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1 **Africa Fashion Futures: creative economies, global networks and local development**

2 Lauren England, Eka Ikpe, Roberta Comunian and Ananya Kabir

3

4 **Abstract**

5 This article reviews existing literature and approaches to the current study of fashion and economic
6 development to rethink the interconnection between creative producers and global production and trade
7 networks in relation to sustainable local development. Focusing on the work of independent fashion
8 designers on the African continent, we first consider their positioning as cultural (micro) entrepreneurs and
9 drivers of economic development. Next, we discuss the wider relationship with the global markets and
10 value chains which impact their work and local context. We conclude with a call for further interdisciplinary
11 research that takes fashion designers as a key point from which to engage critically with global value chains
12 beyond prioritising the lead firm in the global North, so as to position African fashion designers as micro-
13 entrepreneurs with potential for value creation and as leading smaller local or national markets with
14 concomitant international reach.

15 **Keywords**

16 Fashion, Africa, creative economy, entrepreneurship, local development, global networks, value

17 **Introduction**

18 This article reviews existing literature on and approaches to the study of fashion and economic development
19 to rethink critically the interconnection between creative producers, global production and trade networks,
20 and local development. It belongs to a wider research project, *Africa Fashion Futures*, which explores the
21 cultural and economic dimensions of fashion in Africa through the work of fashion designers in Lagos and
22 Nairobi. Starting with the work of fashion designers on the African continent, we bring together literature
23 on creative economy development agendas (AfDB, 2018; Hivos, 2016), fashion designers as creative
24 entrepreneurs (Langevang, 2017) and studies of global value chains (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003) to
25 explicate the economic and spatial dimensions of contemporary fashion in Africa.

26 We begin by examining literature positioning the fashion industry and fashion designers as cultural agents
27 (Rovine, 2015, 2009) and drivers of economic development (Hivos, 2016), in their home cities and regions
28 as well as internationally (Langevang, 2017). We then consider the challenges faced by fashion
29 entrepreneurs in connecting with global markets and exchanges (Hansen, 2014; Mangieri, 2006),
30 specifically global value chains (GVCs) for their attentiveness to how firms and localities interact, organise,

31 and are governed below and outside of global North networks (Gibbon & Ponte, 2005) and how positioning
32 can change over time (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2002).

33 In conclusion, we call for further interdisciplinary research on fashion designers not just in terms of garment
34 production, but as creatives, cultural producers, and centres for value creation; so as to mobilise their critical
35 engagement with GVCs beyond prioritising the lead firm¹ in the global North (as with Global Production
36 Networks - GPN). By paying attention to domestic, regional and continental dynamics that also connect
37 with global structures, we extend debate on lead firms beyond global North actors.

38 **Fashion designers as creative entrepreneurs in Africa**

39 Studies of fashion designers as entrepreneurs and their relationship to geographical context have
40 predominantly addressed global North or Westernised contexts (McRobbie, 2016), Australia (Tuite, 2019;
41 Heim et al., 2020), New Zealand (Larner et al., 2007), and Canada (Brydges, 2018). Research on fashion
42 entrepreneurs in the global South - including China (Ferrero-Regis & Lindgren, 2012), Hong Kong (Skov,
43 2002) and Bangladesh (Khan, 2019), as well in Africa (Langevang, 2017; Pather, 2015; Jennings, 2011) -
44 reflect wider attempts to de-Westernise studies of creative labour (Alacovska & Gill, 2019), questioning
45 who can be “creative” (and accrue associated economic value) in fashion as a globalised creative industry
46 (Khan, 2019). This fashion entrepreneurship literature, focused on designers and brands largely working
47 independently for domestic and international markets, rather than large global corporations, contributes to
48 our understanding of the national contexts and global connections influencing creative entrepreneurship (at
49 the micro and SME level), economic development and innovation. We present this literature as most
50 relevant to the African context (Langevang, 2017; Hivos, 2016).

