Vague Concepts and Issue Washing: Women's Empowerment in Fashion Supply Chains

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Conflict of Interest

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Abstract

This paper explores women's empowerment in fashion supply chains, providing a definition and an analysis of women's empowerment reporting by major fashion brands. Using a systematic literature review, we identified 45 articles on women's empowerment in supply chains and developed a theoretical framework. We applied the framework to seven multinational fashion groups and analysed their communication materials over five years. Women's empowerment programmes, initiatives and actions are not aligned with women's empowerment definitions. To operationalise women's empowerment within supply chains, women workers must be able to procure leadership positions and have the opportunity to intervene in the decision-making process where local, cultural, and social contexts are considered. We provide insights into women's empowerment including, the need for a consistent definition and the first steps to develop a framework towards women's empowerment in fashion supply chains while also identifying the drivers, impeders, enablers and outcomes of women's empowerment in supply chains.

Keywords Supply chain management, Women's empowerment, Gender issues, Fashion industry, Systematic literature review

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment is a challenging yet valuable concept. In most societies women face persistent gender inequalities and underrepresentation when entering the labour market. The literature shows that women's empowerment has the potential to identify and enable transformational change for women to claim their rights (Rowlands, 1995), make decisions (Kabeer, 1999; Richardson, 2018), or begin to access power (Hoang, 2019; MacArthur, Carrard, and Willetts, 2021). However, despite its importance, the concept of women's empowerment is founded on an ambiguous construct. Some authors revisit existing definitions (e.g., Kabeer, Batliwala, Rowlands), while others take definitions from different fields (e.g., education, management, development or economics) without reaching consensus on what women's empowerment is. Where there is no definition, the reader can freely use their own interpretation of the concept, leading to misperceptions of what women's empowerment is and how it may happen (Rowlands, 1995). This results in abstract and fuzzy definitions (Kabeer, 1999), resulting in confusion as various mechanisms are proposed without clarity.

There is much to learn from local, cultural and social contexts that directly affect women's empowerment within global supply chains. For example, men are considered an impeder to women's empowerment, especially in production countries where cultural norms suppress women (de Brauw, Kramer and Murphy, 2021; Jabeen et al., 2020), but it is important to understand how impeders, such as men, can become part of the solution. Skill development is seen as a key to empower women by providing knowledge that transforms into a cognitive state that would then allow women to perceive themselves as capable to perform or have control over their jobs (Cabral and Dhar, 2019; Bhandari, 2017).

Our study provides a more nuanced understanding of what specific mechanisms are needed for women to survive poor, precarious working conditions and overcome patriarchal barriers. We identify several social innovations, for example, 'Table Banking' in Kenya

(Cherotich, Sibiko, and Ayuya, 2021), the gemstones traders in Madagascar (Lawson and Lahiri-Dutt, 2020) that contribute to our knowledge of women's empowerment in supply chains in terms of how cultural, social and economic issues can be solved and how female entrepreneurship can be enhanced.

Women's empowerment in supply chain examples include multinational company (MNC) projects such as Unilever's 'Shakti', and Business for Social Responsibility's (BSR) and Levi Strauss & Co. (Levi's) co-funded 'HER' project, both of which have not only helped women generate income and improve their self-esteem but have brought operational benefits such as reduced absenteeism and turnover rates. These examples show that companies can empower women workers in their supply chains and help them gain economic benefits, competitive advantage or improvement in their company image and reputation. However, no information has been disclosed about the longitudinal impact, actual progress or real change made by these projects.

Despite commitments and pledges that advocate women's empowerment, including the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), practice and research focuses on women's empowerment at the company level and does not stream to the supply chain. For example, four out of 61 Vodafone country subsidiaries (Vodafone Albania Sh. A., Egypt, Turkey, and New Zealand Ltd.) have signed the WEPs (Vodafone Group, 2021; WEP, 2022), however the evidence given pertains to Vodafone's human resources (HR) business processes to empower women in the workplace rather than what happens across the subsidiaries (e.g., Tataru et al., 2020).

Acknowledging the knowledge gaps of the empowerment process in the supply chain context, this study explores women's empowerment in a complex and women-worker-dominated industry: fashion. The fashion industry, including the textile, apparel (clothing), and footwear sectors, is one of the largest and most influential industries in the global economy. In

2017, the clothing market was valued at US$3 trillion and represented two per cent of the world gross domestic product (UNECE, 2020). The fashion industry employs more than 300 million people across complex supply chains (SWD, 2017) and is characterized by a larger proportion of women at the workforce. Major fashion production countries employ a large amount of people with low socio-economic profiles, workers and young women are, therefore, believed to reach a social and economic uplift thanks to global fashion production (ILO, 2021).

Fashion has complex, globally dispersed, and fragmented supply chains over multiple tiers shared with other industries, such as agriculture and petrochemicals, which provide natural fibres and chemical manufacturer synthetics (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Fashion supply chains are characterised by short product life cycles, demand instability, changing product portfolios, and complex supply chain processes (Sen, 2008). Detrimental social and environmental fashion supply chain scandals include, for example, Nike child labour in 1996 and the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse (Khurana and Ricchetti, 2016).

Fashion supply chains are important as an extreme context to explore complex social issues, such as modern slavery (Benstead et al., 2021) women's empowerment, because they are not only characterised by complexity and lack of transparency (Niinimäki et al., 2020) but also brands' demand for flexible arrangements, such as lower costs and shorter lead times (Perry and Towers, 2013). In most cases, brands even do not know who their suppliers are (van der Weerd, 2021). In addition, despite research in fashion supply chains (e.g., Benstead et al., 2022; Macchion et al., 2018), little is known about the women workers in this industry.

Gender distribution of factory workers in apparel supply chains of Africa, Asia, and the Americas usually presents a ratio of women workers larger than that of their male counterparts (Brown, 2021). In Asia, women represent above half of the garment workforce (ILO, 2019a). For example, women in Cambodia and Indonesia represent more than 80 and 58 per cent of the garment workers, respectively (ILO, 2019a). Women experiencing significant wage

inequalities are exposed to numerous workplace hazards, long and unpredictable working hours for wages below the living costs without overtime pay and are exposed to gender-based harassment and violence, including physical assault and rape (Brown, 2021). Additionally, most women are young workers that are at disadvantage for having low levels of education in addition to inadequate labour legislation within fashion production countries. Women are exposed to unfair practices, human right violations with limited bargaining power (Khurana and Ricchetti, 2016). Given all knowledge gaps and issues explored above, this study poses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. *What factors affect women's empowerment within supply chains?* This research question will be answered by a systematic literature review (SLR),

RQ2. *What initiatives do global fashion companies reportedly use to enact women's empowerment within their supply chains?* This will be answered by exploring the communications of the largest fashion groups.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Systematic Literature Review

SLR is a review of prior research using a specific criteria in order to answer clearly formulated question(s) and that employs a systematic method to locate, search, and synthesise knowledge in a well-organised process (Ismail, Ramli and Aziz, 2021). As a replicable process through a bias free lens, SLR provides methodological transparency to produce comprehensive knowledge (Siddaway, Wood, and Hedges, 2019). The key steps for a systematic review, according to Tranfield et al. (2003), compromise planning, conducting, and reporting.

For the planning, specific criteria were established for the inclusion and exclusion of articles. Peer-review journal articles were included with empirical, conceptual and review studies in English. To ensure scientific rigour and robustness only peer-reviewed academic articles published in scientific journals were included. This is a supply chain study looking at women workers operating across multiple tiers of global supply chains. Therefore, articles that see women exclusively as consumers or general members of society were excluded as well as those that ignore women in supply chains or women's empowerment. Publication year was not considered an exclusion criterion. The Web of Science database was used as it is one of the most comprehensive databases for academic research and is an inclusive and wide-ranging database for conducting systematic review studies (Gusenbauer and Haddaway, 2019).

The next step was conducting the review. This study employed a four-step research process, as illustrated in Figure 1. The process began with the identification of a combination of keywords. The keywords for the search were derived from the theoretical gaps. Since women's empowerment and female empowerment are used interchangeably as synonyms, the following two search strings were used to capture all the articles written for the subject: [("women's empowerment") and [("female empowerment"). In order to capture the full range of initiatives happening with supply chain, the term AND ("suppl*)] was also used.

Following the identification of keyword combinations, Step 1 resulted in 233 research articles, after we combined the two strings and removed duplicate articles. The list of 233 research articles was then reduced by carefully checking the titles of the articles for relevance to women's empowerment. For instance, several articles exclusive to topics such as the health sector (50 articles), food security (8 articles), human trafficking and violence against women outside supply chains (7 articles), energy and water supply (6 articles), population research (3 articles), poultry and animal studies (3 articles) and forestry (1 article) were discarded. This step provided 155 full research articles. In Step 3 article abstracts were reviewed using the same

exclusion and inclusion criteria. The number of articles was reduced to a total of 64 research articles. Lastly, in Step 4, we reviewed the full articles. Research articles that mentioned women's empowerment in the abstract but not in the body of the article were discarded. The search process resulted in a final sample of 45 articles (summarised in Appendix 1). Five additional articles were included as original sources of definitions or concepts.

