



**FASHION INDUSTRY AND ITS EFFECT ON THE ENVIRONMENT: AN
UNENDING BATTLE**

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ABSTRACT

When we retrospect into our daily lives, we might realise that the number of clothes that we own, are not even things that we wear on a daily basis. Every time that a cloth is washed, millions of microfibres get released into the ocean, which nearly equals to the same amount as that of 50 million plastic bottles dumped into the ocean. Fast fashion is easily known as the way in which old clothing is disposed of and new clothing is bought to replace it, thus acting as a direct contribution towards a far-reaching impact on the environment. As the world's population has been estimated to increase to a projected 8.5 billion people by 2030, the annual global apparel consumption could rise by 63%, from 62 million tonnes today to 102 million tonnes, which is equivalent to more than 500 billion additional clothing or t-shirts. The current fashion system is unsustainable, and it is undeniably our biggest risk is to carry on as we currently operate with this same toxic system. In this paper, we provide the several negative externalities at each step of the fast fashion supply chain has created a global environmental justice dilemma to deal with. While the fast fashion industry offers consumers an opportunity to buy more clothes for less, those who work in or live near textile manufacturing facilities bear a disproportionate burden of environmental health hazards, which completely get ignored and keep continuing without a solution.



INTRODUCTION

Fast fashion is a term that has been used to describe the readily available, and inexpensively made fashion of today's world, by several leading brands such as Forever 21, H&M, ZARA, etc. The word "fast" has been used to describe how quickly retailers can move designs from the catwalk to stores, keeping pace with the constant demand for more and different styles, which will be trending all over the world within a short period of time. With the rise of globalization and growth of a global economy, these fashion supply chains have become international, shifting the growth of fibres, also the rapid the manufacturing of textiles, and the construction of garments which are made from areas with cheaper labour that is also easy to get access to. Increased consumption drives for the ultimate production of inexpensive clothing, and prices are kept down by outsourcing production to low and middle-income countries, also known as LMICs¹.

Globally, there are about 80 billion pieces of new clothing are purchased each year, which simply translates to \$1.2 trillion annually for the global fashion industry in general. The majority of these products are always assembled in China and Bangladesh and sometimes India, while the United States always consumes more clothing and textiles than any other nation in the world as well. There is approximately 85 % of the clothing that Americans alone consume, which is nearly 3.8 billion pounds annually, is sent to landfills as solid waste, amounting to nearly 80 pounds per American per year.

The global health costs associated with the production of cheap clothing are substantial. While industrial disasters such as the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire have led to improved but the occupational protections and work standards in the United States under certain circumstances, the same cannot be said for the countries that are LMICs. The hazardous working conditions that attracted regulatory and legal attention in the United States and European Union have not been eliminated yet, but merely have shifted to the overseas. The social costs which happen are also associated with the global textile and garment industry are significant as well. Defined as "*all direct and indirect losses sustained by third persons or the general public as a result of unrestrained economic activities,*" these social costs have always involved in the production of fast fashion that always include damages to the

¹ Wicker, A. Fast Fashion Is Creating an Environmental Crisis. Newsweek. September 1, 2016; Available from: <https://www.newsweek.com/2016/09/09/old-clothes-fashion-waste-crisis-494824.html>. Accessed 2 July 2020

environment, human health, and human rights at each step along the production chain, as this directly affects human health in general.

FAST FASHION SERVES AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE ISSUE

Environmental justice has been defined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, as the “*fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies*”². In the United States, usually this concept has primarily been used in the several scientific literary works and also in practice to describe the disproportionate placement of superfund sites such as any hazardous waste sites which are in or near communities of colour. But, environmental justice, as it has been defined, is however not limited to the United States and need not be constrained by geographical or geopolitical boundaries. The textile and garment industries, for example, shifts the environmental and occupational burdens associated with mass production and disposal from high income countries to the low-income communities in the countries which are LMICs². Putting forth the environmental justice framework to encompass the disproportionate impact experienced by those who produce and dispose away our clothing is essential to understand the magnitude of global injustice that has come in through the consumption of cheap clothing in general. In the context of Sustainable Development Goal 12, which ideally calls for sustainable consumption and production as part of national and other international plans, sustainable business practices, consumer behaviour, and the reduction and elimination of fast fashion should all be a target of global environmental justice advocates, in order to reduce this completely.

