

# Economic and Social Council

## The Question of Sustainability in the Fast Fashion Industry



<b>Forum</b>	Economic and Social Council
<b>Issue:</b>	The Question of Sustainability in the Fast Fashion Industry
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## Introduction

The fashion industry is constantly changing and evolving. With new trends becoming cheaper and more accessible, fast fashion brands and media outlets are encouraging consumers to invest more into shorter and more widespread trend cycles. This increase in consumption threatens the sustainability of manufacturing products to the clients' demands. Clothing production is considered to be one of the largest contributors to climate change as it emits a large amount of carbon dioxide, alongside its demand for water and its contamination of those water sources.

The increased demand for clothing production has encouraged the establishment of factories that exploit their workers in order to maximize output. The working conditions of the aforementioned workshops are often dangerous due to a corporation's desire to reduce the cost of production and maximize profits. The rapid production of clothing and textiles made from finite resources is unsustainable. The question of sustainability pertains to a company's ability to output products at a consistent rate over an extended period of time with minimal impact toward the surrounding environment. It is also related to the sustainability of economic growth and to what extent the factories adversely affect the economic growth of the country in which it operates.

With fast fashion and its ramifications on the environment being a pertinent issue, the major brands such as Shein, Zara, Pull & Bear, H&M and many more need to implement more sustainable practices — for example, diminishing exploitation of workers, increasing their pay and minimizing the amount of chemicals and cheap materials they have to work with. Many of these brands have public statements about using more sustainable fabrics or minimizing emissions by a certain date, however these statements are not necessarily enforced or acted upon (often made to encourage consumers to believe that they should buy more items). In order to ensure that clothing becomes more sustainable, guidelines need to be implemented and enforced so that companies must use less plastic and toxic chemicals when making their clothing.



## Definition of Key Terms

### Fast Fashion

Fast Fashion is inexpensive and unsustainable production of clothing, shoes and leather which is manufactured in response to current trends. Oftentimes the product is of poor quality — encouraging the consumer to buy more and wear less.

### Sustainable Fashion

Sustainable fashion is clothing, shoes and other garments which are made with organic and low impact materials, have little to no waste and use eco-friendly dyes. They are often locally produced in order to minimize the environmental impact caused by outsourcing production. They are also designed to be more durable and are capable of withstanding more than fast fashion clothing.

### Greenwashing

Greenwashing is the act of purposely providing misleading or false information about a company's environmental sustainability in order to persuade the consumer to buy a product.

### More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs)

More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) are considered to be the more industrialized countries with a large GDP (gross domestic product). Examples of More Economically Developed Countries are: United States, Japan, Australia and all western European countries.

### Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs)

Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) are defined by having less GDP and are more susceptible to environmental and economic damage. Less Economically Developed Countries are also vulnerable to exploitation from More Economically Developed Countries, selling their raw materials at low prices and allowing More Economically Developed Countries to open sweatshops in their country. Most Less Economically Developed Countries are found in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

### Sweatshops

A sweatshop is a factory where the employees are exploited for cheap labor. They are commonly used by large fashion corporations in order to make a large amount of cheap clothes for a



small price. Sweatshops are often outsourced from More Economically Developed Countries to Less Economically Developed Countries, allowing the richer countries to take advantage of the less economically stable ones.

### Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is a nonprofit organization that is independent from the United Nations and works on matters of political and social significance. An example of a well-known NGO is Greenpeace.

### General Overview

Fast Fashion has rapidly grown into a culturally accepted norm since the late 1990s, early 2000s. Through social media, the period of a trend (what is in fashion) has shortened from a few years to a few months. This shortened cycle has encouraged a faster overturn of clothing — customers are more inclined to wear each clothing item less before discarding them. This consumerist and throw away culture are resulting in an increase in clothing being placed in landfill each year (as the cheap, fragile fabric prevents it from being a suitable donation). The poor-quality fabric and the chemicals used to dye it makes the production and subsequent discarding extremely unsustainable.

The multi-trillion dollar industry relies on China, Indonesia, Bangladesh and other countries in Asia to produce cheap textiles from cheap labor, with China and the United States being the main consumers. These countries are preferable for the fast fashion industry due to flexible environmental regulations. However, this activity is having a catastrophic impact on the environment, with the “emission of 1,715 million tons of annually as well as 79 billion cubic meters of water”.