51 Despite the dominance of China and Bangladesh (McKinsey & BOF 2019), there is increased global
52 awareness of growing fashion and garment production in Africa (Berg et al., 2015; Manson, 2014). The
53 Africa-sited global fashion industry’s market value is estimated at \$1.3 trillion (AfDB, 2019b); the
54 developing fashion industry (including textiles and apparel sectors) is positioned as potentially accelerating
55 economic growth and industrialisation, building new trade and export options and GVCs, and enhancing
56 regional and global integration (Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2019). However, compared to other creative industries
57 emergent continent-wide, including film (Lobato, 2010) and music (Pratt, 2008), fashion has received
58 relatively little policy attention. As wages rise in Asia (AfDB, 2018), initiatives have tended to focus on
59 enhancing productivity and capitalising on cheaper labour in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)’s textiles and

¹ Lead firms are small, medium or large firms operating in formal and informal economies which have a significant number of commercial linkages (forwards or backwards) with MSMEs. They include buyers, traders, input suppliers, exporters and processors and training providers and others. Lead firms are often associated with value adding activities, innovation and international market engagement (USAID, 2008, p.1).

60 apparel sector, primarily associated with producing basic clothing items in Export Processing Zones (EPZs)
61 (Kobia et al., 2017). There is, nevertheless, increased interest in fashion designers as cultural and creative
62 entrepreneurs engaging with higher value activities in the fashion value chain (Hivos, 2016).

63 Fashion entrepreneurs contribute to Africa's creative industries through tradeable cultural and creative
64 products and services that support economic development (Langevang, 2017; UNCTAD, 2010). Because
65 the emerging fashion industry is a site where 'personal, cultural and socioeconomic development converge'
66 (Langevang 2017, p.893), they are also crucial in defining and redefining cultural heritage (Rovine, 2015;
67 Allman, 2004). For Jennings (2011, p.14) developing African fashion industries are most impacted by
68 'basing socially responsible production on the continent' through, for example, creating jobs for local
69 artisans and supporting farming communities. This convergence is particularly important when considering
70 alternative, more inclusive, ethical and sustainable visions for value chains beyond the typical global North
71 dominant model, and to developmental objectives connected to the creative economy (UNCTAD 2010).
72 For example, designers and brands can provide fair employment and support sustainable income sources
73 for local artisans and farmers, use locally sourced materials produced through sustainable farming methods,
74 and reduce the environmental impact of their supply chains and production processes through local
75 sourcing, recycling etc. (Ericsson & Brooks, 2014; Moreno-Gavara & Jiménez-Zarco, 2019).

76 Designers are not isolated workers, but deeply interconnected with creative and non-creative professions
77 (Cunningham, 2011) supporting production and retail across the creative economy. In the African context,
78 designers' reliance on tailors to construct their garments (Hansen, 2019) enhances the contribution of both
79 professions to domestic and global manufacturing and retail (Hivos, 2016). The value of connections
80 between fashion entrepreneurs and marketing, finance and other professionals within the fashion design
81 field (Vallone 2008) highlights the role of intermediaries in providing business support to the sector
82 (Comunian et al., 2022).

83 Following the rapid expansion of digital technologies (especially mobile) across Africa (James, 2009), a
84 growing use of global social media and e-commerce platforms among designers (Jennings, 2011) alongside
85 wider growth of 'electronic mass media, international travel and transnational migration' (Gott & Loughran,
86 2010: 2) enables African designers to produce an "African style" for global markets (Rovine, 2009), and
87 African and diaspora audiences to disseminate African fashion globally (Jennings, 2011). The increasing
88 presence of African designers and African styles at international fashion weeks and other events confirms
89 interaction on the global stage, alongside interest in developing previously underexploited local and
90 regional markets by promoting 'African fashion for African people' (AfDB, 2018, p.5).

91 Important questions arise regarding connections between fashion designers and the processes of designing
92 and making integral to garment production, including their relationships with actors at different stages in
93 the production process and along global, domestic and regional value chains (Hivos, 2016). Such
94 interactions indicate that African designers operate within global value chains, albeit at a different (lower
95 and less profitable) level than would typically be acknowledged in GVC literature, as we elaborate later.

96 [Challenges for fashion entrepreneurs in Africa](#)

97 Scholarship acknowledges tensions between hoped-for economic development and empowerment
98 (especially for women) through fashion entrepreneurship (Moreno-Gavara & Jiménez-Zarco, 2019) and
99 global forces which perpetuate workforce precarity and hierarchical perceptions of cultural value (Khan,
100 2019). The consequent economic and labour environments limit creative entrepreneurship's transformative
101 potential (Langevang, 2017). Literature charts several challenges to developing sustainable enterprises at
102 local, national and regional levels, including: accessing training and resources; working in informal,
103 fluctuating economic markets (Hansen, 2019; Langevang, 2017; Pather, 2015); privileging basic skills
104 development in the EPZ over fashion design education and training (England et al. 2021); 'volatile shifts
105 in the global economy [including...] competition from online players and decreasing foot traffic, and the
106 speed of changing consumer preferences' (McKinsey & BOF, 2016, p.18); the informal structure and
107 operation of local fashion markets (Hansen, 2019; Hivos, 2016). However, the ways in which fashion
108 designers move between and engage with these multiscalar levels remains unexplored.