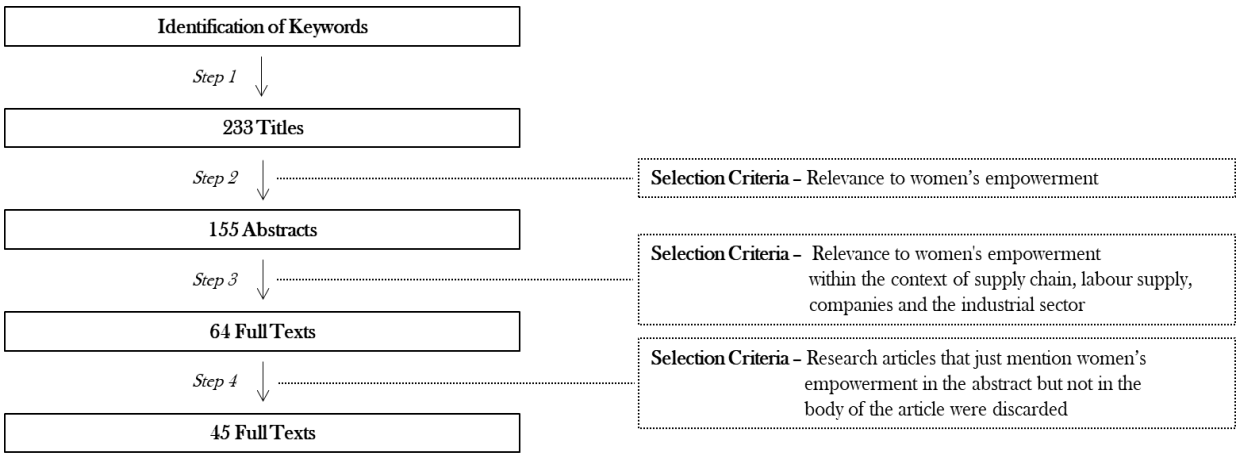

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Process

Each article was read thoroughly. We then began the process of extracting first-order constructs. We extracted data from the sample of 45 articles using a standard excel form to summarise the subject areas as well as descriptive details which included information on the authors, year and journal of publication, methods and theories used and the contexts of the research. First-order constructs were grouped into second-order constructs that involved specific categories such as, the definition of women's empowerment, the factors (drivers, impeders, enablers) influencing women's empowerment, empowerment mechanisms, outcomes and future research. Finally, third-order constructs were built to synthesise the findings into the main issues.

2.2 Report Analysis

To explore women's empowerment in fashion supply chains, we analysed commitments and initiatives reported by fashion groups on women's empowerment within their supply chains. A theoretical sample was selected by looking at the top fashion groups included in the Forbes Global 2000 list (2021). The Forbes list looks closely into the companies' assets and sales as well as market value and profits to measure, compare, and rank the largest companies. We were driven by research stating that large companies are more likely to disclose performance (Linich, 2014). To ensure representation across the industry, our sample included: two largest holding groups in the luxury sector (LVMH and Kering), two largest brands in the sportswear sector (Nike and Adidas), and three largest giants in the mass-market sector (Inditex, Fast Retailing, and H&M). The profiles are summarised in Appendix 2. Specifically, we analysed publicly available information from annual and sustainability reports, websites and communication materials from the years between 2016 and 2021. This period allowed us to observe and compare the evolution of seven groups' supply chain commitments to women's empowerment.

3. Results

3.1 Defining Women's Empowerment

Achieving empowerment either as a process or as an outcome involves closely looking at disempowerment and addressing power inequalities that shape decision-making processes, Women's empowerment is woven into concepts and forms of power use, resulting in multiple interpretations of empowerment.

When integrated with power, women's empowerment definitions focus on the *'ability of one person or a group to get another person or groups to do something against their will'* (Rowlands, 1995, p. 101). Such power can be described as zero-sum, the power gain from one side is equivalent to the loss or reduction on the other side (Kabeer, 1999). Power can be

experienced in diverse ways, therefore distinct forms of power cover different purposes and achieve distinctive effects on society.

Threat, economic and integrative power are three forms of power that possess unique characteristics (Rowlands, 1995). Threat power is an extreme form of violence or any kind of force. Economic power is having enough resources (income) to be able to make own decisions in life. Integrative power refers to the creation of relationships such as love, respect, friendship, and legitimacy (Rowlands, 1995). Insights from gender theory state that power goes beyond power over people or resources (Rowlands, 1995) with four types of power relations: 'power over' (ability to influence and coerce), 'power to' (organise and change existing hierarchies), 'power with' (collective action power) and 'power within' (individual consciousness power).

Further definitions include Srilatha Batliwala's definition: '*a spiral, changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analysing activities and outcomes'* (Mosedale, 2005, p. 248). While Kabeer (1999), provides the most used definition of women's empowerment as *'the process by which women increase their ability to make life choices'* (p. 435).

Despite the popular notion suggesting that empowerment equals to having unlimited options and liberty of freedom of choice, this is misleading. Choices can occur after a process of conscientisation, *'individuals becoming subjects in their own lives and developing a critical consciousness, that is an understanding of their circumstances and the social environment that leads to action'* (Rowlands, 1995, p. 103).

The concept of empowerment in modern times can be traced to the last half of the twentieth century, when it was *'adopted by the liberation theology, popular education, black power, feminist and other movements engaged in struggles for more equitable, participatory, and democratic forms of social change and development'* (Batliwala, 2007, p. 558). Since the

role of women in society has been changing over the decades, women's empowerment can be understood as a transformative process (Richardson, 2018).

Although definitions of women's empowerment abound, there is a consensus on several core concepts: agency, resources, and achievements (Kabeer, 2005). Agency represents the processes to make choices and act upon them (considered a main component of empowerment). Resources are the channels through which agency is practiced (including material, human and social resources that enable the exercise of choices). Finally, achievements are the desired or wanted results of agency implementation. Therefore, there is no endpoint to women's empowerment, instead women's empowerment is an ongoing process and can endure distinct levels of influence within different relationships, over time, experience, and conditions. Based on these ideas we define women's empowerment in supply chains as: '*the dynamic and adaptive process by which women workers in supply chains enable their own sense of self-worth; ability to make and act on their choices without fear, harassment or discrimination; and the right to influence social change for the common good*'.

3.2. Factors Affecting Women's Empowerment in Supply Chains

The main factors affecting women's empowerment in supply chains are divided into drivers, impeders and enablers.

3.2.1 Drivers of Women's Empowerment in Supply Chains

Trade liberalisation resulted in women's participation in the global economy and became part of the workforce and generated income (Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Women participated in the economy due to the migration of rural labour into urban areas (de Brauw, Kramer and Murphy, 2021). Countries moved to more market-oriented economies where the involvement of women in the workforce represented productive potential (Andonova and Blazheski, 2019). Working

in the formal and informal economy, or as entrepreneurs, women are economically engaged in multiple ways. Now, across developing countries, women constitute much of the labour force of many supply chains, for example agriculture and horticulture (Ragasa and Lambrecht, 2020; Akite et al., 2018), garment and textiles (Ali and Medhekar, 2016), and tourism (Radovic-Markovic and Zivanovic, 2019).

Feminist movements, with an emphasis in Latin America and South Asia, *'evolved their own distinctive approach, pushing consciousness-raising into the realm of radical organising and movement building for gender equality'* (Batliwala, 2007, p. 558-559). During the 1980s, the women's empowerment concept paved the way to get into diverse development and social areas, such as in the fields of education, medical care, development of rural areas, and labour rights. Also, the debates held by feminists from developing countries regarding their disagreement with development interventions with deep economic interests, transformed women's empowerment into a more political and transformative concept that challenge patriarchy and structures of class, race and ethnicity (Batliwala, 2007).

Development agencies, particularly influenced by feminist movements, formed strategies to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment as well as the promotion of equal and decent work (Batliwala, 2007). The work of the United Nations (UN) was pivotal in women's empowerment beginning with the inclusion of the term empowerment instead of women's development in the 1980s. Other initiatives included the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women in 1991, and the Beijing Declaration adopted by the UN at the end of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The conference turned the dominant development discourse into one where the involvement of women was more significant, *'from women as a tool for development to a focus on strategic change addressing perceptions of gender through social relations and gender roles'* (MacArthur, Carrard, and Willetts, 2021, p.1). This strategic change was later seen in the 2015

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as Goal 5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. SDG-5 targets represent structural resources used as drivers for creating favourable conditions for gender equality and women's empowerment (Richardson, 2018).

As gender equality represents an important goal within the UN SDGs, multiple companies started to acknowledge women's empowerment as a visible concern (Tataru et al., 2020). In the era of global competition, companies are realising the role they play in society and that they should contribute to socio-economic development not only within their organisations but also within their entire supply chains, otherwise they risk facing both reputational and financial costs. As the interest and involvement of companies has increased regarding the principles of socially responsible behaviour, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) arose as well as the concept of gendered social responsibility (GSR).

