

AT WHAT COST?



UNRAVELLING THE HARMS OF THE FAST FASHION INDUSTRY

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CENTER *for*
BIOLOGICAL
DIVERSITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Fast fashion is an enormous, rapidly growing industry, with the number of new garments made per year nearly doubling over the past 20 years and global consumption of fashion increasing by 400%.



Waste occurs at every stage of the garment manufacturing process, harming wildlife, degrading land, and polluting soil and water.



The fast fashion industry is a significant contributor to the climate crisis, responsible for as much as 10% of global carbon dioxide emissions.



Animal-based textiles such as wool are responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution, widespread habitat loss from deforestation and grassland conversion, and other harms to wildlife. In fast fashion, wool is commonly blended with fibers derived from fossil fuels and coated with chemicals, further increasing the environmental cost of production and disposal of these garments.

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Fast fashion has revolutionized the fashion industry at a cost to the environment and human rights. The fast fashion business model relies on the exploitation of resources and human labor to deliver garments following the latest trends to its consumers at an unprecedented rate. This quick output of garments demands a sizeable volume of raw materials fed into the fast fashion industry, creating a significant amount of waste, pollution and degradation to air, water and wildlife habitat. The pollution introduced by the fast fashion industry results in devastating impacts to both terrestrial and aquatic environments, with harmful effects linked to habitat degradation, proliferation of chemicals and microplastics in waterways, and the increasing impact of climate change from anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite the increased demand and consumption of fast fashion garments and people's apparent growing interest in fashion, they are buying more while wearing fewer of the items they own. The poor quality of fast fashion clothing contributes to the limited lifespans of garments, which often end up decomposing slowly in landfills or being incinerated. In addition to degrading in landfills or being incinerated, fast fashion clothing has also become a notorious source of microplastics in marine environments as the cheap, plastic-based materials shed fibers that make their way to the oceans.

On top of the environmental exploitation that allows for fast fashion's cheap prices, the other contributing factor is worker exploitation in low-income countries where factories are based. Workers — primarily young women — are subjected to hazardous working conditions while earning unlivable wages, despite the companies pulling in massive profits.

Although both the fashion industry and consumers have indicated that sustainability is a priority, fast fashion is an increasingly unsustainable market that continues to grow, relatively unchecked. And the scale of this industry is enormous: For a company such as Shein, an estimated 1,000 new styles are uploaded daily — though there has been speculation that this figure may be a gross underestimate (Zhou, 2022). With the average number of each garment manufactured ranging from 50-100, according to the Shein website, this results in a minimum of 50,000 new garments created every day.

Changing these practices requires drawing attention to the harms of fast fashion and shifting the narrative from the glamour that has been assigned to overconsumption toward fashion that embraces sustainability and justice.

INTRODUCTION

Behind the glamour of the fashion industry hides a steep environmental price. The fashion industry as a whole is responsible for consuming 79 trillion liters of water per year, producing over 92 million tons of solid waste per year, and contributing up to an estimated 20% of global wastewater and 10% of CO2 emissions (Niinimäki et al., 2020; UN Climate Change, 2018).

This output of CO2 exceeds that of the international aviation and shipping industries combined (UN Climate Change, 2018). Concern continues to rise as, over a span of roughly 20 years, the number of new garments made per year has nearly doubled and global consumption of fashion has increased by 400% (World Bank, 2019; Collective Fashion Justice). If this trend continues, industry greenhouse gas emissions could also increase significantly, possibly by over 50% by the year 2030 (World Bank, 2019). One of the most notorious sectors driving these harms has also become one of the fastest growing: the fast fashion industry.

Fast fashion is an exploitative, growing industry based on the replication and mass production of garments following current trends — a business model that has revolutionized the industry, simplifying consumers' purchasing process and expediting the turnover of both garments and trends.

This transformation, however, comes at a price. Every day fast fashion companies are capable of producing a shocking 10,000 new garment styles (Williams, 2022). These items are produced quickly and with an excess of waste: As much as 15% of the fabric used during manufacturing is discarded during the garment production process (Shukla, 2022). Unethical generation of waste has become a pivotal element of transforming the fashion industry into the polluting behemoth it is today.

In addition to the waste produced during quick manufacturing, businesses are generating yet more pollution to protect their business models (Lieber, 2018). Brands at all levels, from Shein to Nike to Burberry, have been found to destroy new, undamaged products (Mayo, 2021). This has often been carried out by burning, which introduces additional CO2 and toxic gases on top of the industry's already large contribution. For companies like Shein, production costs are so low that returned items are often destined for landfills because it costs less to simply dispose of items than put them back into circulation (Williams, 2022).

The low costs set by the fast fashion industry have been praised by some for making new clothing more accessible to people with lower incomes, yet the largest consumers of fast fashion include customers of relatively substantial income, while low-income communities bear the brunt of the industry's waste and pollution. This further demonstrates that the goal of this industry is not inclusivity but enormous

profit based on environmental and worker exploitation (Williams, 2022). Fast fashion has changed society's perception of what clothing is worth. The enticing low costs in fast fashion push poorly made garments on people, promoting excess purchasing of cheap items destined for the landfill rather than the purchasing of higher-quality garments that will ultimately last longer.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Clothing production adversely affects the environment at every stage. Land is cleared or degraded to produce fossil fuels for fibers, raise animals, or grow commodity crops. Toxic chemicals are used in processing. Greenhouse gas emissions are produced in manufacturing and transportation, and waste is generated by factories.

