



Ninakuru: Holistic Luxury Hats and Handbags

Why Holistic Luxury is the New Luxury

This post was sponsored by and written in collaboration with NINAKURU.

When we think of a luxury product, what comes to mind?

The concept of *luxury* in all its forms suggests higher prices, the best quality, and covetable associations with status. Luxury items are associated with tradition, elegance, and durability, and are expected to surpass their less popular, inexpensive counterparts.

However, as many of us know, much of the perception of luxury is image-based. The reputation behind the brand, and corresponding glossy and sexy ad campaigns, are often a façade.



In fact, many products deemed “luxury” are actually produced quite cheaply in overseas factories. The companies that boast well-established pasts –

those that began as small family businesses – have been eroded by time and globalization, and have sacrificed quality for quantity.

In a fashion market overwhelmed by fast fashion and extractive business practices, how can we call something we buy “beautiful” or “luxury” if it was sold by companies engaged in unethical business practices and made by exploited workers?

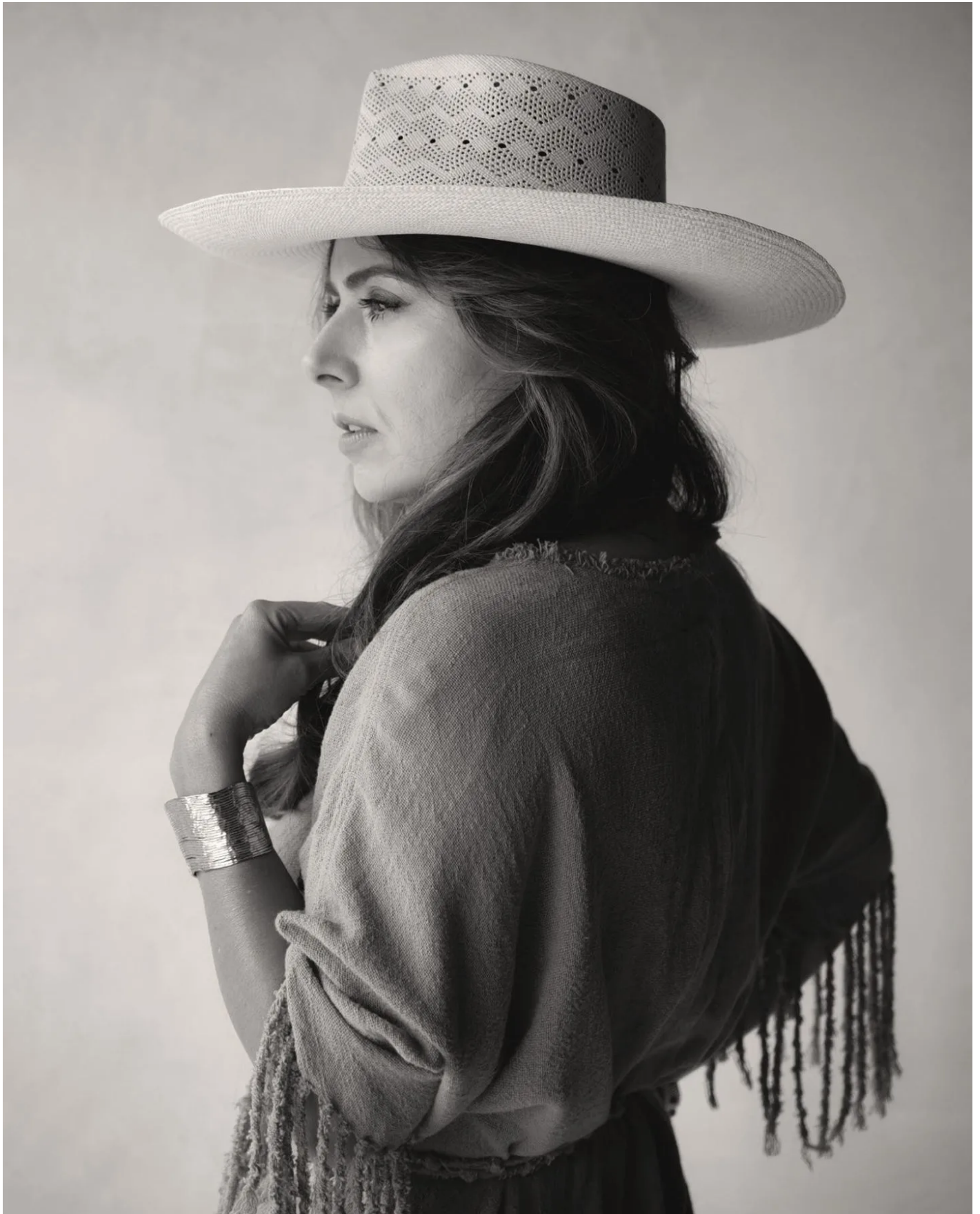
The world is changing, and it’s time that our definition of what true beauty and luxury in the fashion world really means.