GSR incorporates gender equality objectives into all social responsibility initiatives and practices implemented by a company both internally and externally (Larrieta-Rubin de Celis et al., 2015). Internal GSR practices focus on human resource management within a company. External GSR practices involve commitments to gender equality in local communities with business partners and with suppliers, extending gender equality commitments throughout supply chains (Larrieta-Rubin de Celis et al., 2015). Since the 1990s, further GSR practices have become commonplace.

Concerns over violations related to workers' labour rights and working conditions in global supply chain have led many brands and retailers to constitute supplier codes of conduct (CoCs), as voluntary-regulatory measures, to ensure transparency and to avoid compliance violations of international labour standards in supplier factories (Hoang, 2019).

3.2.2 Impeding Factors

There are multiple factors impeding women's empowerment. There are insurmountable inequalities between men's and women's involvement in labour markets (Arouri and Cuong, 2020) with gender playing an important role in outlining the different components and tasks of labour (de Brauw, Kramer and Murphy, 2021). According to Mukhopadhyay (2018) there are key characteristics defining women's participation in the workforce in developing countries. First, gender stereotypes reinforced by social norms, routinely appoint women to unpaid, arduous and time consuming domestic, childbearing and rearing roles (Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Such roles represent a major impediment for the participation of women in the labour force, especially married women who have to meet social expectations and several roles that inhibit them to stay at work. Second, the depth of patriarchal values in society and the social stigma around working outside the domestic realm have adverse and discouraging effects on female labour force participation (Mukhopadhyay, 2018). In conservative societies, where the voice of men prevails over women in decision-making, women tend to be stay at home or work in part-time jobs. As women can only work part-time and have lower pay, this unequal trend will continue (Mukhopadhyay, 2018).

In addition, women tend to occupy different roles to men. Gender inequality in the labour force drive women to occupy positions in low-productivity activities, self-employment, and in the informal sector (Feeny et al., 2021). Women's predominance in the informal sector is attributed to the inability to access and inherit property, below-average education levels and lack of skill development, restricted access to capital and public services, and gender-based discrimination and labour division (Olu-Owolabi et al., 2020). Even within the formal sector, women are greatly under-represented and those employed face gender pay gap (Feeny et al., 2021). Studies have also shown that women who are employed in export-oriented agro- and manufacturing industries, are more exploited than their male counterparts with long and sudden

work hours during high demand seasons, unexpected lay-offs in low demand seasons and poor working conditions with severe health and safety risks (Kabeer, 2005).

The principles of CSR, as well as CoCs, aim to tackle the poor working conditions characterising global supply chains. However, the implementation of CoCs has been criticised due to lack of transparency, inadequate verifications and auditing practices, which have failed to detect supplier violations in issues such as discrimination, freedom of association and harassment (Hoang, 2019). In addition, studies have exposed practices where suppliers deceiving labour auditors who evaluate CoC compliance (Hoang, 2019). On the other hand, efforts by some Western governments, who have enacted legislation requiring due diligence in supply chains from companies have also been criticised. For example, the UK's Modern Slavery Act of 2015 has put intense pressure onto suppliers' managers to monitor assembly lines, so global companies can avoid modern slavery accusations (Hewamanne, 2020). This has led to surveillance working environments where suspicion and censure have resulted in the critical issues faced by women being ignored, obfuscated or hidden (Hewamanne, 2020).

3.2.3 Enabling Factors

Beyond drivers and barriers, enablers are *'the factors that aid and support the overall evolution or positive change once it has been initiated'* (Khan, 2019, p. 83). Therefore, the creation of a more supportive enabling environment can accelerate efforts for women's empowerment throughout supply chains, and it is essential for an ongoing process with lasting change. An enabling environment for women within the labour market and supply chains is characterised by empowerment enablers such as investment in education, skill development, and training; access to property, technology, and financial resources; access to quality work conditions and decent paid work; and women's collective action.

Investment: Education, skill development, and training represent essential components to empower women. Access to education during childhood has imperative spill-over effects, such as breaking persistent poverty self-reinforcing mechanisms and improving women's equal employment opportunities later in life. Gender gaps reduction in education has been tackled by international legal instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women of 1979, which was ratified by almost all the countries (Feeny et al., 2021). However, in societies characterised by extreme forms of gender inequality, *'women's access to education is curtailed by various restrictions on their mobility, and their limited productive role in the wider economy'* (Kabeer, 2005, p. 17). Education helps women acquire different skills that could be transformed into bargaining power that enable them to demand fair and an increase in wages. (Atal, 2017). Therefore, barriers to education entail significant repercussions for women's future prospects. While educating girls is crucial for boosting future economic outcomes, programmes that train and provide women adults with skills are also essential for women's empowerment. Initiatives and programmes that aim at developing skills *'strengthen the process of women's empowerment by imparting adequate knowledge and enhancing women's sense of belief in their ability to perform a job'* (Cabral and Dhar, 2019, p. 2257).

Access to Resources: Women's empowerment interventions aim, for the most part, to enable women to access, use and control over productive resources (Debela, Gehrke, and Qaim, 2021). Access to and control over property as well as technology (tools and equipment), and financial resources are central to women's financial security, economic opportunities and mobility. Moreover, resources increase household income and wellbeing and broaden women's opportunities for livelihood (Jabeen et al., 2020). However, across the world discriminatory norms and practices in society still exist and confer men over women access and control over resources (Jabeen et al., 2020). For example, in India it is tradition that if someone dies without

leaving a will all their possessions are passed onto their male relatives (Heath and Tan, 2020). Thanks to the amendments to the Hindu Succession Act it is now possible for women to inherit property that turns into an unearned income increase (Heath and Tan, 2020). This entails women having bargaining power and enough autonomy to access greater labour opportunities (Heath and Tan, 2020). Other benefits from women's land and property ownership, include *'women can use as a source of income, either by selling in times of dire need or by using them as collateral to obtain credit for entrepreneurship and other income-generating capital investments'* (Bhandari, 2017, p.7).

The higher participation of females in the workforce, in agriculture and other productive activities within supply chains, fosters the development of gender-friendly tools and equipment (Mehta, Gite, and Khadatkar, 2018). Moreover, providing women with access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), including mobile phones and internet access, has positive effects such as bringing knowledge and information to women (Bhandari, 2017). ICTs are also able to facilitate women the acquisition of loans through microcredit online platforms.

Like property and technology, access to financial services is key to women's empowerment. However, access to financial services such as microcredits is still restrained for women by gender gaps (Arouri and Cuong, 2020). To approach the prevalent credit gap that affects women entrepreneurs, women's empowerment programmes were established to bring access solutions, for example 'Table Banking' and 'Female Enterprise Funding' (Cherotich, Sibiko, and Ayuya, 2021). 'Table Banking' is *'an informal group where members pool their savings and borrow immediately from the contributions "on the table" either for a short-term or long-term period. Members gather monthly to deposit their savings as well as repay their loans with interests'* (Cherotich, Sibiko, and Ayuya, 2021, p. 2). There is also evidence that microcredits can increase female entrepreneurs' income and therefore allows a greater spending of household income for the reduction of poverty (Haase, 2012). Women also benefit from

microcredit by getting more involved in economic activities and increase the labour supply of a region (Arouri and Cuong, 2020).

Access to Decent Work: Good quality working conditions and decent paid work are essential for economic empowerment (Bhandari, 2017). Concerns over controversial labour standards and non-compliance with workers' rights from global brands and retailers supply chains have entailed to the establishment and adoption of suppliers' CoCs to tackle poor working conditions (Hoang, 2019). However much more needs to be done. For instance, living wage agreements aim to assure a specified income for all workers, protecting them from exploitation with unions playing a key role in this (Ike et al., 2019).

Collective Action: Women's capability to build competence and enhance their own economic activity and rights is a central element of the women's empowerment process in supply chains. Collective action takes many forms, for instance women's self-help groups (Lawson and Lahiri-Dutt, 2020), informal groups for finance (Cherotich, Sibiko, and Ayuya, 2021) and workers' unions (Hoang, 2019; Ike et al., 2019). Association with a group is strongly related to improvements in productivity, better income (Kaur, Garg, and Sharma, 2017) and improved working conditions (Ali and Medhekar, 2016) because the group can demand changes in workers' rights, wages, social protection and benefits. Apart from bringing economic advantages, women gain leadership and management skills that build within themselves motivation and enhance feelings of identity and belonging. This inner transformational process can represent gender equality gains that go beyond the workplace into the societies.

3.3 Women's Empowerment Initiatives in Supply Chains

Supply chain management (SCM), in the current environment of globalisation and the increasing dependence on network relations, has been used as a practice to increase competitive advantage (Liu et al., 2017). Business actions that exceed organisational boundaries affect environmental and social conditions across globally dispersed supply chains; hence, companies are responsible for not only their own operations but also of their suppliers' (Fritz et al., 2017). Some industries are characterised by opaque supply chains where millions of female workers are employed.

With the implementation of GSR practices, some companies are investing in women workers in their supply chains by promoting equality throughout gender perspective initiatives that aim at strengthening and empowering women (Prügl, 2015; Larrieta-Rubin de Celis et al., 2015). Though GSR is considered an *'important element towards an enhanced company brand image, new business opportunities, and better risk management'* (Tataru et al., 2020, p. 463), GSR practices tend to be used by companies more as 'guilt cleaning' to *'gain an advantage over competitors in a struggle over market share and to earn legitimacy as they counter the critiques of social forces that challenge them on the public impact of their operations'* (Prügl, 2015, p. 626).

