



## BEYOND AESTHETICS: ANIMAL CRUELTY, ENVIRONMENTAL HARM, AND THE FUTURE OF ETHICAL FASHION

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### Abstract

*The fashion industry's long dependence on and association with animal-derived materials has been a subject of growing concern. This article presents a critical examination of the practice of employing animals in fashion from socio-economic, ethical, and environmental dimensions. It traces the historical origins, contemporary trends, and the growing resistance and calls for a shift in industrial practices. The study highlights how fur, leather, wool, and exotic skins have traditionally symbolised luxury and status while they simultaneously contribute to animal cruelty and ecological degradation. Drawing from data sets, global case studies, and several investigative reports, this paper sheds light on the cruelty that is embedded within the system. Further, it has been noticed that there exist glaring inadequacies in welfare standards established to ensure a check on these exploitative practices. In response to rising ethical awareness, there has been a notable growth in vegan materials and biotechnological innovations offering cruelty-free alternatives. These alternatives possess significant potential for creating a future of cruelty-free fashion. The article concludes with a call for introspection, advocating the need for collective action on the part of all stakeholders, policymakers, and consumers to transition towards an ethical and sustainable fashion that is built upon principles of compassion and ecological balance.*

**Keywords:** Fashion, Animal-Derived Products, Cruelty, Sustainable Alternatives, Innovation.

### INTRODUCTION

*"The question is not, can they reason? Nor can they talk but rather, but can they suffer?"*

-Jeremy Bentham

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The world of fashion has long been entangled with the use of animal-derived materials and products. Its most prevalent use is in leather, fur, silk, wool, and exotic skins. The history of their use dates to ancient times. In the Middle Ages, fur was a symbol of wealth and status, worn by nobility and royalty. The 20th century saw the rise of the luxury fashion industry, with brands like Hermès and Chanel incorporating exotic skins and furs into their collections. In the Indian context, it is observed that silk, wool, and leather form an integral part of Indian traditional attire - Pashmina shawls, Banarasi silk sarees, and finely crafted leather sandals.

The economic value of these animal-derived materials contributes to the profitability of the businesses that exploit these animals. These materials have always been celebrated for their aesthetic look and glorious assumption of quality and standards, or class. Nonetheless, they come with a high cost - the suffering of animals and considerable environmental impacts. Millions of animals suffer annually for fashion. According to a 2023 report by the global animal welfare organisation, FOUR PAWS, an estimated 5 billion animals are used annually in the fashion industry, with many of them being subjected to inadequate welfare standards and cruel practices, leading animals to be treated merely as objects.<sup>1</sup>

Some data highlighting the unbelievable number of animals affected by the absence or lack of animal welfare can very plausibly convey the seriousness of the issue:

- “3.4 billion ducks and geese are used for down and feathers,
- 777 million cows, sheep, lambs, and goats are slaughtered for meat and leather,
- 672 million animals (merino sheep, cashmere goats, alpaca, angora goats, and rabbits) to produce fine wool,
- 107 million animals slaughtered for fur, 3 million wild animals slaughtered for exotic leather.”<sup>2</sup>

Fur farming is a cruel practice where animals like rabbits, minks, foxes, chinchillas, and others are confined and subjected to unsanitary living conditions, lack of care, and slaughter through inhuman methods (such as strangulation and electrocution). The fur trade, valued at over \$20 billion globally in 2021, speaks much about the seriousness of the issue, with Europe

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<sup>1</sup> “Animal Use in Fashion and Little Oversight of Welfare” (FOUR PAWS International - Animal Welfare Organisation) <<https://www.four-paws.org/our-stories/blog-news/animal-use-in-fashion-and-little-oversight-of-welfare>>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

contributing 50% of worldwide fur.<sup>3</sup> This industry not only has an absolute disregard for animal welfare but also employs the use of vast amounts of resources - water, energy, and harmful chemicals, making it unsustainable and potentially harmful to the ecosystem.

Cattle tend to be the most exploited animal for leather; others include deer, lamb, eels, stingrays, and ostriches. Kid (goat) skin is often used to make gloves. Economically, the industry is valued at "\$240 billion in 2022" and is expected to grow "6% annually until 2030." Fashion brands like Gucci have been excessively utilizing leather in creating products such as shoes and bags." A 2020 investigation by PETA has disclosed the horrific conditions of animals in a global fashion brand's supply chain. But not to forget, "the industry simultaneously contributes to deforestation, greenhouse emissions from tanning processes."<sup>4</sup>

Birds suffer great pain as they are fully conscious while their feathers are being pulled out, and are even killed if no longer profitable. Down, which is a delicate layer of feathers found on the chest area and is closest to the skin, is demanded in large numbers by "manufacturers of clothing and comforters because it is devoid of quills". In 2021, an investigation was conducted by PETA in Vietnam slaughterhouses, which produced "responsible down". It revealed the cruel reality where birds were being subjected to vapid living conditions, immobilised due to infections. Some were being tied and stabbed in the neck while still conscious.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to popular notion, wool production is not in any way good for the sheep. Sheep go through the painful procedure of mulesing, which is just part of the exploitation that they suffer, in addition to stress, pain, overcrowded living conditions, and unethical treatment of animals. Similarly, silk production involves boiling silkworms alive in their cocoons. An estimated 3,000 silkworms were killed to produce just 450 grams of silk, as reported by PETA. That implies billions of them face death every year. The use of exotic skins like those from alligators, snakes, or crocodiles raises concerns about the exploitation of wild animal populations and the cruelty of their capture and slaughter. Reports from TRAFFIC reveal that "India is a significant hub for smuggling animal-derived products, particularly tiger and pangolin skins."