There are additional, more inclusive values, that should define the *new luxury*.

Luxury redefined

Materials and craftsmanship certainly play a part in a luxury piece, but there’s more to it than that. The well-being of craftspeople should be a factor, as well.

Makers and artisans around the world have suffered centuries of exploitation. While we can’t erase this generational mistreatment, we can change how we select products to buy based on *holistic* quality.



What is holistic quality?

It's the intangibles: respect, empathy, appreciation, and sense of worth one feels by being paid a dignified wage. There's an interdependency between how the makers are treated and the quality of their craft. A product marketed as beautiful and luxurious should be defined only as such when we honor and respect how the maker was treated when making the product.

When skilled makers feel respected for their talent and creativity, it drives their creative passion from a place of dignity and enthusiasm for their craft. Honoring them makes for a genuinely beautiful, holistically luxurious product.

Holistic beauty and luxury are all around us

The holistic luxury you're looking for might be sourced from a maker or boutique right in your own neighborhood, or a brand's site a mouse-click away.

As we work to build a more equitable world, holistic luxury is the new haute couture. How so? Makers, boutiques, and brands who recognize skilled craftsmanship and the artistic value and luxury it represents attract a mindful clientele who appreciate authenticity.

And because each item is made with passion and attention to detail, the product is more than a product: it is an extension of the maker who created it.

So, rather than spending my money at a high-end department store that cares only about margins and bottom line, it makes more sense to be loyal to local boutique or brand catering to a mindful clientele that sells authentically beautiful products.



Holistic Luxury: Hats and Bags by NINAKURU

With the definition of holistic quality and luxury in mind, I sat down with Jennifer Moray, founder of [NINAKURU](#), to discuss her luxury accessories brand.

Ninakuru, which means “*firefly*” in Quechua, signifying that “each of us has an inner glow worthy of being noticed.” Quechua is the language of the Quechua people, who live throughout Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador.

Ninakuru partners with artisans in Ecuador, including women’s artisan co-ops and their own network of talented makers, who produce a stunning collection of fair-trade hats and bags.

An Interview with NINAKURU

Read on for Jennifer’s words on the brand:

How It All Began

The purpose came first, and then came the hats.

My mother was a dressmaker from Ecuador, and she encouraged me to be creative from a young age. I built Ninakuru to be a vehicle for this creativity, and just as importantly, to help preserve the heritage and livelihood of artisans in developing countries who rely on the trade of their artisanal crafts to support the economic and educational development of their families and communities.

I grew up in the Midwest, and after college, I moved to my mother’s native Ecuador, where I spent 14 years as a managing partner in a flower broker business, as Ecuador is also famous for its beautiful roses.

On the side, I traveled, made clothing and accessories for myself, and formed wonderful relationships with talented local artisans.

I learned soon after getting to know and spending time with these lovely artisans that many were abandoning their cherished craft to work in the service sector, but this was by economic necessity and not by choice.

By collaborating with them and elevating the designs with quality materials I source globally, I am able to bring these collections to a wider audience, which helps the preservation of their artisanal crafts and treasured heritage.



How NINAKURU's Fair Trade Hats Are Made

Authentic Panama hats aren't from Panama! They're actually made in Ecuador, recognized by UNESCO as an "[Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#)", using traditional craftsmanship that has been passed down for many generations.