109 Africa-specific economic, logistic, social and political challenges for the micro, small and medium
110 enterprises that form 90% of African fashion businesses (AfdB, 2019a, 2019b) have been identified:
111 difficulty in accessing capital within largely informal economies (Hansen, 2019) for start-ups, scaling up
112 production and bulk-buying materials/equipment (Fianu & Zentey, 2000); lack of legal clarity, financial
113 resources, government support, and formal unified representation (Fianu & Zentey, 2000; Jennings, 2011)
114 around intellectual property and copyright; limited availability of skilled labour (Pather, 2015), graduate
115 employment opportunities (Muhammad et al., 2018), and provision and access to formal fashion design
116 education with relevant curricula (England et al. 2021; Jennings, 2011; Mihyo, 2013). The lack of
117 equipment and limited local industrial capabilities (AfDB, 2019a; Fianu & Zentey, 2000) complicate
118 production of small orders that meet international quality standards, timeframes and price points (Jennings,
119 2011). These challenges coexist within broader financial and industrial contexts: fluctuating foreign
120 currency and foreign exchange rates, high taxes, tariffs and licensing fees, high transport and shipping costs
121 combined with international competition and import/export regulations (AfDB, 2019b; Jennings, 2011;
122 Pather, 2015); and unreliable or irregular energy, internet, communication and transport provision and
123 infrastructure to support business activities, currency fluctuations, economic recession, high labour costs,

124 limited access to technology, raw materials, funding and support services (Fianu & Zentey, 2000; Pather,
125 2015).

126 Such challenges impact capacity building and scaling up production within the fashion industry, and the
127 distribution of the industry and supporting infrastructure beyond urban clusters (i.e. education/training
128 facilities, availability of materials, production facilities and skilled labour). Irregular access to technology
129 and reliable internet services also inhibits the competitive development of African markets given the
130 emergence of ‘digitally mediated fashion creation, distribution, and representation’ (Crewe, 2013, p.762)
131 globally, and its facilitation of sustainable fashion (Scaturro, 2008). Designers thus face overall challenges
132 in navigating economic divisions in the continent’s consumer markets – a very small wealthy elite and a
133 growing middle class with purchasing power, but a large poor population with limited means (Hansen,
134 2019). Brooks (2018) highlights the uneven distribution of benefits and opportunities associated with
135 economic growth across the continent and critiques the positioning of a “middle-class consumer” as being
136 internationally transferrable (see also Melber, 2016). Understanding the different consumer markets for
137 fashion (locally, nationally and globally) is key to understanding fashion designers’ capacity for market
138 development.

139 Trade discussions and the development of value chains for the textiles and clothing sector are also
140 prominent and sensitive areas for negotiation, particularly with respect to expanding regional value chains,
141 continental free trade agreements, preferential tariffs and rules of origin (UNCTAD, 2019 Morris, 2006;
142 Kobia et al., 2017; Phelps et al., 2009; Staritz et al., 2017). Both international trade agreements such as The
143 Multifibre Arrangement (withdrawn in 2005)² and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)
144 (USA), and policies initiated by developing countries, including those limiting foreign exchange (forex)
145 resources on textile imports or bans or heavy taxation on fashion and textiles imports (Jennings, 2011; Botti,
146 2019) impact domestic production, imports, market capacity, and local, regional and continental trade
147 (Frederick and Gereffi, 2009). International trade agreements have enhanced market access, and
148 subsequently employment and poverty reduction for qualifying SSA countries (Morris, 2006; Portugal-
149 Perez, 2008; Staritz et al., 2017). However, a historical ‘prevalence of developed-country protectionism’
150 (Gereffi and Memedovic, 2003: 5) alongside wider de-industrialisation, economic downturn, the
151 marketisation of public services and declining infrastructure eroded the viability of the African textiles
152 industry (Brooks & Simon, 2012; Ericsson & Brooks, 2014). The volume of imports and the second-hand
153 market, together with perceptions of quality divergence between local and international products also

² an international trade agreement limiting the import of textiles and clothing into (developing) countries where high volumes of imports were damaging domestic industries (WTO, n.d.). The withdrawal is positioned as “wiping out” apparel manufacturing industries as exports fell while imports from Asia into African markets increased (Ayoki, 2017).