### Economic Dependence on the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry is estimated to be worth \$2.4 trillion USD, and have more than 75 million workers worldwide. However, it is also known to severely underpay the garment workers. These workers can be paid as little as 15 cents per hour. Despite the deplorable conditions in factories, it is not as simple as suggesting the shutdown of sweatshops. For example, in Bangladesh, 3.5 million workers produce goods that are exported to Europe and the US. The production of the garments for the fashion industry accounts for over 80% of their export revenue. Furthermore, despite the below livable wage that is supplied, shutting down the factories would lead to unemployment. The low wages are the reason that large corporations take their business to lesser



developed countries. The exploitation leads to a larger profit for the company when the goods are outsourced.

### **The Role of Social Media in Overconsumption**

Social Media has provided a platform which allows for widespread communication across the globe. Along with being able to share information, social media has also become a platform for influencers to share and market brands and products. This constant advertisement has encouraged and played a significant role in accelerating the rate in which trends are introduced and consumed. With platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, the trend of a “haul” in which an influencer purchases a large amount of clothes and does a review is the most environmentally harmful and is the trend most often endorsed by clothing companies.

The visibility that social media has allowed the consumer to demand the trends provided by the retailers. It has also allowed brands and companies to intertwine advertisements with the consumers usual content. By using targeted advertisements, more and more people are buying clothes on a one-use basis before discarding the item for the next advertisement or trend.

### **The Social and Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion**

The fashion industry is one of the largest contributors to climate change and pollution. It makes up roughly 10% of all carbon emissions, while using up and contaminating water sources. After the production of fashion items using chemicals and other harmful substances, more than 85% of the textiles that have been made are discarded per year. Furthermore, the lower quality of production means that microplastics are released into the ocean every time the items are placed in the washing machine. As 60% of all clothing is constructed from plastic, the equivalent of 50 billion plastic bottles are released into the ocean each year from the microplastics that come off clothing in the washing machine.

Furthermore, fast fashion has large social repercussions, with well-known brands such as H&M being criticized for deplorable and abusive work environments. The sweatshops also promote gender discrimination, with more than 80% of the workers being female and routinely subjected to abuse based on their gender. In sweatshops, workers can be paid as little as 3 cents per hour and be expected to work up to 100 hours a week. Children as young as 6 have been found working at sweatshops.



## Major Parties Involved

### United States of America (USA)

The United States of America is one of the leading countries in clothing consumption, with the main target audience of fast fashion being young women ages 18-24. Within the last three decades, the amount of clothing bought has increased by five times. Furthermore, it is estimated that of the “85 % of the clothing Americans consume, nearly 3.8 billion pounds annually, is sent to landfills as solid waste, amounting to nearly 80 pounds per American per year”.

### China

China is both a leading producer and consumer of fast fashion. It currently produces roughly 65% of the world's clothing, with the initial attraction of production in China being the large number of workers and the low costs of production. Furthermore, China alone produces 26 million tons of waste from textiles and discarded materials. However, China itself has also now begun to outsource a lot of its production to poorer countries, while announcing their intentions to create a circular economy.

### Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi economy is almost entirely based upon the exploitation of its citizens in order to produce clothing. The working conditions in the sweatshops are notoriously unsafe, with an estimated 1.4 million workers dying per year. Bangladesh was also home to one of the most public garment factory disasters — the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in 2013 — which killed 1,138 people and injured an additional 2,600.

### Inditex Group

Inditex Group is the mother company of Zara, Pull&Bear, Bershka, Stradivarius and multiple other fashion brands. They are responsible for some of the largest global fast fashion brands. Inditex has been accused of using clothing dyes that cause cancer and using unethical production. Out of Inditex's fashion brands, Zara is the most prominent and faces the most scrutiny. It was revealed that Zara used to employ a sweatshop in Istanbul where workers worked without pay, along with slavery and child labor being reported in their Brazilian factories. Overall, Zara does not pay a livable wage



across their supply chain, and it can be assumed that the other brands underneath Inditex do not either.

## H&M

H&M has been known to advertise itself as a sustainable brand that is contributing towards the Sustainable Development Goals and is reducing emissions in their supply and production line. However, at the core of the business model, H&M is a fast fashion brand — designed to make and sell cheap clothing. H&M is valued at \$18.82 billion USD, making it one of the wealthiest fashion brands in the world. It has also been subjected to many reports on the abuse that its workers endure. In 2018, between January and May, over 540 workers claimed that they were abused. The known factories were based in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Cambodia.

