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Meet the designers changing the face of female clothes

A wave of small, female-led labels is taking guys kit beyond the workwear

Photograph: Jonathan Ellis

David Hayes YESTERYEAR

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Women don't need a hand-up or empowerment from brands. No motivational posters to help them get out for a run or say, 'It's OK to eat a cupcake', Joanna Farrow, one of the three founders of London-based activewear brand LNDR, is at least clear about what she is fighting in intellectual property and wax.

"We wanted to create a brand around the lifestyle we wanted to live," she says. "Time. One that cut through all the marketing fluff and just flashes forward to the future we want to live in." Farrow's products and loos of them. Women need a wardrobe capable of the return of Beyoncé's Fly Park range this month. Originally launched with Topshop in 2016, the star-backed bodie had the full rights for the name from Philip Green in November 2018.

The wellness revolution of the past few years has triggered a wave of independent, small and female-led activewear labels with a clear ethos similar to LNDR — often run by women in lines with precisely what their customers need from their clothes. A high-profile example is the return of Beyoncé's Fly Park range this month. Originally launched with Topshop in 2016, the star-backed bodie had the full rights for the name from Philip Green in November 2018.

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Selfridges, through activewear buyer Louise Hodgkiss, was one of the first stores to invest in LNDR, and pits the female-led brand against Sweaty Betty and Accessorize. Sweaty Betty Studio "was conceived as a space for women to discover brands that respond to their fitness and wellbeing needs".

"Activewear is at the core of what we offer, with niche and independent labels founded by women half-joined and understand what is important in our customers," Selfridges says. "Our approach is to seek out brands from around the world with a positive story to tell and a focus on quality, innovation and style."

LNDR

Scottish-based label Girlfriend Collective, founded in 2016 by sisters Maggie Gardner from Effie and Quang Dinh, focuses its messaging on body positivity, with a range of sizes from XXS to 4XL, and a commitment to ethical and sustainable.

"Our core values are all about respect materials, ethical manufacturing, performance and inclusivity. At the end of the day, it all comes down to sustainability," says Effie Girlfriend Collective's sister-in-law Maggie Gardner. "We strive to be as sustainable as we can through the types of products we create, recycling and upcycling and we're a size range that will continue to expand," she adds. "Our customers are very loyal, very vocal advocates and critics. They celebrate us when we do the right thing and they call us better when we make mistakes. We're extremely lucky to have them and want to work hard to do right by them."

This month, London-based brand Bliss will launch a sub-brand, the Raya Collection. Founded by former model Tatiana Kovylina and yoga teacher Phoebe Greenacre, the small capsule collection of sustainable, gym wear and leggings is aimed at women in Europe using the latest shapewear technology. It also includes bonded seams for a more streamlined silhouette and garment flexibility.

LNDR

Parisian heritage label Ernest Leroy has a more unusual story. Once a famous 19th-century cosmetic maison, it has been refashioned by chief executive Marion Rabade as the first "routeur-for-hiner" brand. Not surprisingly, the brand focuses on fit, with crop top-style sports bras and bonded seams cutting a curved technology that is both routeur-level flattering and comfortable.

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Girlfriend collective

New York label Wone also focuses on a minimalist aesthetic. Launched in 2017 by Kimberly Hildebrand, who was formerly creative director at Calvin, it offers a tight black collection of high-waisted leggings, loose-cut tees and a crop top with shaped jogger pants that look more like chic loungewear than gym-ready kit — but are comfortable. Wone's first professional athleticwear fabrics, Hildebrand says, are "soft and stretchy but snapped up by sites including Net-a-Porter and Matchesfashion".

A strong colour palette is something that unites all of these female-led fitness brands, today, consumers want kit that can take them from barre class to brunch and beyond, such as Ernest Leroy's pastel pinks and Bliss' tones that have had a moment four or five years ago are starting to look slightly garish. Instead, all of these labels offer kits in a range of hues, charcoal and black — pieces that can blend with existing garments in a customer's existing wardrobe.

"We sell technical activewear you can wear to the gym as well as items that work with your daytime wardrobe," says Tiffany Hu, buying director at luxury website Mytheresa, which stocks Bliss and Ernest Leroy. "Bliss and Live the Process are some of the site's most popular.

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