Unilever's Shakti is a project that aimed initially to enter the rural markets of India with direct operations conducted by sales and marketing trained rural women. At the end of 2020, the project established a network of 136,000 women entrepreneurs from rural areas, allowing them to *'reach millions of potential consumers in the countryside, where there is no retail distribution network, no advertising coverage, and poor roads and transport'* (Prügl, 2015, p. 622). Women entrepreneurs were trained in public speaking and they obtained social acceptance from their village as well as increased earnings. However, although most of the dealerships are signed in the names of the women entrepreneurs, mobility restrictions entail that

male relatives must be involved, and it is often the husbands who run and profit from the enterprise (Prügl, 2015).

Among other examples is Unilever's Novella project focused on Tanzania, Ghana and Nigeria. Allanblackia is an African native tree, and its oil is unique as it can be used to produce multiple foods. To ensure the participation of women in all the aspects of the Allanblackia supply chain, they receive education on business best practices and are given a fair and democratic chance to be elected as leaders within participating communities (Attipoe et al., 2006).

Levi's brought CSR and GSR to its supply chains by replacing surveillance and disciplining by making suppliers and employees active partners rather than passive compliers. Levi's engaged with its stakeholders to shift from supply chain management practices to supply chain engagement when they partnered with BSR for the 'HER' project, which brought together global brands and NGOs in supplier countries to provide healthcare services as well as health education among women garment workers (BSR, 2011). HER trained women workers from the factories, clinics and even from the human resources area on issues such as reproductive health, family planning, nutrition, hygiene, infectious diseases, harassment and violence through peer-to-peer mechanisms, bottom-up knowledge, leadership skills, solidarity, and collaborations with civil society organisations. A return-on-investment for a subcontractor in Egypt showed that *'the program delivered four dollars in return for every dollar invested in the form of reduced absenteeism and turnover rates'* (Prügl, 2015, p. 625). Other benefits included lower frequency of error and good reputation for the company, signalling that return-on-investment drives GSR initiatives.

Further examples of women's empowerment in the supply chain literature include the women gemstone traders, working across the sapphire value chain in Madagascar. Since 2016, in the town of Sakaraha, women sapphire traders have received support through workshops

focused on giving an introduction of gemmology and sponsored by the luxury jewellery company, Tiffany and Co. The workshops benefited more than 100 women with tool manipulation and gemstone recognition training. Consequently, women participants perceive themselves as more capable and confident when introduced to new skill sets and knowledge that allow them to earn greater income for their stores. On average, as a result of the training, the original value of the sold gems increased 900 per cent (Lawson and Lahiri-Dutt, 2020). Also in 2018, the Australian government with the collaboration of German Aid founded a women's lapidary centre in Sakaraha, to develop the practice of shaping local gemstones into decorative items such as jewellery. The women involved acquired general training on lapidary practices and small-scale business management, however, the project still has a long way to go in terms of developing markets to sell these products (Lawson and Lahiri-Dutt, 2020).

3.4 Women's Empowerment in the Fashion Industry

Women make up the large majority of workers across all manufacturing phases within global fashion supply chains. For example, 63% of the 1.56 million workers employed within H&M supplier factories are women (H&M, 2021). In Nike, over 70% of workers are women (Nike, 2020b). Fashion groups' reports recognise the substantial value of women and are striving for gender equality and women's empowerment. Indirectly, in alignment with SDG 5 focusing on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, fashion groups have developed initiatives to empower women through several key categories, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Top Fashion Groups' Women's Empowerment Initiatives in the Supply Chain

Category	Programs/Projects	Outcome
Violence and Harassment Prevention (Inditex, 2020; Adidas, 2021)	Sowbhagyam Project Group: Inditex Country: India	In partnership with local organisation SAVE, Inditex carried out audits, implemented controls, and trained supplies to avoid discrimination practices in factories (for example the Sumangali practice, a form of female child labour). During 2020, Inditex raised awareness on children's rights with audio-visual materials in four districts, reaching 2,897 people (59% women and girls).
	Medicus Mundi Protection Programme Group: Inditex Country: India	Inditex raises awareness of workplace harassment and women's rights. Eight factories were involved, and 2,487 workers reached. From January to March of 2020, 22 women from three different factories attended the Annadja Centre of the Union of Feminist Action Association. Legal aid was offered on medical issues, domestic violence, work disputes and psychological assistance.
	Americas Group Project Group: Adidas Country: El Salvador and Honduras	Adidas is an active member of the multi-stakeholder initiative, the Americas Group (AG) that aims to find socially responsible solutions for labour rights violations affecting women workers at the assembly lines of global companies. In 2017, AG also explored new ways to enhance mechanisms of prevention, identification and remediation of gender-based violence in factories.
Health and Well-Being (Inditex, 2020; Adidas, 2021; Marie Stopes Vietnam, 2016; H&M, 2021; ILO, 2019b)	Sakhi Health Programme Group: Inditex Country: India	Inditex conduct the 'Train the Trainers' to upskill 53 people in issues of childcare services, 52 people in pregnant workers' rights and 82 parents in raising children. Awareness raising sessions were also held with 43 management representatives to reinforce the importance of improving health conditions in factories. Also, guidance sessions for the management of canteens, day-care centres and clinics were held. This programme involved 16 factories and reached 23,100 workers (2020).
	Medicus Mundi Programme Group: Inditex Country: Morocco	The programme seeks to promote healthcare rights among at risk workers of the garment industry. It entails four modules: a) medical campaigns for the prevention of occupational diseases (217 women workers benefited in 3 factories), b) prevention campaigns about occupational risks and diseases (occupational physicians trained 28 workers), c) raising awareness on healthcare aspects (introduction sessions with 238 workers of companies involved in the project about healthcare rights), and d) preparation and distribution of information on COVID-19 transmission prevention. The programme involved 34 factories, benefiting 14,174 workers.
	Marie Stopes Project Group: Adidas Country: Vietnam	This involved creating a reproductive health clinic to serve workers and the surrounding communities. A mobile team from the clinic travels out to the factories to provide services, training to factory clinic staff on counselling basic reproductive clinical services, and training to volunteer workers as peer-

		group leaders distributing educational materials and information for workers in the factories. The project improved the sexual and reproductive health of workers in 11 supplier factories.
	Wealth Project Group: H&M Country: Indonesia	In partnership with ILO's Women in STEM project, H&M train women to become trainers to their fellow women workers regarding women's health issues in H&M suppliers' factories. The training was initially conducted by ILO by using soft skills training. By the end of 2020, 118 women were trained who, in turn, had trained 5,000 from the 16,000 workers at 6 factories. The project brought an increase of women's visits in the clinics, women started discussing health issues, one factory started to support midwives about maternal health, and there was a better healthcare awareness.
Financial Training and Loans (Inditex, 2020; H&M, 2021; Solidaridad 2021)	HER Finance Programme Group: Inditex Countries: India, China, Bangladesh	The main achievements of the programme were greater awareness of digital services, risk decreased of theft in areas near the business, administrative workload reduction for businesses, and control over earnings. Additionally, financial training was provided to 14 suppliers, 109 managers, and 389 educators. The programme involved seven factories and benefited 12,219 workers (2020).
	Digital Payments Project Group: H&M Countries: Myanmar, Cambodia, Bangladesh	H&M offered digital payment training. At the end of 2020, over 90% of H&M direct supplier factories in Bangladesh implemented digital payments as well as 82% globally. The transition to digital payments led women to manage their own money.
	Women Entrepreneurs in Gold Communities Project Group: Kering Country: Ghana	In partnership with the civil society organisation Solidaridad, Kering seeks to raise the financial and social position of women through the introduction of Village Savings and Loans Associations which was supported by the civil society (VSLAs; self-managed saving groups that used members' savings to lend to each other); external funding for business support; and training in responsible mining, group dynamics and leadership skills. The project used a €15,000 revolving fund, financed by Kering through their Ethical Gold Fund but managed by the women with the VSLAs. The fund represents an opportunity for women entrepreneurs who don't want to rely on high-interest loans. The project supports around 130 women in three gold mining communities.
Education and Training (Fast Retailing, 2021b;	Career-Building Training Programme Group: Fast Retailing Country: Bangladesh	Fast Retailing career-building training programme, according to surveys, improve women workers knowledge of labour rights, build confidence to acknowledge gender discrimination at work, and increased their confidence and self-esteem to undertake managerial positions, seek promotion, and communicate with senior management.
	Together Strong Programme Group: Inditex	Training was given in collaboration with AÇEV to raise awareness among female and male workers on gender equality. In 2020, two factories were involved, and benefited two suppliers and 418 workers.

