

SUSTAINABILITY

At the Global Fashion Summit, It Was All About Resilience

BY BELLA WEBB

May 12, 2026



 SAVE THIS STORY

Sustainability is at a crossroads. This sentiment echoed around the annual Global Fashion Summit in Copenhagen last week, where the impacts of an industry facing existential headwinds could be felt.

Coordinated by non-profit Global Fashion Agenda (GFA), the summit rallies sustainable fashion stakeholders from across the value chain, sparking conversation around key bottlenecks, opportunities, and roadmaps for industry progress. There were fewer attendees this year, but GFA CEO Federica Marchionni puts this down to a “recalibration”, rather than a wholesale “retreat” from sustainability.



Global Fashion Agenda CEO Federica Marchionni at the celebration dinner on Thursday. Photo: Global Fashion Agenda

was exceptionally high. The depth of the conversations, the roundtable participation, and the number of concrete collaborations initiated tell a much more important story.”

As ever, there was a spate of news announced on-stage. Non-profit Paris Good Fashion revealed the topline results of its latest citizen consultation, gathering insights from the US, the UK, Italy and France on how consumers understand and engage with sustainability in fashion. Amsterdam-based fashion brand Martan won the Visa Young Creators: Recycle the Runway program. And Copenhagen-based jewelry giant Pandora — one of the summit’s associate sponsors — took to the stage with brand ambassador Pamela Anderson to celebrate the launch of its product-level carbon footprint initiative. (The brand has dubbed carbon footprints the “fifth C” of laboratory-grown diamonds.)



Amsterdam-based fashion brand Martan won the Visa Young Creators: Recycle the Runway program. Photo: Global Fashion Agenda

ADVERTISEMENT

Elsewhere, Marchionni says the 14 closed-door roundtables offered deeper discussion and problem-solving, which will be followed up with “concrete next steps, partnerships, and action plans”. This year’s roundtables focused on scaling circular infrastructure, climate adaptation in sourcing regions, and the need for harmonized regulation.

Beyond the scheduled — and scripted — conversations, the main balcony of the Copenhagen Concert Hall lent itself as a hub for attendees to spontaneously gather and discuss the state of the industry, form new connections, and set the world to rights over cups of coffee and afternoon snacks (this year, it was banana-flavored ice cream sandwiches). Meanwhile, associate sponsor Ebay hosted live-shopping events, auctioning off luxury handbags with fellow



The Cirkel co-founder Eliza Batten hosting an Ebay live auction on the community stage. Photo: Global Fashion Agenda

But what did this year's summit tell us about the key challenges keeping sustainable fashion folks up at night, and how do they plan to solve them?

Vogue Business: Daily

Insights, updates, and alerts to help you make better business decisions.

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our [user agreement](#) (including [class action waiver and arbitration provisions](#)), and acknowledge our [privacy policy](#).

Innovation can't scale in isolation

Innovation was a key theme at this year's summit. For Kering's chief sustainability and institutional affairs officer Marie-Claire Daveu, discussions reinforced her belief that innovation is no longer a nice-to-have in sustainability, but vital to the transformation of supply chains and for meeting fashion's climate targets. "What stood out, in particular, was the emphasis on ecosystem-building rather than isolated initiatives," she says. "The discussions highlighted the importance of large groups working hand-in-hand with startups, researchers, and technology players to accelerate commercial viability and scale."



The Innovation Forum, where startups presented their solutions to attendees. Photo: Global Fashion Agenda

A clear example of this was the Trailblazer Award — a collaboration between GFA, manufacturing group PDS, and its investment arm PDS Ventures — designed to spotlight fashion’s most promising innovators. Daveu chaired the jury, before announcing the winner on-stage; this year, Japanese startup Synflux took home the top prize for its AI-powered, pattern-cutting algorithm, which it claims can reduce textile waste by up to 66% and fabric consumption by up to 15%. It will now benefit from an investment package worth \$200,000, including mentorship and operational support from PDS, whose network spans over 250 retailers and brands, and 600 factories. “Capital is not the only solution, it’s also scalability,” PDS co-founder Faiza Seth said during the announcement. “We will help the finalists get the mentorship, the know-how, and the partnerships they need to scale.”