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<sup>3</sup> Journal FL, "Fur, Faux And Foe; Animal Rights, Laws, And Ethics In The Fashion Industry - Fashion Law Journal" (Fashion Law Journal, May 29, 2023) <<https://fashionlawjournal.com/fur-faux-and-foe-animal-rights-laws-and-ethics-in-the-fashion-industry/>>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> "Ducks Stabbed, Legs Cut Off for 'Responsible' Down | PETA" (PETA Exposés and Undercover Investigations, October 4, 2024) <<https://investigations.peta.org/vietnam-responsible-down/>>

Animal testing is another practice that remains controversial in the fashion and beauty industry, where products, such as cosmetics and skincare items, are often tested on animals. The process involves subjecting animals to harm and suffering. Globally, over 115 million animals are used in laboratory experiments annually, including species such as rabbits, rats, mice, dogs, guinea pigs, and birds. The United States beauty industry alone accounts for more than 110 million animal deaths due to regular testing each year, according to PETA.<sup>6</sup> These animals are subjected to "confinement, restraint, and physical and psychological torture." Despite widespread criticism and well-documented evidence showing that results from animal testing do not accurately predict human responses (Journal of the American Medical Association), this gruesome practice persists due to regulatory requirements and outdated methodologies.

Public opposition to animal testing has encouraged the search for more humane alternatives, such as "cellular models and computer simulations." As steps are being taken to come up with innovative replacements, the issue of the welfare of animals used for fashion products remains largely neglected. Interestingly, only a small percentage of animal-derived materials meet welfare standards—"less than 3% of wool, around 4% of down and feathers, and under 1% of alpaca wool" meet the required standards.<sup>7</sup>

*"Fast fashion is not free. Someone somewhere is paying the price."*

The use of animals in the fashion industry simultaneously raises significant environmental concerns, extending far beyond the immediate suffering of animals. Greenhouse gas emissions through animal agriculture, like leather, fur, and wool production, are considerably high in amounts, such as methane released during the digestion of livestock like cattle. The industry also demands vast tracts of land for grazing and growing feed crops, leading to "habitat destruction, deforestation, and the loss of biodiversity." This conversion of natural ecosystems into farmland eliminates vital carbon sinks, exacerbating climate change. Water usage is another critical issue, as animal farming consumes enormous amounts of water for both livestock and crop cultivation purposes, leading several regions to face water scarcity. Moreover, the process of tanning leather and processing fur releases harmful pollutants like

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<sup>6</sup> Wolfe W, "Animals in Fashion" (Watson & Wolfe, April 1, 2024)

<<https://www.watsonwolfe.com/2023/09/01/animals-in-the-fashion-industry/?srsltid=AfmBOopEKWwfkzC89KlmdvXyisbNh9oAxb6GImneJ8mna-TzS4ToVB2Y>>

<sup>7</sup> "Animal Use in Fashion and Little Oversight of Welfare" (FOUR PAWS International - Animal Welfare Organisation) <<https://www.four-paws.org/our-stories/blog-news/animal-use-in-fashion-and-little-oversight-of-welfare>>

chromium and formaldehyde into waterways, endangering "aquatic ecosystems" and public health.

Beyond these few listed environmental impacts, these animal-derived materials pose even broader risks to human health and planetary boundaries. Large-scale animal farming generates significant waste, which, if not properly managed, leads to water contamination and excessive nutrient pollution, disrupting ecosystems. The industry's intensive resource use contributes to global pressures on land, water, and energy systems, with livestock farming accounting for up to 16.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there was a direct link noticed "between the spread of zoonotic diseases and the global fashion industry" owing to the crowded conditions of animal farms, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, outbreaks occurred on mink farms across multiple countries, such as Italy, Poland, and Sweden. "The use of animal-derived materials is not sustainable in the long term." The Fashion Industry must revolutionise itself to collectively replace this use of animals in their world with sustainable and ethical alternatives.