154 challenge the growth and sustainability of local fashion production (Brooks & Simon, 2012). These
155 conclusions reflect scholarly tendencies to fit analyses of contemporary trade to the historical pattern of
156 unequal exchange rooted in the continent's colonial legacy, whereby Africa exports raw materials to the
157 global economy and imports high(er) value products from the global North and increasingly other
158 developing economies (Taylor, 2016). The Covid-19 crisis has reinforced these structural and geographical
159 inequalities– although most significantly for high volume garment producing Asian nations– an outcome
160 seen as reflecting the industry's 'natural order' that 'relies on a contrast between the 'first' and 'third'
161 worlds' (Khan & Richards, 2021, p. 434).

162 The overall inability to address structural foundations of inequality and poverty (Khan, 2019) makes
163 creative economy discourse around these challenges impact significantly entrepreneurial activity. In
164 contrast, we want to ask why, so far, African designers and brands have not typically been thought of as
165 potential lead firms in the fashion industry. The current GVC (and GPN) approach to lead firms (in the
166 fashion industry and beyond) represents, to us, an exclusionary economic determinism; it gives inadequate
167 consideration to micro-enterprises who nevertheless engage with main parts of the (apparel) value chain:
168 raw material supply; component networks; production networks; export channels; and marketing networks
169 (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003) and can leverage and control of resources that denote lead firm behaviour,
170 albeit at a different scale. It also risks masking and devaluing innovation and wider cultural and social value
171 generated by these smaller actors operating in the periphery.

172 **Fashion designers, global networks and local development**

173 Assessing the work of African fashion designers in relation to local development necessitates an
174 understanding of their relationship with global networks of production and value construction within the
175 fashion and textile industry (Khan, 2019). Fashion's global remit encourages scholarly engagement with
176 the interaction between networks of value and production on international, regional, and national levels
177 (Whitfield et al., 2020), particularly through its connection with the textiles and clothing industry as a first-
178 stage development in light-manufacturing as part of industrialisation (UNCTAD, 2019).

179 Global value chains and global production networks participate in an interdisciplinary discourse around
180 international trade, international business, politics, power and innovation and their interface with industrial
181 transformations and uneven development (Neilson et al, 2014; Coe & Yeung, 2019). While supply chains
182 or production networks are common frameworks for analysing the fashion industry, our review focuses on
183 the position and role of African designers in value chains vis-a-vis those in the global North. The value
184 chain approach, useful within studies on apparel production in developing economies (Gereffi &
185 Memedovic, 2003; Gopura et al., 2019) aids analysis of the influence (direct or indirect) of globalisation,
186 especially the intersection of global power and geographical structures on the economic development of

187 fashion designers (Godart, 2014). Value chain perspectives increasingly illuminate studies on ethical,
188 sustainable and local fashion production and markets (Pal, 2014; Pal et al., 2016; Rinaldi & Testa, 2015;
189 Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2019).

190 Through GVCs we can explore global interconnections of linkages between the production, distribution
191 and consumption of products in and from Africa (Tallontire et al., 2005) and question ‘how local firms can
192 participate as well as upgrade and capture value in the context of asymmetric power relations between
193 buyers and suppliers in apparel global value chains’ (Whitfield & Staritz, 2020, p.3) (see also Bair &
194 Werner, 2011). This approach prioritises consideration of the *value* of African creative products over
195 *volume* (of labour and product), and its optimal increase.

