

# EXPANDED SUMMARY

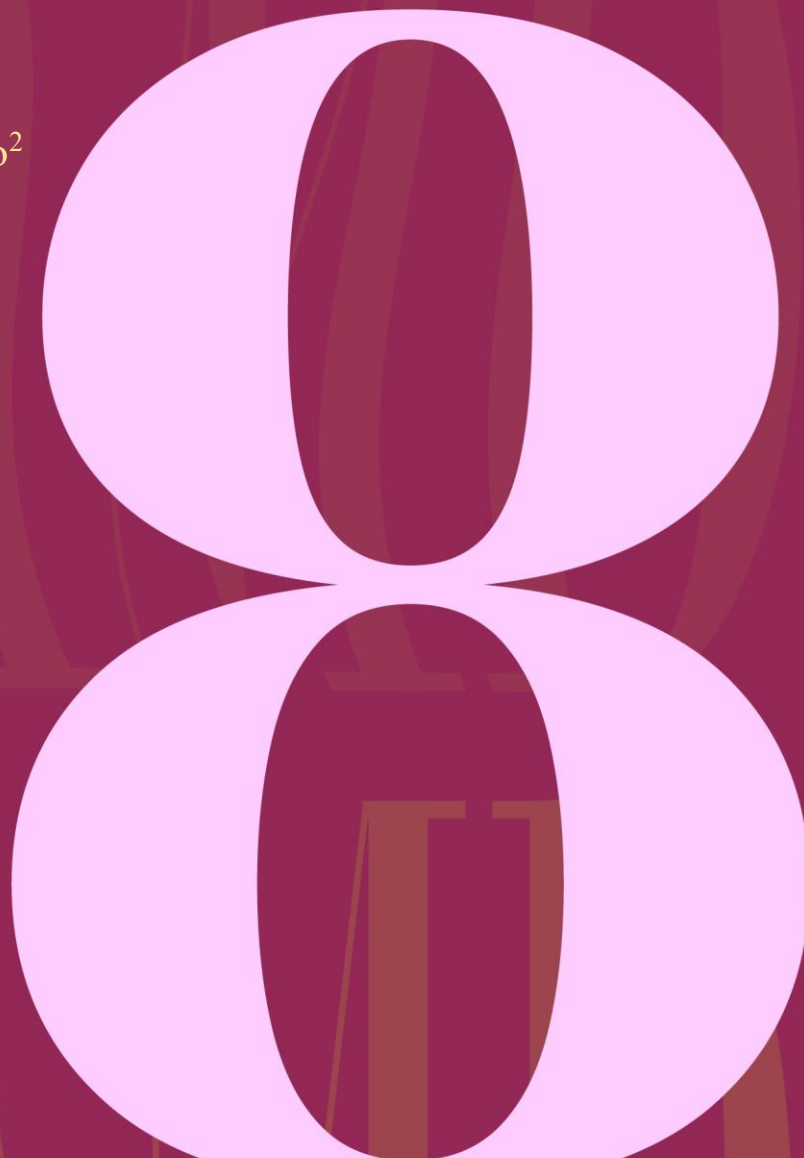
Social innovation and sustainability with women  
in areas of social vulnerability: the Thousand  
Women Program in São João dos Patos - MA

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## Introduction

Contemporary society functions as a vast laboratory of ideas, where new modes of being and doing continuously unfold into fresh challenges and responses. Social innovation emerges, evolves, and disseminates, transitioning from novel concepts to fully implemented solutions. In this scenario, design gains importance as a transformative agent, fostering quality of life and well-being by addressing social vulnerabilities (Manzini, 2008). However, such transformation requires shifts in consumption behaviors, environmental respect, and social interaction.

In recent years, global discussions on sustainability and social equity have emphasized the role of inclusive design and community-driven initiatives. Fashion, as a cultural and economic force, plays a significant role in these discussions. Traditional production and consumption models have long prioritized efficiency and profit over ethical considerations, often exacerbating environmental degradation and social inequalities. However, innovative approaches that integrate sustainability and local empowerment into fashion processes are reshaping the industry's future (Escobar, 2014).

The Thousand Women Program, in collaboration with the Fashion Revolution movement, represents a practical embodiment of social innovation and sustainability in the fashion industry. This initiative, implemented in São João dos Patos - MA, Brazil, utilizes a photography contest as a means of exploring women's autonomy and life quality in vulnerable communities. The program empowers women

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through education, entrepreneurship, and the promotion of sustainable fashion practices, creating economic opportunities while preserving cultural heritage.