## Primark

Primark is one of the most notorious fast fashion brands, its low prices and poorly made clothing is attractive to the younger generations. As of October 2021, Primark had 450 factories in China alone along with over 100 factories in Bangladesh. With roughly 400 stores worldwide, Primark has a net worth of \$1.3 billion USD. Primark has a history of worker exploitation, as in 2008 it was discovered that children as young as 11 were working for less than 80 cents per day. The result of this discovery led Primark to drop those factories. As of September 2021, Primark has pledged to ensure that all clothing is made from sustainably sourced material by 2030.

## Shein

Founded in 2008, Shein has recently skyrocketed in its revenue as it emerged onto the European and US market. Now valued at \$47 billion USD as of 2021, Shein has already been suspected of breaking multiple labor and child labor laws. The emergence of Shein as a well-known fast fashion brand can be largely attributed to social media — specifically the TikTok trends, and advertisement on Instagram and Pinterest. The trends involve influencers ordering a large quantity of clothes and then posting a video where they try on all of the different items. Doing this encourages consumerism and Shein markets that they are an extremely cheap brand, incentivizing buyers to purchase more.



## Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event
1980s	A model dubbed “the quick response” was developed in the US as a manufacturing model.
1990s	The “quick response” concept evolved into the Fast Fashion model which is still present and increasing exponentially in the current climate.
1 <sup>st</sup> January 2016	The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 12: Responsible Production and Consumption) were enforced.
14 <sup>th</sup> March 2019	UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion made at the UN Environment Assembly with the aim to stop the socially and environmentally damaging nature of fast fashion.
2019	#ActNow Fashion Challenge launched as a part of the ActNow Climate Campaign.
20 <sup>th</sup> May 2021	UNECE launches ‘Sustainability Pledge’ for the clothing and footwear sector in order to measure and verify sustainability

## UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- Sustainable Fashion Summit, 1 February 2019
- United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, 14 March 2019
- Synthesis Report on United Nations System-wide Initiatives related to Fashion, 2021

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The Question of Sustainability in the Fast Fashion industry is a relatively new concern, therefore there are not a lot of previous attempts to solve this issue. This issue is further complicated by the public demand and desire for cheap, affordable clothing. One of the UN’s current attempts to advertise sustainable fashion and environmental awareness is through the UN Alliance For Sustainable Fashion which was launched at the UN Environmental Assembly in 2019. The goal of this alliance is to develop responses to the challenges of the fast fashion industry in the hopes of achieving the 17 sustainable development goals by 2030. The Alliance consists of eight organizations:



Connect4Climate — World Bank Group, International Labor Organization (ILO), ITC Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI), UN Environment, UN Global Compact, UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), United Nations Office for Partnerships (UNOP).

## Possible Solutions

Fast fashion is a large threat socially and environmentally because there is a large demand for the cheap clothing that is being produced. A solution could potentially be looking at and raising awareness about the fast fashion brands which are heavily supported by trends that happen on social media platforms. By advocating for sustainable fashion and collaborating with social media platforms to slow down the rate in which trends are appearing and disappearing, the demand for fast fashion will decrease. If the public are not as inclined to participate in a trend or buy the clothing that is being advertised (in, for example a TikTok video), then the decrease in demand will result in a decrease in production.

In addition, stronger guidelines should be outlined surrounding the toxic chemicals used in clothing production and the safety of the workers within the factories. This can be done by providing regular audits of factories within which clothing is produced and implementing large taxes and fines on those found not to be in compliance with the regulations set forth on toxic chemicals and worker safety. On the other hand, there could also be solutions that promote sustainability by subsidizing or providing a budget to sustainable clothing and development in countries or companies attempting to produce fashion ethically and sustainably.

Another solution could be to create websites and platforms which recommend which brands are sustainable and provide you with locations in which to find them, along with a section that highlights the least sustainable brands to be avoided.

Furthermore, guidelines could be implemented to require clothing companies to specifically indicate on their clothing tags the ramification of the production of their product (for example putting an image of a crossed out tree to indicate that it is not sustainable or another image to indicate working conditions were unfavorable or that toxic chemicals were used).



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