The discussion around ecosystem-level support, however, was where innovation conversations fell short, says Nemanthie Kooragamage, director of group sustainable business at Sri Lankan clothing manufacturer MAS Holdings. Representation was lacking from those with lived experience in transitioning to more innovative materials, supply chains, and systems. Without this, conversations about circularity and innovation became overly technical, Kooragamage explains, neglecting to consider the behavioral shift that creates systems change. “It is important to understand the difference between an overarching aspiration and what is possible with existing ecosystems, where innovation gaps are yet to be unlocked,” she says.

For others, the focus on innovation was a sore point. “Having attended many global events, I continue to hope for more voices with direct links to nature, land stewardship, and future consumers. Too often, the conversation focuses on new innovations rather than supporting and scaling existing solutions,” says Australian supplier Michael Taylor, whose company Taylors Run produces superfine merino wool. “Innovation is important, of course. But when the summit begins to feel more like a trade show than a forum for hard-hitting sustainability discussions, I think something is lost. Farmers innovate every day. Why not draw more deeply on that resource?”



Australian wool producer Michael Taylor (far right) on a panel about Tier 4 (raw material production). Photo: Global Fashion Agenda

ADVERTISEMENT

Implementation is only possible with suppliers

Throughout the summit, speakers reiterated that sustainability is entering its implementation phase. Many noted that the political swing to the right — and the ensuing ESG backlash in Europe and the US — has prompted not only something of a corporate retreat, but it has also spurred the most dedicated companies to double down and pursue increasingly sophisticated strategies. “There is clearly more maturity in the conversations today,” says Daveu. “Less focus on pledges alone, more attention on implementation, measurable impact, and supply chain transformation.”

For GFA, one of the priorities was implementing its 2030 Circularity Blueprint, published ahead of this year’s summit, in partnership with non-profit Rehubs. The blueprint, which was the subject of a workshop and a closed-door roundtable, was designed to scale textile-to-textile recycling infrastructure in Europe, as well as unlock circular investment before businesses must comply with incoming regulations. “Unlocking textile circularity at scale requires the full value chain to move together,” Evan Wiener, interim COO and board advisor to Rehubs, said in a statement. “Rehubs brings leading organizations from across the textile recycling value chain to the same table, to align interests,

While the emphasis on implementation meant more manufacturers were involved in GFS this year, representation remained low, especially on the main stage, attendees agree. “There were opportunities created for honest conversations between brands and manufacturers, which is so important to make the transition from talk to action,” says Kooragamage. Brands and manufacturers should hold equal power in making sustainability happen, both in financing and in effort, she adds, which includes equal on-stage representation. “I believe manufacturer numbers are still lacking or imbalanced in many conversations and panels. We need less sensationalization of extreme views and more conversation on what’s practically possible. There is a real need to move away from the narrative that suppliers lack the knowledge or intent, and to acknowledge that everything is driven by the demand signals.”

Resilience reigns supreme

In a bid to win over business leaders, this year’s overarching theme, “building resilient futures”, offered a subtle nod to the geopolitical shocks currently wreaking havoc on supply chains and communities around the world. “Across almost every conversation — whether around circularity, decarbonization, labor, AI, or innovation — the same truth emerged,” says GFA’s Marchionni. “The companies that will lead the future of fashion are those building the capacity to absorb shocks while continuing to transform.”

The GFA also redesigned its annual CEO Agenda to address a different stakeholder group: chief financial officers. “We need to recognize that resilience is not only built through creativity or sustainability teams, but also through capital allocation,” she explains. “CFOs are the architects of resilience, because they decide where investment flows — into product integrity, circular infrastructure, traceability, and workforce capability.”

Despite the obvious compounding crises motivating the need for resilience, there was little talk of politics on-stage, says Politecnico di Milano associate professor Dr. Hakan Karaosman. “Shockingly, the summit remained silent on the current state of macropolitical disruptions, such as Trump’s erratic behavior and war in the Middle East,” he says. “Fashion needs to be fearless, because it is one of the industries capable of influencing governments. In a world where everything is political, we need serious leadership that takes action rather than turning a blind eye.”