196 Fashion designers and value chains in Africa

197 GVC is a frequently-used analytical framework for literature on the apparel industry, that, while recognising
198 its limitations with regard to specificity of dynamics and actors (Coe & Yeung, 2019), also overcomes them
199 through particular attention to lead firms as an entry point to analysis (Coe & Yeung 2019; 2015). For us,
200 GVC is a useful framework, enabling assessment of fashion designers as creatives, innovators and cultural
201 producers beyond mere apparel production and the concomitant significance of value creation. The
202 framework’s attentiveness to production linkages is pivotal to discussions on fashion as a context for
203 industrial development using domestic primary products/ raw materials in Africa (Raei et al., 2019),
204 especially with the advent of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Our key locale of interest,
205 the global South, is currently limited by an overarching focus on lead firms located in the global North. Yet
206 the GVC framework encourages consideration of how lead firms recalibrate their relationships with firms
207 in developing contexts due to growth and transition in some global South contexts (Gereffi, 2014). Such
208 approaches mesh with our critical interest in reimagining how lead firms can participate in more complex
209 South-South exchanges.

210 The academic literature on textiles and apparel value chains applies Hirschman’s (1958) theory of backward
211 linkages to garment industries and the production of textiles and related materials, including agricultural
212 production of raw materials in Africa, with added emphasis on production for the global economy (Morris,
213 2006; Phelps et al., 2009; Staritz, Morris & Plank 2017). Gereffi and Memedovic (2003) associate both
214 backward and forward linkages in the apparel industry with high levels of industry employment and identify
215 five main parts to the value chain: raw material supply; component networks; production networks; export
216 channels; and marketing networks. Value is added and jobs created at each stage of the value chain with
217 global interaction present throughout.

218 Fashion value chains are prominent examples of buyer-driven chains (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003). Here
219 key decisions about activities and actors in the chain are made by lead firms, often large retailers or brand-
220 name (typically Western) companies who do not own any manufacturing facilities (i.e. H&M, Primark,
221 Zara etc.) but retain control over higher value activities such as design, marketing and distribution (Jiménez-
222 Zarco et al., 2019). Both tangible profits and control over ‘the intangible, symbolic value of fashion, and
223 thus the brand value’ (Goupura et al., 2019, p.467) (see also Weller, 2007) are thereby located outside of
224 manufacturing nations which remain remote from the end-consumer (Aspers, 2010). While outsourcing of
225 design activities to supplier firms (Palpacuer et al., 2005) is increasing, outsourcing is often limited to
226 lower-value manufacturing activities (Botti, 2019; Whitfield et al., 2020) by pre-existing transnational
227 production networks, international mistrust, and uncertainty in financial systems. To develop a more
228 diverse, sustainable and ethical fashion industry, we must understand and address these challenges and
229 opportunities posed by GVC participation and how African nations can avoid being restricted to providing
230 labour intensive, lower value linkage activities that perpetuate exploitative models and extend colonial
231 legacies of unequal exchange. For Selwyn (2015), the GVC structure alludes to the scope for developing
232 country firms to upgrade along the value chain while ignoring the global lead firms’ control and dominance
233 of innovation across the world system. Herein lies a challenge for fashion designers as cultural producers
234 and innovators from below.

235 The need to examine lead firms in Africa within GVC and GPN analysis has been raised (Oqubay, 2016;
236 Krishnan, 2018) and a case made for reconceptualising elements of GVC and GPN, including lead firms,
237 on account of multi-layered public and private governance regimes and simultaneous multiple roles (lead
238 and supplier) for firms serving local, regional and global consumer markets (Horner & Nadvi, 2018).
239 Pasquali et al (2020) and Goger et al (2014) offer scope for considering lead firms from below in value
240 chain analysis of South-South exchanges, which are outstripping North-South exchanges especially in the
241 apparel subsector. What is also distinctive about this regional pivot is the attention to smaller batches as
242 well as a higher fashion content and greater complexity and intermediating between smaller assembly
243 operations (Pasquali et al 2020; Goger et al, 2014). This shows the scope for creativity, innovation,
244 sustainability and associated value retention on design and brand by designers within this context.

245 Within GVC structures, fashion designers can provide ‘creative, commercial, technical and leadership
246 skills’ that act as a source of competitive advantage and contribute to industrial upgrading (Gopura et al.,
247 2016: 103). Rather than being limited to the ‘design’ segment of the fashion value chain, we suggest that
248 fashion designers working as micro-entrepreneurs or establishing small to medium companies (Langevang,
249 2017; Hivos, 2016; Jennings, 2011) can connect across multiple levels of the value chain. By designing,
250 producing and retailing a range of products, including custom designs / made-to-measure, small batch or