Inditex, 2020; Adidas, 2021)	Country: Turkey	Women stated that they increased their self-confidence and awareness of gender equality. Pilot project commenced in 2019.
	Pathways for Promise Programme Group: Adidas Country: Bangladesh	Adidas supplier factories were participating in a collaboration programme with the Asia University for Women to support women workers who were seeking further education by providing a salary regardless of being in school hours. Adidas also allowed university students to work at the factories with an internship programme.
Representation and Leadership (H&M, 2021)	Gender Equality and Return (GEAR) Project Company: H&M Country: Bangladesh	A total of 13 H&M supplier factories followed a training program designed to empower women and boost their confidence to seek supervisor roles. Women were imparted with work and technical supervisor skills, which positively impacted participants' work and home environment. Additionally, most of the women in one of the factories enrolled in the training were promoted to supervisors in 2020.
	Better Work Project Company: H&M Country: Cambodia	In collaboration with Better Factories Cambodia (BFC), H&M aimed to promote within their suppliers' factories the development of women's leadership skills as well as strengthening women's representation in social dialogues in the workplace and elections for workers representation. Currently, seven factories in Cambodia are part of the programme.

All fashion groups analysed implement international and national policies and have labour standards to bring forward and protect the fundamental human and labour rights for workers in their supply chains regardless of the gender. For instance, the seven fashion groups promote initiatives and behaviours that respect human rights in accordance with the United Nations (UN) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (apart from LVMH), the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (apart from Fast Retailing), and the United Nations Global Compact (but not Adidas) (LVMH, 2020; Kering, 2021; Fast Retailing, 2020; Inditex, 2016; H&M, 2020; Nike, 2021a; Adidas, 2020). All groups report their alignment with human rights described in the International Bill of Human Rights (UN General Assembly resolution 217 A III) and the International Labour Organization Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. As the groups span the globe, they are committed to comply with the applicable labour and human rights laws in each country or region where they operate. Examples of these laws are the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act of 2010, the UK Modern Slavery Act of 2015 and the Australian Modern Slavery Act 2018 (Kering 2021).

Commitments to respect human rights in supply chain operations are more specifically described in supplier CoCs. There is no gender distinction for labour rights, however women's rights are included in the CoCs. There is consensus on the main CoC principles within our fashion group sample:

- Fulfilment of applicable laws, regulations, and international conventions in all activities. For example, Fast Retailing works with the Fair Labor Association (FLA), to clarify wages and benefits requirements in line with ILOs international labour standards framework (Fast Retailing, 2019).

- Prohibition of child labour; forced labour; illegal and undeclared terms of employment; manifestations of violence in the form of harassment and abuse; and discrimination. However, Nike, for example, have a worrying clause related to pregnancy tests.

They state that *'pregnancy tests will not be a condition of employment, nor will they be demanded of workers, unless required by local law'* (Nike, 2020a, p. 113). Nike also states that pregnancy tests can be carried out only by a 'on record' voluntary request of the women worker (Nike, 2020a).

- Provide a secure and healthy workplace environment to avoid risks and accidents. For example, Inditex states the assurance of minimum requirements including proper lighting and ventilation, safety and fire prevention systems, access to drinking water and hold hygiene processes and equipment (Inditex, 2021a).

- Safeguard workers' rights of association, union membership and collective bargaining, without facing any sanction, discrimination, or harassment. Adidas mentions that business partners must set mechanisms for industrial disputes resolution and effective grievance and communication channels between employees and representatives (Adidas, 2016a)

- Follow applicable local laws and regulations related to working hours and not surpass the maximum amount established by international labour standards. Fast Retailing's procurement policies ensure that orders are communicated through established procedures to maintain appropriate order schedules and volumes to avoid sudden increases in production volumes that could result in excessive overtime hours (Fast Retailing, 2018).

- Wages must be equivalent or top the legislated local minimum wage or the predominant industry wage. LVMH stipulates that if there is no legal minimum wage in an operation country, the supplier must guarantee workers the average minimum wage in the referred industry (LVMH, 2017).

Unfortunately, we found that most of the fashion groups do not define women's empowerment. Only Inditex provide a definition: *'empowerment means providing women with the tools for participating actively in the workplace so as to improve the quality of life of women, men, children, families, communities, and society in general, and contribute to building solid*

and fair societies' (Inditex, 2021b). Nevertheless, Fast Retailing, H&M, and Adidas refer to women's rights as outlined in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Fast Retailing, 2021a; H&M, 2020; Adidas, 2021).

Nike, LVMH, Kering, Inditex, Fast Retailing, and H&M have joined the UN Global Compact, a voluntary initiative that seeks to detonate business action towards achieving the SDGs that underscore women's empowerment as an important development objective (UN Global Compact, 2022). And LVMH Group, Kering, and Adidas, mention the United Nations Women's Empowerment Principles or WEP (Adidas, 2016b; Kering, 2013; LVMH, 2020), which are a set of 48 guidance principles that set a collaboration path by which businesses can promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the work and market site as well as the community (UN WEPs, 2021). It is worth mentioning that from a sample of 350 signatories of the principles from the G7 countries, only 21.1 per cent of WEPs signatories have a supplier diversity program (UN Women, 2021), and 85.9 per cent of WEPs signatories have not received an independent gender-audit certification (UN Women, 2021). This highlights a mismatch between what is publicly communicated and what is implemented in fashion supply chains.

The fashion groups report commitments towards ensuring fair treatment and equal workplace opportunities for women throughout their supply chain operations. In relation to women's empowerment in the supply chain, however, each group has a heterogenous way of addressing the issue. Each fashion group is using its own terminology: women's empowerment in the case of Kering, Adidas and Inditex, gender equality in the case of Nike and H&M, and women's rights or issues in the case of LVMH and Fast Retailing.

Strategies for each group are also heterogenous across issues and scope. Adidas, H&M and Inditex's strategies focus on issues affecting women factory workers across their supply chains. For example, Adidas focuses on gender discrimination, equal compensations, benefits and entitlements and gender-based violence (Adidas, 2021). H&M focuses on health and safety

issues, women's professional development, fair wages and the support of women's representation (H&M, 2021). For instance, to achieve social dialogue between employees and employers in Bangladesh, H&M trained employees at five selected suppliers in how workers committees can be formed through democratic elections as well as how to negotiate with management about their rights (H&M, 2012). Inditex focuses on health, protection from harassment and empowerment through financial and leadership programmes (Inditex, 2020). However, Kering, Nike, Fast Retailing and LVMH focus more on stipulations in their CoCs, human rights policies and other labour compliance standards that consider all factory workers regardless of gender. For example, Fast Retailing collaborates with the NGO Global Alliance for Sustainable Supply Chain (ASSC) in Japan to approach human rights issues and work towards achieving effective due diligence practices to prevent modern slavery, forced labour and human trafficking in the supply chains (Fast Retailing, 2021b).

Several fashion groups focus their efforts on monitoring and evaluating suppliers' compliance with CoCs. Fast Retailing contracts third-party companies to perform regular unannounced CoC audits (Fast Retailing, 2021c). Inditex carries out several types of CoC audits (Inditex, 2021c) and LVMH applies reasonable due diligence measures and audits their suppliers and subcontractors to ensure they meet the requirements laid down in the LVMH Supplier CoC.

However, for women's empowerment initiatives, programmes and projects, there is no clear methodology to evaluate and monitor the progress and project results. For instance, Nike asks their suppliers to employ a self-diagnostic tool to evaluate how gender equity is implemented throughout the manufacturing process and then assists the suppliers with the development of a long-lasting action plan to solve low gender equity scoring areas (Nike, 2021b). Such efforts fall into general descriptions with no evidence of the results.

H&M conducts worker satisfaction surveys in around 50 factories across nine Asian countries to understand women workers' needs (H&M, 2021). However, H&M does not mention if or how survey results are further used to improve women's working conditions.

Each of the reports, websites and communications in our sample maintain a positive tone and state constant progress on the issues of equality and empowerment within supply chains. Much of this reads like a positive marketing or brand-protecting tool. However, not every initiative mentioned by the groups are supported by evidence and further information such as base lines metrics and achieved goals can be described as '*issue-washing*' (Grandia, 2020).

The reporting tendency for most of the fashion groups is to report on several initiatives with no in-depth description of how the target audience, key indicators, impact dimensions, metrics and outcomes are defined without evidence or any details on how the implementation process takes place. For example, in Kering's reports, most of their initiatives are one-line descriptions. In Kering's Human Rights Policy 2020, there is an initiative supporting 150 cotton farmers in India, which also encapsulates unclear actions regarding education on health and safety in local communities (Kering, 2020). But there is no further information beyond this brief descriptor.

We also found that the fashion groups engage with stakeholders (for example, international NGOs) to develop initiatives. However, there is little or no information about the outcomes of these women's empowerment initiatives. For example, the cases of the Social Compliance Project between Adidas and the NGO Phulki (Phulki, 2019), or the partnership between Fast Retailing and UN Women for the Career-building Training Program (Fast Retailing, 2021b).

Among rare exceptions is Inditex that has the most comprehensive and detailed descriptions of both initiatives and measures. The Inditex annual reports state the initiatives'

progress over a period of years stating numbers of benefited workers and communities, impact dimensions and quantifiable activities, such as training and awareness campaigns, as summarised seen in Table 1.

