana, such as the crushing physical impact on women carrying bales of clothes, and the 40 per cent that remain unsellable, often diverted to Ghana's shores and landfills. The Or Foundation will receive \$5 million annually for three years from fast fashion retailer Shein — recently reported to be worth \$100 billion — as part of the brand's Extended Producer Responsibility Fund.

“We have been calling on brands to pay the bill that is due to the communities who have been managing their waste, and this is a significant step toward accountability,” says Ricketts. “What we see as truly revolutionary is Shein's acknowledgement that their clothing may be ending up here in Kantamanto, a simple fact that no other major fashion brand has been willing to state as yet.”

The Or Foundation co-founder Liz Ricketts sharing the news of Shein's \$15 million grant.

Photo: Courtesy of Global Fashion Summit: Copenhagen Edition

The audience response was mixed, with critics pointing out that this is pocket change for a company the size of Shein, and it isn't sufficient to donate without changing the business model creating waste in the first place. "You can't run a permanent programme on \$15 million, especially over three years," says Joanne Brasch, special project manager at the California Product Stewardship Council.

Sustainable fashion writer and advocate Sophie Benson summed up the complexity neatly. "The Or Foundation's agreement with Shein does not represent an endorsement of the brand's practices," she says. "We should not be celebrating Shein for doing the absolute bare minimum in mitigating its impact and it doesn't excuse the waste it creates or the harm it causes. But the money will prove vital in supporting and furthering The Or Foundation's work, and those who are not on the ground doing that work have no place criticising them for accepting the money."

Adam Whinston, Shein's global head of ESG, said via email that the partnership is about transparency. "Through this agreement we acknowledge that some of our clothing may be ending up in Kantamanto, and other markets like it. This acknowledgement is a first step toward our goal of industry-wide reckoning."

Funding climate action was another running theme. The Apparel Impact Institute announced a [\\$250 million Fashion Climate Fund](#), backed by H&M and Lululemon. The fund is aimed at decarbonisation, and will finance initiatives throughout the supply chain, from transitioning to renewable energy to scaling next-generation materials.

Others made individual commitments, in the hope of inspiring more brands to follow in their footsteps. Copenhagen-based Ganni, whose founders hosted select attendees for a dinner in their home on Tuesday night, brought three next-gen '[fabrics of the future](#)' – Mylo, Stem and Circulose – to market, with limited-edition releases aimed at supporting material innovators to scale.

Ganni founder Nicolaj Reffstrup on the action stage, sharing the brand's journey from carbon offsetting to carbon insetting.

Photo: Courtesy of Global Fashion Summit: Copenhagen Edition

British brand Mulberry said it will work with Eon to embed all products with digital IDs by 2025, starting with pre-owned items bought back for its Mulberry Exchange programme, and extending to new products in the next year or two. Mulberry is the first member of the Sustainable Markets Initiative Fashion Task Force to follow through on its commitment to embed digital product IDs, and CEO Thierry Andretta says he hopes the move will encourage other members to move faster. "Authentication is important to customers," he explains. "This is the future."

Diverse voices bring more fruitful discussions

Among attendees, there was a general consensus that diversity and authenticity should be at the heart of conversations about change. Many commented on the lack of conflict between panellists on stage, remarking that collaboration often involves difficult conversations. “We strive to hear from many voices, and we always promise to be more global, driving more impact,” says GFA CEO Federica Marchionni, who joined in 2021 from Secoo International.

“This year’s summit saw a huge increase in diverse voices from all over the world, with different lived experiences who hold power in fashion coming together to learn,” says designer and educator Rahemur Rahman. “I wish the garment workers, leather tanners and farmers — the people our decisions affect — had more presence.”

A panel called ‘Subverting Fashion’s Historical Exclusion’, with In Futurum co-founder Moussa Mchangama, Better Buying Institute co-founder Dr Marsha Dickson, and Buzigahill founder Bobby Kolade.

Photo: Courtesy of Global Fashion Summit: Copenhagen Edition

Nina Stevenson, head of education at London College of Fashion’s Centre for Sustainable Fashion, agreed. “Fashion is still on a business-as-usual trajectory. If the solutions work continues to be driven by those in the Global North, without listening and learning from those personally affected by our actions, then it will be in vain.”

Still, others acknowledged the progress made since its foundation in 2009. Marchionni notes the diversity of attendees was limited by Covid-19 travel restrictions and challenges. To help counter this, GFA is planning to expand its reach, with a new summit in South-East Asia soon to be announced. “We want more representation across the value chain,” she explains.

The real measure of the summit’s impact will be in the months to come, Marchionni continues. GFA is planning to survey attendees several times in the next year to understand what has changed as a result of the summit, and the connections formed there. “It’s good to take a pledge and make a commitment, but you need discipline in the follow-through.”

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