Marchionni says this was a deliberate move from GFA, designed to position sustainability as a bipartisan issue. “We were intentional about focusing not only on the pressures facing the industry, but on the practical ways forward,” she explains. “The current moment is undeniably difficult. Economic pressure, geopolitical shifts, and regulatory uncertainty are real, but this is exactly why GFA exists, to help the industry navigate complexity without losing momentum.”

A fireside chat with Chalhoub Group executive chair Patrick Chalhoub was the most explicit reference to conflict. He explained how the group has relocated several times in its 70-year history as a result of turmoil in the Middle East. “Our story is one of resilience,” Chalhoub told attendees. “Life is such that things can change, environments can change. How are we going to rethink ourselves, and adapt our strategies in the best way to achieve what we want?”

While resilience in its various forms was woven into almost every session, the most practical panel discussions centered on climate resilience and adaptation — from one about [the impacts of climate change and extreme heat on women’s health](#), to another on the [physical climate risks affecting raw materials](#) in fashion and beauty, and several sessions addressing [decarbonization](#). “There is a pressing need to include climate risk in decarbonization roadmaps,” Kooragamage says, “to acknowledge that the road to decarbonization will not be linear, and to reassess what these new realities would mean for current decarbonization pathways and financing.”

READ MORE

Extreme heat is putting factory workers in danger. What should brands do?

Heat stress lays bare the tension between climate mitigation and adaptation. Workers are caught in the middle.

BY BELLA WEBB



Pessimism gives way to pragmatism

Just a few months into Trump’s second term, with tariff chaos whirring, EU deregulation at its peak and widespread sustainability team layoffs, [the mood at last year’s summit was decidedly downbeat](#). This year, despite a smaller crowd, attendees seemed resolved to make the best of a bad situation.

For first-time attendee and speaker Wendy Savage, who is senior director of social impact and transparency at [Patagonia](#), there was a refreshing pragmatism underpinning sessions about circularity and policy. “What came through clearly is both the scale of the work ahead and the opportunity in building and finding incentives for the underlying systems — collection, sorting, recycling, data — that can enable circular models to move from niche to normal,” she says. “Real progress will depend on whether we can build these systems in ways that are interoperable, transparent, and accessible across the industry, not just for a few leaders, but at scale.”

As always, certain perspectives were marginalized or overlooked. For Emma Håkansson, founder and director of non-profit Collective Fashion Justice (CFJ), there were not enough advocates for — or even mentions of — animal welfare. “We can’t keep talking about ‘people and the planet’, leaving out all the other sentient species we share earth with,” she says. Meanwhile, for Taylor, there could have been more input from Tier 4 producers, rather than just those “at the top of the supply chain”. And in a keynote address, photojournalist and documentary filmmaker Ami Vitale reminded attendees that viewing nature through the blinkered lens of risk management and profit protection overlooked its role as “a living system to which we all belong”, as opposed to “a warehouse of resources”.

optimized,” says Dr. Karaosman. “They are people who deserve and need dignity.”

Finally, Fred Werneck, co-founder of impact investment firm Clarmondial AG, delivered a call to action that neatly summed up the feeling among attendees. “Just do it. Get moving. Take the first step,” he said. “You can always commission another paper, hire another consultant and gather more data, but the world will burn before you’re ready.”

More Sustainability Stories from *Vogue Business*

- [How to Tell a Sustainability Story Today](#)
- [How to Fix the In-Store Experience for Neurodivergent Shoppers](#)
- [Can One Brand Tackle Jewelry’s Toughest Challenge?](#)
- [Reformation Wanted to Become Climate Positive. Did It Work?](#)
- [How to Get Fashion to Change Its Ways](#)



Bella Webb is the sustainability editor at *Vogue Business* and an associate lecturer at Central Saint Martins. Her coverage spans from raw materials and regulation to supply chain transformation and systems change. Bella regularly moderates panels for agenda-setting organisations, including the British Fashion Council, European Delegation, Global Fashion Summit and ... [Read More](#)

Vogue Business: Daily

Insights, updates, and alerts to help you make better business decisions.

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our [user agreement](#) (including [class action waiver and arbitration provisions](#)), and acknowledge our [privacy policy](#).

READ MORE