4. Discussion

To understand if and how women workers experience empowerment through initiatives implemented by seven fashion groups in their supply chains, it is imperative to look at how such initiatives have affected women's exercise of power in the form of 'power within', 'power to', 'power with' and 'power over' (Said-Allsopp and Tallontire, 2014).

The impeders of women's empowerment are embedded both in the culture of many, if not most, countries and in business practices. This supports the study in Kering's supply chains (2019), that there are four main challenges women face in their day-to-day working lives and career development: Unequal remuneration between male and female workers, access to career advancement opportunities and leadership and decision-making positions, balance between domestic responsibilities and work, and harassment and inappropriate workplace behaviours (BSR, 2019). The prevalence of gender inequalities in these conditions remain due to structural power dynamics that replicate a lasting labour division over time (Pike and English, 2021). According to Kabeer (2005), *'because of the significance of beliefs and values in legitimating inequality, a process of empowerment often begins from within'* (p.14).

'Power within' involves a process where women '*perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy… decision-making space… and come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and have influence*' (Cornwall, 2016, p.344). In that sense, 'power within' relates to how women analyse their experience to understand the influence of structural power dynamics in their lives and gain the sufficient self-confidence to act upon changing their imposed position to one under their own terms (Nikkhah and Redzuan, 2012).

In order for women workers to achieve a transformation of their individual consciousness, women must first learn to recognize their entitlement to have rights and second to exercise a voice to reclaim those rights (Cornwall, 2016). Women's empowerment through education and training initiatives served as a means by which women acquire consciousness of their rights. For instance, the Fast Retailing career-building training programme increased women's knowledge of labour rights, which consequently lead women to recognise gender discrimination practices at work and at home. Likewise, women workers start building self-confidence and ambition to seek career advancement as well as undertaking managerial roles and holding communication with senior management. Inditex's Medicus Mundi protection programme offered women support for issues such as domestic violence in addition to legal aid regarding medical issues, work disputes, and psychological assistance. Therefore, education and training initiatives enhanced women's knowledge of their rights. However, even if women acquired considerable 'power within', structural power dynamics in the factories indicate a lack of 'power to' to turn this ambition into reality.

To transform fashion supply chains through women's empowerment, it is imperative that all actors take an active role. However, we know that women workers are not taken into consideration in decision-making processes about the initiatives, programmes, and projects. Women's 'power to' create new possibilities and actions, without being dominated by others, is limited. Fashion groups mention what women need to be empowered, however there is no evidence of how women workers participate in the process of defining mechanisms, programmes, and projects, therefore, fashion groups are exercising 'power over' women who are treated as passive subjects. As such, there is no evidence of inclusion of women workers, their needs, life priorities and aspirations for the future work and family environment. Beyond ensuring women workers a quality job that respects their fundamental human and labour rights in supply chains, there is a need to further discuss women's representation in leadership

positions so they can gain ‘power to’ introduce change. For instance, H&M’s Better Work and GEAR projects, as well as Fast Retailing career-building training programme and Adidas’s tailored training for women supervisors in factories initiative are some of the examples that strengthen women’s leadership skills towards becoming worker representatives or supervisors in the supply chain. However, there is not enough evidence about how these actions boost skills and how women are given the power of decision and transformation once they are in such positions.

The depth of involvement of the seven fashion groups in women’s empowerment in fashion supply chains varies, however there is a minimum threshold of human and labour rights covered through CoC implementations, contracts, and voluntary participation with an arm’s-length approach across all the groups. Despite CoCs being implemented in a prevailing women workers industry, gender issues such as discrimination based on gender (sexual harassment, maternity leave, childcare) are set aside in the establishment and assessment of suppliers rules, principles and expectations of operations (Prieto-Carrón, 2008). Moreover, there is no evidence of involving women workers in the CoCs establishment process.

It is worth mentioning that increases in women’s ‘power to’ occurred with greater financial independence. For instance, H&M’s Digital Payments Project allowed women greater freedom to manage their money and become part of the modern financial system. It is expected that digital payment systems will increase women’s ability to control their own income and strengthen their economic independence.

The combination between women acknowledging their ‘power within’ and women collectively exercising ‘power with’ results in women being able to achieve ‘power to’ become agents of change in their communities (Cornwall, 2016). From the SLR we see that women’s ability to build capability and enhance their own economic activity and rights through collective action enhances their ‘power with’.

The main forms of collective actions are self-help groups, informal groups for finance and workers unions. Association with a group is strongly related to improvements in productivity, better income and improved working conditions because the group can demand changes in workers' rights, wages, social protection and benefits. In this sense, women exercised 'power with' to address common concerns and overcome obstacles they faced collectively. However, there is a lack of evidence from the analysis of fashion groups' disclosures that suggest that women empowerment initiatives for workers have opened up proper channels to allow the constitution, affiliation, and active participation in women's groups, unions or other collective activities. There are few examples in the health category, such as the H&M's Wealth Project and Inditex Sakhi Health Programme, which encourage women to come together for peer-to-peer training to increase health awareness. Nevertheless, the ability to act or change things collectively is not evident, therefore these initiatives cannot be considered to increase their 'power to'.

Women's empowerment goes beyond granting power to increase women's ability to resist and turn coercive power into their advantage. There is enough evidence supporting that 'power as domination' is practice over women factory workers, mainly by men. Therefore, there is a need to develop women's empowerment initiatives involving men since cultural norms in some production countries represent the main barrier to women's empowerment.

For instance, Inditex's Together Strong programme is a first step to raise awareness among male workers on gender equality. Men can provide critical contributions to expand women's voices and opportunities and can represent important allies in transforming power relations. Women's empowerment initiatives in the fashion industry are top-down, where fashion groups are the decision-makers and women are their subjects. Scaling successful initiatives is crucial, therefore, companies must ensure the representation of women at senior positions in their companies and suppliers. It is essential that the women who will be impacted

most are represented in the design, decision making, management and assessment of women's empowerment initiatives.

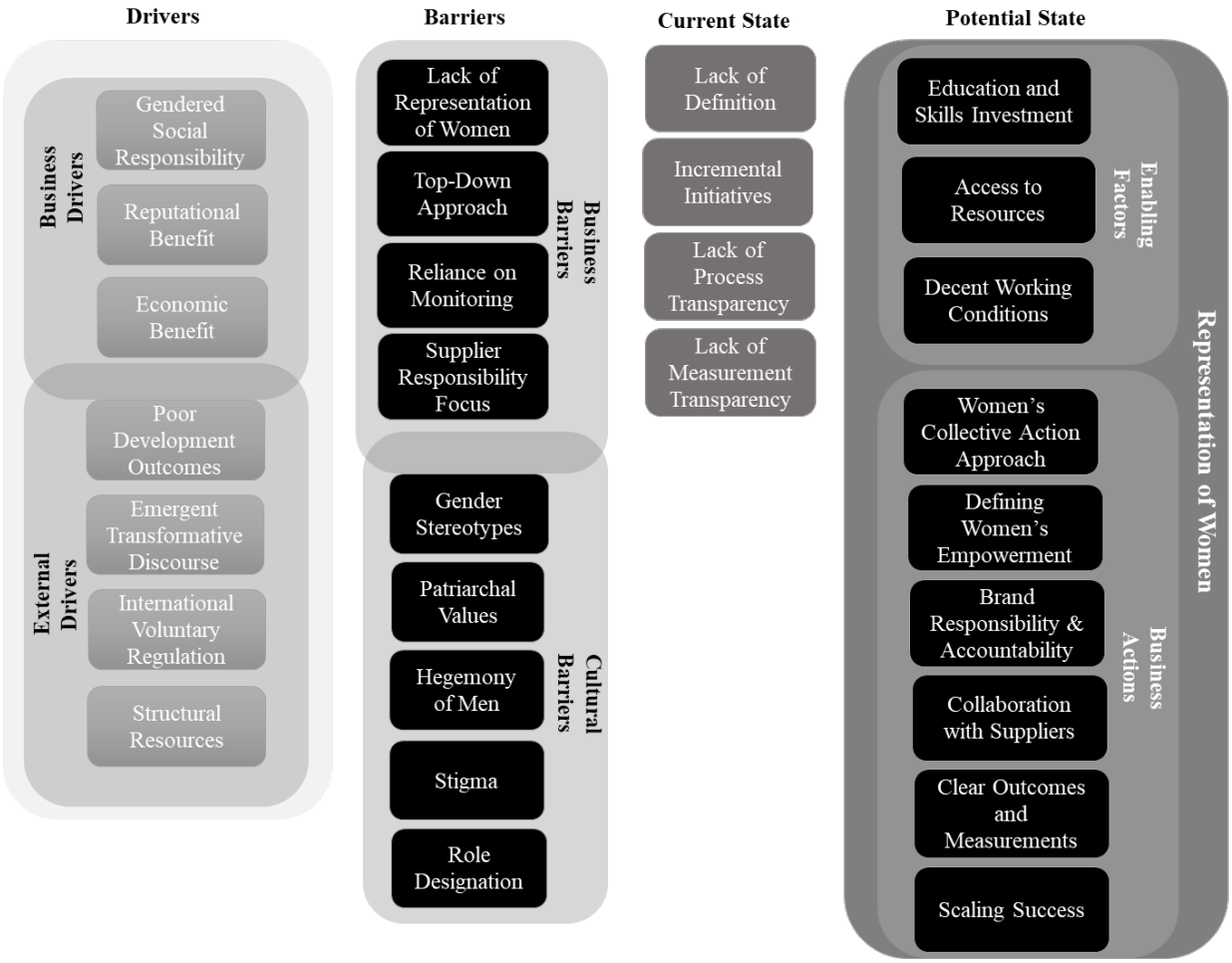

Figure 2. Women's Empowerment in Fashion Supply Chains

It is also important to understand the way fashion companies conceptualise and practice women's empowerment in their supply chains characterised by a majority of women workers. Figure 2 illustrates the framework developed from the literature and is a basic framework for fashion companies to begin their journey to women's empowerment in their supply chains. Determining how to apply the principles and a framework for action to achieve women's empowerment in supply chains is not straightforward. Just as there is no single solution to