1. The source of the straw for Panama hats comes from toquilla palm, the palm found in the lush, forested coastal regions of Ecuador.
2. Harvesters cut only those palm shoots they need for production, keeping the living plant intact. This is the foundation of the sustainable harvesting practice that has no negative impact on the environment.
3. The palm shoots are gathered into bundles and made into straw. Over time and experience, the harvesters are able to efficiently identify each bundle of straw, and pick the highest quality. They are then cooked, treated, and hung to dry, creating a fine, natural colored straw.
4. The straw is then sent to the weaver. A significant amount of skill and knowledge, usually passed down generationally, is required to be a talented weaver.
5. While simple tools and some machinery are used in some parts of the process, the weaving of a Panama hat is done 100% by hand. Skilled artisans make tight, fine weaves to build a hat from the crown out. Each step in the hat-making process is done by a specific person with refined skills for that specific step.
6. The weaver starts by hand-weaving a small circular mat, forming the center of the crown. More straw is added until the crown takes shape.
7. The weaver continues to work from the crown to the brim, bending over at a birds-eye perspective enabling her or him to get close to the straw and see the intricate detail in the weave.
8. While some straw-hat manufacturers cut the edge of the brims with a machine, folding and gluing the edge of the brim, genuine Panama hats are never cut or sewn by machine – they are folded by hand and finished meticulously. This handmade process is why one may encounter slight

imperfections in brim shape. These imperfections are stamps of authenticity.

9. To get the hat to its final form, the hat form is then blocked into the desired shape, depending on the hat block used. It could be a fedora, gambler, porkpie, or any number of other crowns available to the hat maker.

The entire hat weaving process alone can take one to three weeks for some hats, while the most finely woven hats can take as much as three months or more!

Where NINAKURU Sources Wool

NINAKURU wool is collected by a family run farm in South America. No industrial machines are used to shear the wool; the sheep are all hand sheared using standard electric shears or non-electric hand shears (those basically look like huge scissors).

The shearing is done for two reasons: to collect the sheep's wool of course, but just as importantly, to relieve the sheep of the heavy wool coat which causes them to overheat in the warmer months.

We've learned that after shearing, the sheep are more active and seem energized, as if they've been happily released of their thick coats! There is shade and clean water and lots of [organic grazing land](#) for all of them.



The Continuing Importance of Holistic Quality

The fashion industry contributes to an enormous amount of wasted resources each year across the globe. The issue pretty much boils down to the fact that so many fashion brands – especially those we see in malls across the U.S., Europe, and Asia – are distributing poor quality clothing en-masse.

People over-consume these items, flooding closets with the latest disposable trends, and discarding items that quickly go out of style. It takes so many resources to produce a garment: water, energy, fabrics, dyes, transportation, and more.

Then we come to the workers. In many fast-fashion companies, the extremely low-price tags often don't match a product's true cost. Workers who do the hard task of actually making the garment or accessory often receive painfully low wages while the corporations profit wildly.

These companies tend to use inexpensive materials and pay their workers incredibly low wages, knowing full well that the trendy item they're selling will soon be out of style, and it won't matter if that dress or sweater is starting to lose shape.

Then, if the consumer decides to throw the item away, they'll have to replace it, further benefiting the fast fashion companies. In effect, landfills end up packed with billions of pounds of clothing each year, many of which won't degrade for decades or longer.



Meanwhile, millions of fashion workers who produce the clothes we buy are barely making living wages and working in dangerous workplaces.

If you see a handwoven hat or bag that's selling for \$19, this means the worker got paid pennies a day to make the product. This destructive cycle needs to stop.

So, fair trade does indeed matter, because exploitation not only doesn't pay the workers enough to survive, it suppresses creativity, drive, and purpose. And it dims people's inner light and self-esteem by diminishing their self-worth.

This has an incredibly negative impact on their quality of life, and inevitably, the quality of their work.