Several documentaries and other means are being brought up to show how fast fashion is not only detrimental to the environment, but it is also detrimental to the well-being of the workers who are the main employees of these industries. The workers are underpaid, and often not paid at all and work under absolutely inhuman conditions. Unpaid workers are made to work under conditions which are not only problematic, but absolutely lethal for the well-being of the workers. Records of the number of workers whose health gets damaged in the process of working for fast fashion industries is never put up on most places, due to the controversy that it might bring in. Death of workers is also an unspoken issue that arises, and this usually occurs due to the chemicals that are used in order to colour

² United States Environmental Protection Agency. Environmental Justice. June 2, 2020; Available from: <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>.

the garments or for bringing patterns into the garments. This essentially harms the environment to a fatal level, and also puts human lives at risk.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS DURING PRODUCTION

The first step in the global textile supply chain is known as textile production, and the process by which both natural and synthetic fibres are usually made. Approximately 90 % of clothing that is sold in the United States is made from cotton or polyester, both of these are associated with significant health impacts from the manufacturing and production processes. Polyester is usually a synthetic textile, and it is derived from oil, while cotton requires large amounts of water and pesticides to grow in fields. Textile dyeing results in additional hazards as untreated wastewater which comes out from dyes are often and always discharged into local water systems, releasing heavy metals and other toxicants that can adversely impact the health of animals in addition to nearby residents in the same area.

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS DURING PRODUCTION

Garment assembly, which is the next step in the global textile supply chain, employs approximately 40 million workers around the world. LMICs have produced 90% of the world's clothing. Occupational and safety standards in these countries that are LMICs are often not enforced due to poor political infrastructure and organizational management which is a major drawback. In these LMICs, reported health outcomes also include degrading and life-threatening conditions such as lung disease and cancer, any damage to endocrinal functions, severe reproductive and birth defect outcomes, accidental injuries, severe injuries and death which has been recorded as a total number of 9,10,11. Periodic reports of international disasters, such as the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse is one of the primary examples which killed about 1134 Bangladeshi workers, and is a stark reminder of the health hazards faced by the garment workers. These disasters, unfortunately, have not significantly changed safety standards for workers in LMICs.

TEXTILE WASTES

While getting any finished garments to the consumers in the high-income countries is always seen as the end of the line for the fashion industry, and the environmental injustices continue long even after the garment is sold. The fast fashion model always encourages consumers to view clothing as disposable in nature. The average American is known to throw away approximately 80 pounds of

clothing and textiles annually, which occupies nearly 5% of landfill space in total. Clothing that are not sent directly to the landfill often ends up in the second-hand clothing trade places.

SOLUTIONS, INNOVATION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE TO REDUCE THE SCENARIO

Ensuring that environmental justice at each stage in the global supply chain remains a challenge in general, the global environmental justice will be completely dependent upon discoveries in textile development, and corporate sustainability, and trade policy, and any consumer habits.

SUSTAINABLE FIBRES

The sustainability of a fibre usually refers to the practices and policies that reduce environmental pollution and minimize the exploitation of people or natural resources in crossing paths with lifestyle needs. Several fabrics such as Lyocell, which are made from the cellulose of bamboo, are usually created in a closed loop production cycle in which 99% of the chemicals used to develop fabric fibres are recycled in nature. The use of sustainable fibres will be important in reducing the environmental impact of textile production.

CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY

There are certified organizations such as Fair-Trade America and the National Council of Textiles Organization which offer evaluation and auditing tools for fair trade and problem-free production standards. There are some companies that elect to get certified in one or more of these independent accrediting programs, while others are engaged in the process of “greenwashing.”

Capitalizing on the excessive need of eco-friendly and fair-trade goods, companies will market their products as “green” without adhering to any criteria. To battle these practices, industry-wide adoption of internationally recognized certificate criteria must be adopted to encourage eco-friendly practices that promote health and safety across the providing chain.

TRADE POLICIES

While fair trade companies will attempt to compete with fast fashion retailers, markets for fair trade and eco-friendly textile manufacturing remain small, and ethically and environmentally sound supply chains are difficult and expensive to audit overall. The United States, for example, could be increasing

its import taxes for garments and textiles or place fees on annual weight or quantities which are imported from the LMICs³.

THE ROLE OF THE CONSUMER IN THE GAME

Trade policies and regulations will be the most significant and useful solutions that will help in bringing about large-scale change to the fast fashion industry. However, consumers in high income countries have a very significant role to play in supporting companies and practices that minimize their negative impact on humans and the environment as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In the last two decades since the fast fashion business model has become the norm for big name fashion brands, the increased demand for large amounts of inexpensive clothing has resulted in environmental and social degradation along each step of the supply chain, resulting in damage to human lives. The environmental and human health consequences of fast fashion have largely been absent from the scientific literature, research, and discussions surrounding environmental justice as a whole. The complexities of social and environmental abuses in fast fashion warrants its classification as an issue of global environmental justice and this needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

³ Anguelov N. *The dirty side of the garment industry: Fast fashion and its negative impact on environment and Society*. Boca Raton: CRC Press; 2016.