women's empowerment in supply chains, there is no single strategy that all companies can employ. However, companies need a systematic approach which involves establishing what women's empowerment means as a first step. Looking at the analysis of the seven fashion groups disclosures, except for Inditex, there is no evidence of a definition of women's empowerment nor an understanding of empowerment in the supply chain context. Each fashion group is using its own terminology; moreover, the fashion groups that signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the UN Global Compact, and the United Nations Women's Empowerment Principles do not specify what this entails beyond declaring participation. Without a definition, a proper understanding of the terminology, and a clear explanation of what the fashion groups understand by committing to the mentioned initiatives, it is difficult to understand to what extent fashion groups empower women in their supply chains. Understanding the meaning of women's empowerment can unify sectoral efforts, justify the right investment in resources to assure the right approach, and create significant value for all stakeholders specially women workers in the supply chain.

It seems that the fashion groups, except Inditex, omit the first step and go straight to developing diverse programmes, projects, and initiatives for women's empowerment based on their assumptions about the issues within their supply chains. Since there is no definition and a framework for women's empowerment, the fashion groups repertoire of initiatives, programmes and projects are prone to act according to the 'flavour of the month'. From the analysis of publicly available disclosures, it is evident that fashion groups are driven by reactive actions related to competitive market growth, stakeholder pressures from international NGOs, their own code of ethics, media scandals, and marketing and image proposes. For instance, the Social Compliance Project between Adidas and the NGO Phulki managed to improve the image of Adidas that was damaged from the War on Want (anti-poverty charity) accusations of abuse in Adidas factories located in Bangladesh.

The fashion groups do not have a clear methodology to evaluate and monitor progress about women's empowerment in the supply chain because they do not have a clear understanding of women's empowerment. Therefore, such efforts fall into general descriptions with no evidence. Further, there is no joint effort between the different fashion groups towards developing a working framework to create actions and programmes focused on an inclusive, unified, and well-resourced commitment for women's empowerment in fashion supply chains, which would not only benefit critical suppliers, but also any supplier that works with multiple fashion groups. Using the working definition from this paper, which is analogous to the one developed by Inditex we can see that companies must develop clear strategies and initiatives for investing in education and skills, provide access to resources and fundamentally ensure decent working conditions. Companies need to support and encourage women's workers collective action in their supply chains, with a clear definition, ensuring brand responsibility and accountability. Brands, in particular, cannot abdicate responsibility to local supply managers but must work and support them and provide clear outcomes and measurements.

5. Conclusion

Women are an essential part of fashion supply chains. Yet, women workers are continuously exposed to power relations that underpin gender inequalities and continue to face barriers to achieving their full potential. Therefore, the development of effective approaches to women's empowerment in fashion supply chains helps us to challenge the marginalisation and disempowerment of women and represents an adaptive process of transformative social change that goes above and beyond structural impeders to allow women's power of choice.

There is an upward trend in the fashion industry to adopt top-down strategies to empower women workers at supply chains. However, women's empowerment is a bottom-up process that cannot be fulfilled for someone and that must begin with women's real-life

experiences as the foundational pillars so we can start building an ongoing path to enable women to attain self-confidence and make changes. Therefore, women's expressions of agency in decision-making processes and collective action represent a central component of the empowerment processes. Enabling factors such as education and skill investment, access to resources, and decent working conditions boost this process. However, our study reveals that women's empowerment initiatives created by the fashion companies do not emphasise these aspects and lean towards more superficial programmes and projects. Additionally, little is known about how women working across complex fashion supply chains are included, acknowledged, and empowered. And there is not enough research in women's empowerment in the supply chain, particularly in the fashion context.

Women's empowerment aims to release disadvantage groups, in this case women workers, from the constraining forces of the system that propel social exclusion processes and ideologies of male domination in the labour force. Since empowerment challenges systemic structures and social norms impeders, it is imperative the development of clear and strategic action plans. Not having a definition of women's empowerment is an issue that must be addressed by fashion companies. The fuzziness of a women's empowerment concept allows free interpretation, resulting in lack of theory generation and construct clarity and hazy statements from fashion groups. Equally, it is important to set clear measures since publicly available information disclosed by the fashion groups is not clear and lacks transparency regarding metrics and goals related to the expected outcomes from the implemented programmes and projects. Therefore, this information is mainly 'issue washing'. Publicly disclosed information by the fashion groups lacks clearly defined metrics, therefore it is unlikely to measure the expected outcomes and to evaluate their social impact.

The fashion sector has been scrutinised not just because of major negative events but also because of its history of poor working conditions and human rights practices affecting

women workers. This situation has created unrest not just with the workers, but also with the consumers, governments, and international NGOs. Global fashion groups, beyond branding and marketing-oriented projects and programmes regarding women's empowerment, show no committed efforts to improve the working conditions of women across fashion supply chains.

Building on this study, future research is encouraged to explore how to improve the relationship between NGOs, governments, and fashion groups to ensure the design and success of women's empowerment initiatives at the supply chain level. There is also a need to explore the effective engagement of women workers in decision making processes and in leadership positions and to ensure that women can lead the initiatives and changes necessary to ensure women's empowerment in all supply chains.

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Appendix 1. Subjects and Classification of Research Articles

Subject	Subject Focus/Area	Author(s)/Year	Journal	Method/Theory
Women in the Agriculture and Food Supply Chain	How COVID-19 responses could potentially introduce gender equality in the food system (Nepal, Myanmar, Uganda, Ghana, India, Burkina Faso, Tajikistan)	Ragasa and Lambrecht (2020)	Food Security	Qualitative method
	Impact of rural women's traditional economic activities in the household (Pakistan)	Jabeen *et al.* (2020)	Sustainability	Interviews and focus group discussions
	Gender leads to different interpretations of joint decision-making over agricultural practices (Uganda)	Acosta *et al.* (2020)	Journal of Development Studies	Quantitative (from survey) and qualitative (from in-depth study) data collection method
	Gender-based market constraints to informal fish retailing (Egypt)	Murphy *et al.* (2020)	PlosOne	Linear regression method
	Gender factors which affect the participation and decision making of women in the cassava value chain (Vietnam)	Ao *et al.* (2019)	Cogent Economics & Finance	Mixed method. Data from survey, interviews, and focus groups. And the use of regression models in a two-stage Heckman model
	Women's empowerment through the manipulation of modern farm tools and agriculture machines (India)	Mehta *et al.* (2018)	Current Science	Secondary data method
	Gender aspect in the chicken supply chain (Uganda)	Akite *et al.* (2018)	African Journal of Science Technology Innovation & Development	Literature review and primary data (structured questionnaires)
	Food security association with women's empowerment or status (Developing countries)	Bhandari (2017)	Sociology Compass	Sociological research conducting cross-national quantitative analyses

	Women's empowerment from the Hirda supply chain production (India)	Haque *et al.* (2016)	IEEE	Qualitative and quantitative methods (from focus groups and household surveys)
	Transformational impacts of lemon production on the livelihoods of rural farmers and the process of women's empowerment (Bangladesh)	Kabir *et al.* (2016)	International Review	Qualitative (focus groups, field observations and in-depth interviews) and quantitative (study reports) methods
	Farmworker community organizing for the resistance of the industrial agricultural system integrating women centred organizing model (United States)	Edwards (2011)	Organization & Environment	Interviews
	Employment of rural women and its effect on another empowerment (Iran)	Khodamoradi and Abedi (2011)	Life Science Journal	Second data method
Women in the Garment and Textile Supply Chain	Influence of labour supply modifications on women's participation and empowerment in the jute supply chain (Bangladesh)	de Brauw *et al.* (2021)	World Development	Survey
	Women's involvement in productive roles as textile workers in the Adire production besides traditional reproductive roles (Nigeria)	Olu-Owolabi *et al.* (2020)	Cogent Arts & Humanities	Qualitative research (from in-depth interviews). And Structural Functionalism Theory
	The Rana Plaza Tragedy and the working conditions women face in the garment industry (Bangladesh)	Ali and Medhekar (2016)	Economy of Region	Primary and secondary data
Women Labour Force Participation	How does external factor like rainfall shocks experienced in early life explain future employment outcomes (Vietnam)	Feeny *et al.* (2021)	Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization	Survey
	Women's empowerment through maternal employment and the effects on child nutrition (Tanzania)	Debela *et al.* (2021)	American Journal of Agricultural Economics	Theoretical model