The European Union (EU) has taken significant steps to curb animal cruelty in fashion. In the EU, the import of seal skins and dog and cat furs, as well as their trade, has been prohibited since 2009. However, as of 2023, the European Parliament is still debating a comprehensive ban on fur imports, while concerns remain over its "economic consequences" as the EU is a "leading fur producer and seller". A fur farming ban will come into force in Norway in 2025. In October 2019, Slovakia joined the list of countries that are no longer permitting extreme animal cruelty by introducing legislation that will end fur production by 2025. Estonia agreed on a fur farming ban from 2026.<sup>9</sup>

In 2019 state of California came up with the Fur Products Prohibition Act, becoming the 1<sup>st</sup> US state to prohibit the sale of fur products. The law came into effect on January 1, 2023. China stands as the largest fur market with 1.4 billion consumers and, at the same time, lacks comprehensive animal welfare laws. Very few concrete, enforceable legislations target the fur farming issues and the businesses are subjected to no penalties for not complying with these legislations. Little consideration is given to welfare standards while breeding. The Fur Free Alliance's program - Fur Free Retailer- provides access to information for customers and

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<sup>8</sup> "Tackling Climate Change through Livestock" <<https://www.fao.org/4/i3437e/i3437e00.htm>>

<sup>9</sup> "Fur Bans" (FOUR PAWS International - Animal Welfare Organisation) <<https://www.four-paws.org/campaigns-topics/topics/animals-abused-for-fashion/fur-bans#:~:text=The%20Fur%20Free%20Pioneers&text=A%20fur%20farming%20ban%20will,fur%20farming%20ban%20from%202026.>>>

merchants about companies embracing fur-free trends. Currently, more than 1,000 merchants around the globe, including about 30 Chinese businesses, have pledged to a fur-free future.<sup>10</sup> In the Indian context, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act of 1960 regulates the treatment of animals across industries but does not explicitly cover fashion. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 mainly targets the hunting and trade of endangered species and covers the illegal trade of exotic skins (such as tiger and snake skins). In 2017, India banned the import of mink, fox, and chinchilla fur. However, it still permits the import of "raw hides, skins, leather, fur skin from reptiles, mink, fox, and other fur animals (whole, with or without a head, tail or paws)." Animal rights organisations, backed by the Animal Welfare Board of India, have urged the Union government to take a firmer stance on the matter and ban the trading of exotic skins.

In hindsight, the fashion industry is currently transforming, as innovative alternatives to animal-based materials take centre stage. There is a decrease in the retail value of fur by 9 billion dollars (2017-2021). Global fashion brands- Armani, Gucci, and Versace have taken steps towards eliminating the use of animal-derived fur. Textile and biotechnological advancements have promoted the use of vegan fashion and materials; as a result, Vegan Fashion is finally gaining traction. Modern textiles now offer sustainable, cruelty-free options that rival—and often surpass—traditional fabrics like wool, fur, and leather. Common vegan fabrics such as polyester, hemp, and bamboo have already become promising alternatives, and further innovation has paved the way for more sustainable materials such as cork, pineapple leaves, apple peels, pineapple-based leather (Pinatex), mushroom-based leather (Muskin) and other fruit waste. These materials offer equivalent aesthetics, are cruelty-free, and are environmentally friendly. They reduce waste and carbon footprints. They are both, ethically and environmentally, a better option. Even recycled plastics are being reimaged into durable fabrics, making fashion more accessible without compromising on aesthetics or functionality. Such advancements have proven that fashion can be ethical and practical, moving away from the outdated reliance on animal-derived products.<sup>11</sup>

Vegan materials as alternatives to leather and fur offer products with a similar texture, durability, and appeal. Mushroom leather (Muskin) and Piñatex excellently replicate the qualities of animal leather while simultaneously minimising animal harm. Moreover, recycled

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<sup>10</sup> Journal FL, "Fashion Fur and Fur Laws Across The Globe - Fashion Law Journal" (Fashion Law Journal, March 9, 2023) <<https://fashionlawjournal.com/fashion-fur-and-fur-laws-across-the-globe/#:~:text=Moreover%2C%20there%20are%20Rules%20and,of%20origin%20of%20the%20garment.>>

<sup>11</sup> "Leather, Wool, and Other Clothing Made From Animals | PETA" (PETA, September 27, 2024) <<https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-clothing/>>

materials, including “recycled plastic or second-hand leather”, have also emerged as sustainable solutions to combat waste and animal exploitation. Nonetheless, these materials come with their own set of limitations - some vegan leathers rely on petroleum-based synthetics, “contributing to plastic waste.”<sup>12</sup> Ongoing developments in biotechnology aim to create materials that eliminate these drawbacks.

The fashion industry can embrace these ethical, animal-cruelty-free alternatives. It is simultaneously important for consumers to be made increasingly aware of the backhand exploitation of animals that is accounted as the cost of their fashion and about the benefits of these alternatives. By prioritising sustainability and innovation, the fashion industry and consumers alike can reimagine fashion as an industry that values compassion and environmental responsibility.

Think about it: is a trendy, exquisite outfit worth the life of a living being? A living being with family, emotions, and the instinct to survive. Animals are not commodities. They shouldn't be stripped of their skin or have their feathers plucked for a piece of cloth you would adorn for a few hours or a few days. For a jacket that lasts a season. For a bag that fades with trends. No one's life should be discarded for pleasure. A piece of fashion may go out of style, but compassion never goes out of style. It is high time people say no to the use of animals in fashion and end this cruelty!

*“All beings tremble before violence. All fear death, all love life. See yourself in others. Then whom can you hurt? What harm can you do?”*

- Buddha

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<sup>12</sup> “Animal Welfare in the Fashion Industry” <<https://www.cikis.studio/en/article/animal-welfare-in-the-fashion-industry>>



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