251 mass-produced garments and accessories in local, national, regional, continental or even international
252 markets facilitated by physical and online retail platforms, Africa's fashion designers connect with the
253 design (their own), raw materials (i.e cotton), production (of textiles and garments), logistics/export
254 networks (for transport and production of materials/textiles and finished garments for retail), marketing (of
255 brand and designs/products) and sales/distribution (of designs and garments both physically and online)
256 components of the value chain. As discussed earlier, fashion designers as creative entrepreneurs are also
257 interconnected with creative and non-creative professions in the creative economy that support production
258 and retail across the sector (i.e. artisans and tailors, textiles manufacturers, retailers, marketers and other
259 professionals) (Hansen, 2019; Hivos, 2016; Vallone 2008). In this way, fashion designers on the continent
260 can become dominant players (Pasquali et al., 2020) in a market – especially domestic and/or regional
261 markets in Africa where they service a growing “middle class” (Brooks, 2018; Melber, 2016) as well as
262 global markets (especially through diaspora networks - Jennings, 2011) – and generate both economic,
263 cultural and social value (AfDB, 2019; Jennings, 2011). Horner and Nadvi (2018, p.227) also suggest that
264 domestic and regional markets are shown to provide more scope for functional upgrading in ‘design,
265 marketing and branding’, further highlighting the potential for fashion designers in local development.

266 We therefore argue for applying the lens of lead firms to South-based domestic fashion designers and brands
267 (particularly those with a high-profile who generate significant sales - Pasquali et al., 2020), as they ‘control
268 access to major resources (such as product design, new technologies, brand names or consumer demand)’
269 (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003, p.8). Those that ‘source from and supply to international markets that cross
270 substantial geographical boundaries’ (Horner and Nadvi, 2018, p.222) participate in GVCs. We consciously
271 break with the common understanding of lead firms that cannot accommodate domestic designers and with
272 the GVC framework - in its current manifestation – that does not fit fashion designers in the global South
273 at the level (micro-enterprise/SME and predominantly domestic markets) in which they typically operate
274 and the different types of value (cultural, social and economic) generated. Thus, development literature
275 passes over those working below the global North lead firms, at the micro level and independent of
276 international brands. They nevertheless connect backwards and forwards from the local to the global level
277 through sourcing raw materials (for example textiles from China but also Dutch Wax fabric from Europe)
278 (Hansen, 2019), outsourcing production (Hivos, 2016) and engaging with international markets
279 increasingly facilitated by global marketing and e-commerce platforms (Jennings, 2011).

280 An adapted GVC lens that considers end markets beyond the global North while integrating activities
281 across at least two continents (Sturgeon, 2001; Barrientos et al., 2016:) (i.e. South-South and even South-
282 North, in addition to North-South and North-North chains and trade networks – Horner & Murphy, 2017)
283 could elevate the conceptualising of GVC (Horner & Navi, 2018). Further research that examines that the

284 work of fashion designers within such structures, could, therefore, better explicate how low-income
285 countries can transition from lower value Cut, Make, Trims (CMT) assembly and Original Equipment
286 Manufacturing (OEM) to higher value Original Design Manufacturing (ODM) and Original Brand
287 Manufacturing (OBM), to experience exporting's economic benefits (Gopura et al., 2016). Thus value
288 adding pathways impact the integration of fashion designers in the Fibre to Fashion (F2F) value chain - 'an
289 end-to-end apparel offering, from growing or producing the raw materials (often cotton) to assembling,
290 finishing, and shipping the garment' (Hivos, 2016, p.63). However, in many SSA countries, efforts to boost
291 labour intensive (employment generating) but low value-adding operations such as CMT³, are offset by
292 limited attention to developing higher value activities such as ODM and OBM⁴ (Staritz, 2012); an
293 imbalance that has led scholars to overlook designers as potential lead firms in Africa's fashion industries.

294 **Africa fashion futures – designers leading from below**

295
296 Having addressed the growing acknowledgement of the role of fashion designers in the creative economy
297 and the industry's potential to support economic development, and having reviewed the literature
298 highlighting challenges and opportunities facing both designers and the wider industry, we note a lacuna in
299 scholarly debates on fashion value chains in Africa: the position and role of domestic fashion designers and
300 their connections within and across different networks, particularly those unaffiliated with international
301 companies. As such, 'local designers and small operators are left out of the emerging F2F value-chain'
302 (Hivos, 2016: 23). We further note a disconnect between the literature on fashion designers as entrepreneurs
303 operating within specific global structures and systems, and the national and transnational policies which
304 influence their work.