	Impact of the South African National Housing Program in women's empowerment and labour supply (South Africa)	Roos (2021)	Oxford Development Studies	Survey panel dataset
	Effects of the Hindu Succession Act in women's ability to inherit property and increased their labour opportunities (India)	Heath and Tan (2020)	Journal of the European Association	Alternative noncooperative household model (from the National Family Health Survey, the NSS Employment, and Unemployment modules)
	Women in the informal trade of sapphire gemstones (Madagascar)	Lawson and Lahiri-Dutt (2020)	International Journal	Qualitative method (from field research, interviews, focus groups). And Structural Functionalism Theory
	Determining factor for the participation of women in the labour market (Macedonia)	Andonova and Blazheski (2019)	Innovating Europe	Methodology based on previous research by Contreras and Plaza (2010)
	Empowerment of subsistence women entrepreneurs by social enterprises (India)	Saripalli *et al.* (2019)	Society & Business Review	Comparative case analysis (data from published journal and news articles, case studies, success stories and websites)
	Trade liberalization effects on women's labour force participation and wage earnings (India)	Mukhopadhyay (2018)	Indian Growth & Development Review	Three-sector general equilibrium model. And Standard Trade theory
	Implications of female labour participation within women's empowerment and household's decision-making process (Developing countries)	Atal (2017)	Review of Economics of the Household	General equilibrium model

	Prevalence of gender inequalities in the labour force participation (Sub-Saharan Africa)	Mwakubo and Manda (2014)	Journal of African Economies	Theoretical and empirical method
	Explores the society and policy factors likely to influence female labour force participation (Turkey)	Bugra and Yakut-Cakar (2010)	Development & Change	Comparative analysis
Women's empowerment in Global Companies	UK companies implementation of the Modern Slavery Act in their supply chain to prevent and prosecute modern slavery (Sri Lanka)	Hewamanne (2020)	Signs	Ethnographic research (from interviews, focus groups, and participant observations)
	HR business processes contribution towards the telecommunication companies sustainable business strategy that includes women's empowerment (United Kingdom)	Tataru *et al.* (2020)	Strategica	Value stream analysis method, Suppliers-Inputs-Process-Outputs-Customers method, and event-driven process chain method
	Sustainability considerations for the expansion of MNEs and women employment opportunities (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam)	Ike *et al.* (2019)	Journal of Cleaner Production	Qualitative data collection method (from semi-structured interviews)
	Impact of Supplier's Codes of Conduct in labour standards and worker's agency from the fashion supply chain (Vietnam)	Hoang (2019)	Societies	Qualitative data collection method (from semi-structured interviews). And Reciprocity theory
	Women in management positions influences gender equality practices in CSR initiatives (Spain)	Larrieta-Rubin de Celis *et al*. (2015)	Business Ethics-A European Review	Survey
	Women's empowerment through Unilever and Levi Strauss & Co. CSR programmes (South Asia's countryside and India)	Prügl (2015)	New Political Economy	Secondary data method
	Unilever's Novella projects develop a sustainable Allanblackia oil supply chain (Ghana)	Attipoe *et al.* (2006)	Agro-food chains and	Secondary data method

			networks for development	
Women's Economic Empowerment	Women farm-entrepreneurs access to credit with Table Banking groups (Kenya)	Cherotich *et al.* (2021)	Agricultural Finance Review	Double hurdle econometric model. And Utility Maximization Theory
	Impact of microcredits in closing gender gap participation in the labour market (Egypt)	Arouri and Cuong (2020)	African Development Review	Quantitative method (from datasets)
	Women's economic empowerment through ownership and management of water supply schemes (Cambodia)	Grant *et al.* (2019)	Water	Qualitative data collection method and a literature review
	Role of financial institutions in promoting microfinance and empower women (India)	Arora and Singh (2017)	Pacific Business Review International	Secondary data method
	Impacts of self-help groups in farm women (India)	Kaur *et al.* (2017)	Indian Journal of Economic and Development	Multi-stage sampling method
	Introduction of microfinance and socioeconomic outcomes, including women's empowerment (Ethiopia)	Tarozzi *et al.* (2015)	American Economic Journal-Applied Economics	2x2 Factorial Design
	Microcredits for poverty alleviation and women's empowerment (Nicaragua)	Haase (2012)	Critical Sociology	Mixed Method (Survey and Focus group interviews)
Women's Education and Skill Development	Women's empowerment and entrepreneurship in the tourism sector (Serbia)	Radovic-Markovic and Zivanovic (2019)	Sustainability	Qualitative and quantitative research (using methods of analysis, synthesis, and deduction)

Empowerment	Skill development to reduce poverty and unemployment (India)	Cabral and Dhar (2019)	Benchmarking	Systematic Literature Review. And Experiential learning theory
	Explores the possible improvements of attendance rates of children in schools by empowering adult women in terms of education and workforce participation (India)|	Das (2016)	Child Indicators Research	Parametric and non-parametric techniques (from NSS data)
Empowerment Concept	Exploration of gender equality concepts and trends, including the relation with international development interventions (No Area)	MacArthur *et al.* (2021)	Third World Quarterly	Systematic Review
	Theoretical concepts of women's empowerment and review of common measurement approaches (No Area)	Richardson (2018)	Social Indicators Research	Quantitative researcher

Appendix 2. Fashion Group profiles

LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton	Country	France
	Brands	75 brands (called Maisons)
	Product Categories	Manufacture of luxury goods within six business groups (Wines & Spirits; Fashion & Leather Goods; Perfumes & Cosmetics; Watches & Jewelry; Selective Retailing; Other Activities)
	Resources Reviewed	– Annual Report (2016 to 2020) – LVMH Group Web Page (accessed October/2021) – Social and Environmental Responsibility Report (2016 to 2020; LVMH merge the social and the environmental responsibility reports into one single report in 2020) – Suppliers Code of Conduct (2017)
Nike	Country	United States
	Brands	3 brands (Nike, Converse, Jordan)
	Product Categories	Design, development and worldwide marketing and selling of athletic footwear, apparel, equipment, accessories and services
	Resources Reviewed	– Annual Report (2016 to 2020) – Nike Web Page (accessed October/2021) – Nike Impact Report (2018 to 2020; the study also considered the Sustainable Business Report of 2016-2017 since it was the report previously published) – Suppliers Code of Conduct (2021)
Kering	Country	France
	Brands	13 brands (Gucci, Saint Laurent, Bottega Veneta, Balenciaga, Alexander McQueen, Brioni, Boucheron, Pomellato, DoDo, Qeelin, Ulysse Nardin, Girard-Perregaux, Kering Eyewear)
	Product Categories	Manufacture of luxury goods within three segments (Couture & Leather Goods; Watches & Jewelry; Eyewear)
	Resources Reviewed	– Annual Report (2016 to 2020) – Kering Group Web Page (accessed October/2021) – Supporting Women in the Luxury Supply Chain Report (2019) – Code of Ethics (2019)
Inditex	Country	Spain

	Brands	8 brands (Zara, Pull&Bear, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Stradivarius, Oysho, Zara Home, Uterqüe)
	Product Categories	Fashion retailers of clothes, footwear, and accessories
	Resources Reviewed	– Annual Report (2016 to 2020) – Inditex Web Page (accessed October/2021) – Statement of non-financial information (2020; first year of publication, before it was in the annual report) – Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers (2001)
Fast Retailing	Country	Japan
	Brands	7 brands (UNIQLO, GU, Theory, PLST, Comptoir des Cotonniers, Princesse tam.tam, J Brand)
	Product Categories	Manufacturer and retailer of apparel
	Resources Reviewed	– Annual Report (2016 to 2020) – Fast Retailing Web Page (accessed October/2021) – Sustainability Report (2017 to 2021; the study also considered the CSR Report of 2016 since it was the report previously published) – Code of Conduct for Production Partners (2016)
Adidas	Country	Germany
	Brands	2 brands (Adidas and Reebok). Additionally, the group has product franchises (Footwear franchises for the adidas brand include: Ultraboost, Predator, and Superstar) and collaborations with high-profile individuals and brands (Beyoncé and Prada)
	Product Categories	Portfolio of sport performance and sport inspired products
	Resources Reviewed	– Annual Report (2016 to 2020) – Adidas Group Web Page (accessed October/2021) – Sustainability Report (2016; since 2017, Adidas has been publishing its financial and non-financial information on the annual report) – Code of Conduct for Suppliers (2016)
	Country	Sweden

H&M Hennes & Mauritz	Brands	8 brands (H&M, H&M Home, COS, Weekday, & Other Stories, Monki, Arket, Afound). H&M Group also include Afound (online marketplace), Treadler (B2B initiative), and Sellpy (e-commerce platform for second-hand items)
	Product Categories	Retail of clothing, accessories, footwear, cosmetics, and home textiles
	Resources Reviewed	– Annual Report (2016 to 2020) – H&M Group Web Page (accessed October/2021) – Sustainability Performance Report (2016 to 2020) – Suppliers Code of Conduct (2014)