

Fashion is failing to address the cow in the room

From [Collective Fashion Justice](#)

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Cows continue to be ignored by an industry profiting from the sale of their skins.

Image: a cow on a slaughterhouse truck // [We Animals Media](#)

There's no doubt you've read an article about 'the leather debate'. Fashion industry figureheads love to explore the possibility of more 'responsibly produced' animal-derived leather and pick apart the sustainability credentials of synthetic and bio-based alternatives. They analyse tannery practices and the massive [climate](#) and [biodiversity](#) impacts of cow skin leather. But there's one thing we don't read about: what leather production means for cows themselves.

While leather is a [profitable co-product](#) of the beef and dairy industries, the fashion industry continues to refer to it as a worthless 'by-product', even a kind of recycling initiative, in an effort to distance itself from their own irresponsible supply chains practices. In reality, the leather industry is [worth billions](#), with the popularity and profitability of leather directly linked to the number of cattle reared for slaughter, according to industry bodies including the [Leather and Hide Council of America](#).

As such, those profiting from the sale of animal skin products have an unshakable responsibility to consider the interlinked environmental and ethical impacts of their leather. But this isn't what's happening. Instead, even with FOUR PAWS global surveying finding that [86%](#) of people believe animal protection must be a priority in fashion, the plight of cattle seems determinedly ignored by an industry benefiting from intentionally designed public ignorance on what animal-derived material production really looks like.

[Fashion Revolution's 2022 Fashion Transparency Index](#) found that while 58% of the 250 largest fashion brands and retailers had published animal welfare policies, just 12% can disclose where even some of their raw materials are sourced. The [total inability of most brands to know](#) where animals in their supply

chains lived and died is not flagged as a serious issue in most talks on transparency. Nor is the fact that without this information, brand animal welfare policies have no teeth, committing to control procedures in places they cannot find.

Our industry's policies cannot be helpful unless we understand the suffering they seek to mitigate, and yet, the existence of [hidden 'birthing farms' and feedlots](#) is little known, and coverage of ongoing [painful practices](#) like branding and dehorning without pain relief is missing from media coverage. We shy away from the parts of the leather value chain we consider too gory – perhaps discussing the specifics of how a cow is bled out seems 'unprofessional' – in turn failing to understand what 'best practice' slaughter and skinning actually looks like, and if we should accept that.

A lack of understanding inevitably leads to unintentional further harm to animals, particularly when the wellbeing of the planet is [viewed as separate](#) to animal wellbeing. For example, while the [Leather Working Group](#) aims for deforestation-free leather by 2030, we're yet to address that this much needed move beyond [fashion-linked deforestation](#) would cause a massive uptick in the use of factory-farm feedlots confining cattle, unless we produced far less leather.

The cow in the room continues to be ignored by fashion media, too. New Collective Fashion Justice [analysis](#) found that over a two year period, articles on sustainability, leather and its alternatives from top fashion media outlets Vogue Business, WWD, and Business of Fashion barely gave mention to the animals who are birthed, reared, killed and skinned in its creation. Just 5% of articles explored a specific animal protection issue for more than a sentence. Less than one quarter mentioned animal welfare, rights or even animals themselves beyond as a descriptor for a type of leather, like calf skin. This omission of animals from fashion's agenda is also clear within leading industry events like the Global Fashion Summit, which [has yet to put a serious spotlight](#) on fashion's animal exploitation.

We cannot possibly pretend to be having a genuine conversation about responsible fashion, animals and leather when we fail to address such core, controversial and harmful elements of the supply chain. Why aren't we talking about the fact that the [world's leading producer](#) of cattle skins – China – has [no legally binding provisions](#) requiring the stunning of animals before slaughter? Worse still, why isn't it standard industry knowledge that in most countries, even those we consider to be 'more humane', farmed animals like cattle are [routinely and intentionally exempted](#) from the overarching protections and duty of care standards of animal welfare legislation? While there is legislation out there which says that '[malicious or intentional cruelty to animals](#)' is a class D felony, but this does not apply to those abiding by 'generally accepted agricultural practices', why aren't we talking about what those practices are?

Approaching issues relating to the suffering of animals may seem more intimidating than issues of environmental harm, which we try to simplify with datasets and numbers. They seem a little more personal, and suffering cannot be measured numerically, it is felt. Yet, there is very clear science behind this suffering: the [Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness](#) states clearly that humans are not a unique animal species in our capacity for consciousness, intentional behaviour, thinking or feeling. There are endless peer-reviewed studies showing how cattle discriminate between humans who have been [friendly or unfriendly to them](#); detect fear in the scent of [stress hormones](#) from animals ahead of them in slaughter lines and live export ships; and [grieve, falling into a depressive state](#) when separated from family members.

Recognising that 'responsible fashion' production means eliminating suffering and justly transitioning beyond the needless exploitation of our fellow animals is not unscientific. Acknowledging that the simplest way to eliminate suffering is to end the commodification and needless killing of animals as more innovative alternatives become more widely available is not radical. It's just sensible.

Until the fashion industry is willing to dig deeper into how it treats animals, we will not make progress. Until fashion's animal welfare policies are informed by a real understanding of the supply chains behind them, nothing will change. We must reckon with the wellbeing of animals as a no longer ignorable aspect of responsible and sustainable fashion production: cruel commodification of animals cannot acceptably be sustained, and is woefully irresponsible.