SUSTAINABILITY: PÁRAMO

The World Fair Trade Organization has confirmed Páramo as the first outdoor brand to be able to offer garments with guaranteed fair-trade status. The UK-based brand has now begun to tell the story behind its newly won status: its partnership with a special finished garment manufacturer in Colombia.

Fair-trade first for Páramo

UK-based outdoor brand Páramo has announced that 80% of its garments will now carry a formal fair-trade certification thanks to its partnership with Miquelina, a social initiative in Colombia. Bogotá-based Miquelina is the main source of Páramo's "directional" garments: jackets, fleeces, baselayers and others. The brand uses the term "directional" to describe its products because, it insists, fabric breathability on its own is not enough. "Directionality", the ability to direct where moisture moves to in a fabric to maintain comfort for the wearer, avoiding too much build-up when we sweat but also making sure to avoid the rapid evaporation that could lead to becoming too cold too quickly, in the fabrics it uses allows the finished products Miquelina manufactures on its behalf to perform well in the most challenging conditions.

The president of the World Fair Trade Organization, Rudi Dalvai, confirmed earlier this year that Páramo is the first outdoor brand to offer products with "guaranteed fair-trade status". For the last three decades, Mr Dalvai says, clothing companies have been producing 69 billion garments per year. "We talk about fast fashion," he adds, "but then an incident happens like Rana Plaza in Bangladesh in 2013 and we can see that there is a lot of exploitation. A lot of people died, mostly women." The Páramo-Miquelina project is all about women.



Most of Páramo's "directional" garments are made in Colombia and can now bear a label to say they have guaranteed fair-trade status.

Páramo

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Pattern-cutter Amparo Chambo loves her work.

Decent work

Miquelina launched in Bogotá in 1977 when a community of nuns, equipped with two second-hand sewing machines, set up a garment-making and sewing co-operative to provide work for women seeking to leave prostitution. One of the nuns running the much-bigger manufacturing operation in place today, Sister Rosaura Patiño, travelled to ISPO 2017 in Munich to speak about the initiative, accompanied by one of the women to have benefitted from it, Amparo Chambo. Sister Rosaura says: "Our special gift is to work with women who have fallen into prostitution. It goes against their human dignity, but they go down that path because they see no other way of providing for their families." She described Ms Chambo as "a model mother" who has inspired her own children to study hard in preparation for professional careers. Miquelina has had strong support from aid agencies throughout the course of its existence and, while in Munich, Sister Rosaura singled out Caritas Germany for the help it has given. This organisation has supported the work of the sisters for ten years and has helped them turn Miquelina into a finished garment manufacturer able to supply high-quality outdoor clothing, now with a hard-earned fair-trade label attached. The total workforce is 280 at the moment, but around 400 women a year attend training programmes at the factory and many have been able to find work making clothes elsewhere in Bogotá. Their new skills at least give them an option.

Community leaders

Aid is one thing and trade quite another; the women working at Miquelina could have the highest level of skills imaginable, but without customers the operation would not be able to fulfil its socio-economic aims. Housing projects have developed, with Miquelina funding the construction of new homes (more than 120 so far) and women on the workforce moving in with their families as soon as the building work is complete and then setting aside a proportion of their monthly salary to pay their employer back until they secure outright ownership. A canteen for workers and for local children, childcare and healthcare facilities are other important spin-offs and Miquelina women have become leaders in their communities.

Family ties

Páramo chief executive, Nick Brown, has family ties to Colombia and has been a frequent visitor to the country for decades. When he first encountered Miquelina, it was when Páramo was "just a concept", and one that needed a manufacturing partner to get it off the ground. The Miquelina nuns had become quite famous locally for the work they were doing in offering women training, allowing them to learn to sew and make garments and use their new skills to earn a living, and in 1992 Mr Brown decided to put some work their way. He says now that one of the things that keeps bringing him back to the South American country is "the spirit of the Miquelina women who make Páramo clothing".

He says he has been reluctant to talk about the social responsibility aspect of the partnership for a long time because he feared this might detract from the jackets and other garments his manufacturing partner is producing. He adds: "What these women make is high-tech, waterproof clothing, not commodity products. This is a quality operation." Now, though, the story behind the product is becoming an important aspect of the way brands present themselves to consumers. As Páramo's

Miquelina is a "quality operation", making highly technical outdoor products.

Páramo



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Páramo founder, Nick Brown, with Sister Rosaura Patiño at the site of the Miquelina housing project. The nuns build the houses and the Miquelina workers who make Páramo garments can move in as soon as construction is complete and pay a monthly contribution towards outright ownership of their new homes from their salaries.

Páramo

commercial director, Gareth Mottram, pointed out in Munich, it is possible to do good while you do business, and this is something that Páramo is celebrating by adding fair-trade labels to the products Miquelina makes for it. Nick Brown now says it's a pleasure for him to be able to share what the Colombian nuns have been able to achieve, with Páramo's help.

Fair trade, without knowing it

Ironically, Sister Rosaura's position is that Miquelina, which won ISO 9001 accreditation in 2002, has worked in keeping with the principles of fair trade for years, since long before Rudi Dalvai's organisation sent auditors to its factory in Colombia. There are ten principles in total: to create opportunities for disadvantaged producers, to ensure transparency and accountability, to promote fair trade, to practise fair trade with partners, to pay a fair price for materials and services, to employ no children and no one subjected to enforced labour, to avoid discrimination, to ensure good working conditions, to develop employees' skills, and to respect the environment. "We were doing all this from the outset," the nun says; "we just didn't realise it."

A way out

Amparo Chambo arrived in Bogotá as a 13-year-old, having fled Colombia's longstanding and ongoing armed conflict. She arrived in the capital with her father and five siblings after witnessing her mother being murdered. "As the eldest of six, I had to do something to help my father, so I started working as a prostitute. I continued for a number of years before I started working with the sisters and learning to do what I do now, which is pattern-cutting. I cut the pieces that go into making Páramo jackets. I have five children of my own, the youngest of whom is 11 and I'm pleased to say they are all studying and I have a job that allows me to support them. I never imagined there could be a way out for me, but there was and I am very grateful."

Victims of conflict

Official statements from the United Nations say that Colombia's decades of internal conflict have resulted in a total of 7.4 million displaced people. Sister Rosaura explains that it's common for women in situations like Ms Chambo's to fall into prostitution. "They are women who feel they have no other opportunity," she says. "On average, we have found that they have responsibility for between three and five children of their own but are also sometimes providing for a parent and for their own brothers and sisters." The way the nuns work, she explains, is to befriend the women first and establish a relationship with them. When things move on and the women who want to leave their old life behind take the decision to work at Miquelina instead, they receive professional help in overcoming what Sister Rosaura describes as a trauma that's often more severe than the trauma people suffer in war. She adds: "After an experience like this, the whole person needs healing and the best strategy for that is to establish an entirely new lifestyle with work that's in keeping with human dignity. That's what we try to do at Miquelina, giving the women support, helping them find a home, take up their education again and so on." She explains that it is possible for the garment industry to pay wages to compete with the money a woman can earn from street prostitution (the kind of operation that goes on in night-clubs works in a different way). Sister Rosaura says she believes the whole project proves that "a better world is possible".

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