305 Despite calls to integrate design into the development of National Value Chains (NVCs) (Hivos, 2016), it
306 remains unclear how African fashion designers located across the continent connect with and are impacted
307 by their relationships with producers, manufactures, suppliers and intermediary organisations working at
308 local, national, regional and global scales, and how they may act as lead firms. Some African nations,
309 specifically Mauritius and South Africa (and also emerging in Ethiopia), that focus more on high value
310 addition ODM and OBM activities involving stronger integration of designers both upstream and
311 downstream (Hivos, 2016, Staritz, 2012), present an opportunity to probe their work and relationship with
312 global value chains while rethinking lead firms in the periphery and from below, particularly small-scale

³ 'The labor-intensive part of apparel manufacturing, meaning the factories cut the fabric, sew the pieces together, and add any trims and packaging. They do not have responsibility for design or materials' (Hivos, 2016, p.63)

⁴ In ODM supplying firms provide design services to buyers, in OBM firms also own the brand (Whitfield et al., 2020).

313 actors and entrepreneurs who contribute to local development while acting as cultural agents, and are thus
314 relevant for fashion as well as wider (creative) industries.

315 Fashion designers are global South actors and cultural agents. Their absence from the debate so far limits
316 their usefulness for investigations into how nascent lead firms control and access resources and generate
317 profit in the global context. Thus, prioritising a core-periphery structure intrinsically privileges international
318 global North actors and occludes – inadvertently or otherwise – the scholarly and applied potential of local,
319 national and regional dynamics and their interconnections. Excluding designers from Africa’s fashion value
320 chain also undermines the representation (and possibly preservation) of different cultural traditions, themes
321 and designs within African fashion production. We, therefore, call for further research that deepens our
322 understanding of systems and structures (i.e. trade policies) that can challenge (rather than perpetuate)
323 unequal exchanges rooted in colonial legacies, by investigating the organisation of alternative forms of
324 value, such as cultural and social value.

325 As African nations manoeuvre themselves out of the lower rungs of the value chain as sites of mass
326 production (with associated exploitation and ethical implications) (Khan, 2019) we need the tools to
327 understand the role of designers within sustainable creative economies, and the policies and infrastructure
328 required to support them. We call for interdisciplinary research taking fashion designers as a key point from
329 which to engage critically with GVCs, that extends the discussion beyond prioritising the lead firm and end
330 markets in the global North (Horner & Navi, 2018), to activities between Southern continents (Horner and
331 Murphy, 2017) whereby value can be generated in and for the global South. We thus emphasise looking
332 from below at fashion designers as creatives and cultural producers with potential to be dominant actors
333 (Pasquali et al., 2020) in national, regional and global value chains, leading aspects of domestic, regional
334 and international markets and generating value, particularly through design, marketing and branding
335 activities (Horner and Navi, 2018). We advocate expanding the debates on lead firms beyond global North
336 actors by utilising the lens to examine domestic, regional and continental dynamics and its relationship to
337 the global.

338 We see African designers, especially those working within priority development areas such as AfCFTA
339 (Hivos, 2016; UNCTAD, 2019) as the starting point for analysing forward and backward linkages across
340 the fashion value chain in connection with GVCs, including global power relations (Khan, 2019), and their
341 development of national, regional, and continental value chains. Through fashion designers, we can
342 examine how local actors disrupt existing patterns and ask whether fashion (and other) export channels and
343 marketing networks are also dominated by African actors and the extent to which African designers are
344 able to complete value chains domestically. We note significant opportunities to investigate the
345 development and growth of intra-continental, regional and national trade (UNCTAD, 2019) and the

346 relationship of African fashion designers with localised supply and value chains, including their current
347 engagement with local resources (i.e. revived factories) and markets, their development of more localised
348 production and retail/distribution opportunities, and the impact thereof on their designs, production
349 processes and market access (domestic, regional and international). With the continent-wide focus on
350 developing domestic capacity and intracontinental trade, and with increased recognition of the creative
351 economy, including the fashion industry, as a growth and employment driver (AfDB, 2018), research that
352 seeks to understand how fashion designers can support local development through the creation of value
353 added products that draw from and represent Africa's rich cultural heritage and diversity will be
354 increasingly important for both policy and practice.

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