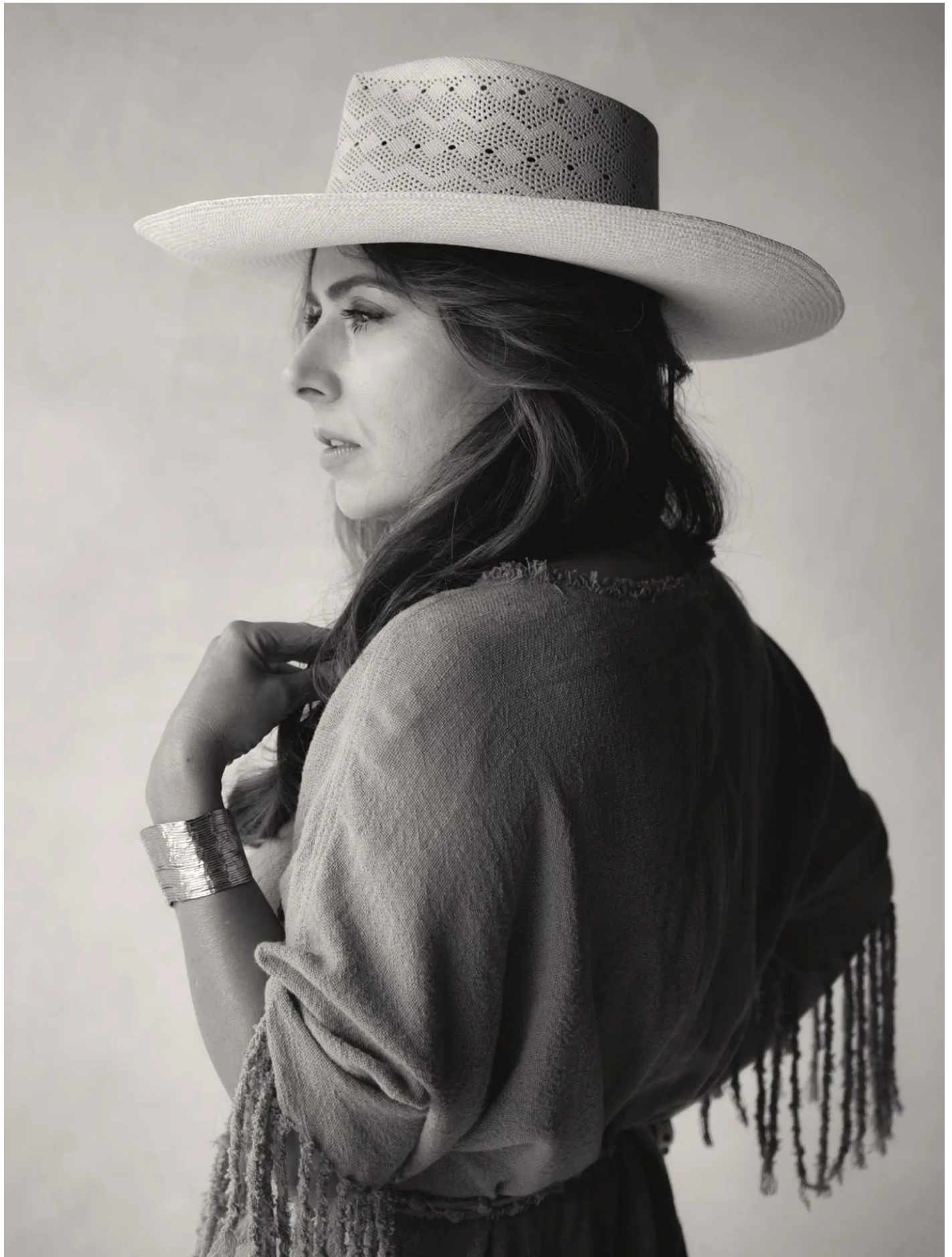
However, when we pay not only fair wages but [dignified wages](#), and provide empowerment through respect, compassion, and other intangibles, this nourishes people's self-worth and sparks the passion necessary for excellence.

Once this happens, it is reflected positively in the holistic quality of their personal lives as well as in their craft.

Shop the Post

[Ninakuru's](#) holistically beautiful and fair-trade [Panama](#) and [wool felt](#) hats and vegetable tanned [leather](#) and [hand woven bags](#) are offered in a range of styles. Customer favorites are below (click the images to view).













Ninakuru products are available in the US, Europe and Australia.

Leah Wise



Leah Wise is the founder of StyleWise Blog. She has been writing, speaking, and consulting on sustainable fashion, the fair trade and secondhand supply chain, and digital marketing for over ten years. An Episcopal priest, Leah holds a B.A. in Religion from Florida State University and an M.Div. from Yale Divinity School. When not working, you can find her looking for treasures at the thrift store.