By analyzing the images produced, this study categorizes the visual narratives into key themes such as affection, identity, and trust, aiming to examine the interplay between social inclusion, female empowerment, and sustainable fashion (Okada & Berlim, 2014). This analysis is critical in understanding how localized interventions can impact broader discussions on sustainability and ethical fashion. Furthermore, the program serves as an example of how grassroots initiatives can foster systemic change, challenging existing power structures within the fashion industry and redefining the way we perceive value in clothing production and consumption.

## Discussion

The concept of sustainability is deeply intertwined with systemic changes in societal behavior. Manzini (2008) emphasizes that sustainable development relies on balancing economic, sociocultural, and environmental aspects while fostering justice, responsibility, and human solidarity. In the context of fashion, this balance requires a paradigm shift—from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented mindset, where design mediates transformative experiences rather than merely delivering commodities.

The Thousand Women Program introduces a decolonial perspective to fashion, challenging Eurocentric norms that have historically dictated beauty and clothing standards (Quijano, 2000). By integrating local craftsmanship, such as embroidery and crochet, the program preserves cultural heritage while promoting economic independence for socially vulnerable women. The initiative aligns with Escobar's (2014) argument that sustainable fashion should be seen as a socio-cultural construct, reshaping narratives through grassroots participation and collective agency.

Furthermore, the photography contest served as a participatory platform where women could document their lived experiences through clothing. This

methodological approach aligns with Bardin's (2011) content analysis framework, revealing key themes in the participants' stories:

1. **Fashion and Affection:** Clothing as a medium of emotional connection and memory preservation (Carvalho, 2016). Participants highlighted how garments carried sentimental value, often linking them to personal milestones or family heritage.
2. **Fashion and Craftsmanship:** Handcrafted garments as embodiments of identity and local knowledge (Borges, 2003). Traditional techniques such as embroidery and textile weaving were reinforced as cultural and economic pillars.
3. **Fashion and Identity:** Clothing as a tool for self-expression and cultural assertion (Krucken, 2009). Many women described how their fashion choices helped them reclaim their agency and individuality within their communities.
4. **Fashion, Fidelity, and Trust:** The role of garments in fostering social bonds and confidence in local producers (Lapoujade, 1997). This theme underscored the significance of sustainable relationships in ethical fashion production.

These themes reinforce the understanding that sustainable fashion is not merely about environmental considerations but also about fostering social justice and inclusion. The participants demonstrated that their engagement with fashion transcended aesthetics, serving as an assertion of self-worth and resistance against imposed standards (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). The act of storytelling through fashion not only strengthened personal identities but also highlighted the necessity of localized interventions to support sustainability on a broader scale.

Another key observation was the role of community-driven initiatives in shaping new economic opportunities. Programs such as the Thousand Women Program contribute to the broader sustainable development goals by fostering local enterprise, reducing social inequalities, and challenging conventional narratives on fashion production and consumption. Women who participated in the contest reported increased confidence and a newfound appreciation for their craftsmanship, reinforcing the potential of fashion as a tool for social transformation.

## Conclusion

The Thousand Women Program successfully exemplifies how fashion can function as a vector for social innovation and sustainability. The program not only provided skills training but also reinforced the importance of cultural identity, community building, and economic independence for marginalized women.

The findings of this study highlight key challenges faced by participants, including economic vulnerability, exposure to gender-based violence, and infrastructural limitations. To address these issues, the program implemented localized strategies such as territorial diagnostics, integration with local production arrangements, and pedagogical methodologies focused on empowerment and critical dialogue (Farah, 2004). Additionally, the initiative fostered an ecosystem where women could engage in co-creation and knowledge-sharing, further reinforcing the importance of participatory methodologies in social innovation.

Through the photography contest, the women engaged in a reflective process that redefined their relationship with clothing, shifting from passive consumption to active storytelling. This process underscores Manzini's (2015) proposition that social innovation emerges from participatory networks where individuals collectively imagine and co-create alternative futures.

Thus, the program serves as a critical case study for sustainable fashion initiatives, demonstrating how local knowledge, design practices, and social engagement can drive meaningful transformation. As we move towards more inclusive and sustainable fashion systems, initiatives like the Thousand Women Program reinforce the imperative of recognizing diverse voices and lived experiences in shaping the industry's future. Moreover, it highlights the importance of community-led sustainability efforts that place the agency of marginalized groups at the forefront of ethical fashion development<sup>4</sup>.

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