Polyester, a synthetic material obtained from oil, is one of the most widely used fabrics in the fast fashion industry. It is also one of the most environmentally harmful fabrics. This material alone was reported to consume 70 million barrels of oil in 2015; the production of all synthetic fibers uses approximately 342 million barrels of oil each year (Conca, 2015; Ellen Macarthur Foundation and Circular Fibres Initiative, 2017). Petrochemicals, in fact, were estimated to be responsible for 62% of global textile fibers (Textile Exchange, 2021). The extraction of fossil fuels requires destroying wildlands to develop facilities and drilling sites, affecting the habitability of land and causing habitat fragmentation, which disrupts essential animal behaviors (The Wilderness Society, 2021). Producing synthetics also contributes greenhouse gases to the atmosphere due to their origin in petrochemicals.

Fossil-fuel-based fabrics, however, are not the only materials of concern in the fast fashion industry. Producing animal-based textiles such as wool involves the breeding of farmed animals, which often results in widespread habitat loss from deforestation and grassland conversion to create the necessary room for grazing or to produce feed (McKinsey & Company 2020). Animal-based fibers used in fast fashion are also responsible for a large portion of the industry's massive water consumption. Sheep bred for wool require significant amounts of water for hydration and feed crops that frequently rely on additional, chemical-intensive processes (Center for Biological Diversity, 2021).

The wool industry degrades wildlife habitat, with sheep displacing native wildlife and eating the vegetation they need. It also produces large amounts of wastewater, with fecal waste polluting waterways and slaughterhouses expelling additional

wastewater. This water often contains contaminants including pathogens, proteins, fibers, and contamination from antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals (Center for Biological Diversity, 2021).

Since 35% to 60% of the weight of shorn wool is contaminated with grease, dirt, feces, vegetable matter and other impurities, wool must go through a scouring process using hot water and chemicals before it can be turned into a usable fiber. A typical wool scour creates an effluent load similar to the sewage from a town of 30,000 people (Center for Biological Diversity, 2021). A more detailed accounting of the full scope of environmental harms of animal-based textiles such as wool can be found in [Shear Destruction: Wool, Fashion and the Biodiversity Crisis](#) (Center for Biological Diversity).

Cotton is one of the most widely used materials worldwide due to its versatility and easy care. But despite only occupying 2.4% of the world's cropland, cotton uses tremendous amounts of pesticides; it is responsible for roughly one-fifth of global insecticide use (McKinsey & Company 2020). This results in serious harm to nontarget insects such as endangered rusty patched bumble bees and monarch butterflies. On top of its enormous pesticide use, conventional cotton, which accounts for most cotton grown, requires a significant amount of water during the growing process. The cotton used in a single pair of denim jeans requires roughly 10,000 liters of water, an amount equal to what the average person would drink over the course of ten years (UN Climate Change, 2018). And the water that runs off cotton fields carries a heavy pesticide load.

Unlike conventional cotton, organic cotton is not produced with synthetic pesticides. It's also estimated that organic cotton production uses 91% less water than conventional cotton, in large part because genetically engineered crops generally require more water (Chan, 2019). Organic cotton, however, is seldom used over conventional cotton in fast fashion due to the heightened costs associated with production.

Even fibers associated with fewer environmental harms than those reliant on oil production and animal agriculture can cause severe damage when produced irresponsibly and at scale to meet the demands of fast fashion. More than 150 million trees are cut down annually to produce man-made cellulose fibers (Canopy, 2020). Of the man-made cellulose fibers produced, up to an estimated 30% originate from primary or endangered forests (McCullough, 2014). Additional habitat loss can result from the soil degradation or pollution of waterways from chemicals used in processing or at plantations (McKinsey & Company 2020).

Fast fashion also requires a significant amount of water at the factory level, which results in roughly 93 billion cubic meters of wastewater just from textile dyeing (Lai, 2021). In low-income countries that produce a large portion of the world's fast fashion, such as Bangladesh, the toxic wastewater from textile factories has historically been dumped directly into rivers or streams to reduce production costs (Regan, 2020). This action has resulted in bodies of water changing colors from the

dye used or turning black and thick with sludge (Regan, 2020).

This polluted water introduces harms to both marine environments and humans. At least 72 of the chemicals used in the dyeing process have been identified as toxic (World Bank, 2014). Once these chemicals accumulate in waterways, they begin to produce a film on the surface, blocking the entrance of light and preventing organisms' abilities to photosynthesize (World Bank, 2014). Reduced ability to photosynthesize results in lower oxygen levels, or hypoxia, in the water, impacting the ecosystem's survivability for aquatic plants and animals. In addition to increased prevalence of hypoxia in aquatic environments, the presence of certain chemicals used in the dyeing process can also increase the buildup of heavy metals (World Bank, 2014).

Polluted water is often used to irrigate crops and studies have found textile dyes present in fruits and vegetables grown around Savar in Bangladesh (Sakamoto et al., 2019). Areas closer to industrial hubs are disproportionately impacted by the harms of fast fashion, with costs to livelihoods due to impacted agriculture or fishing, increased incidence of disease including jaundice or diarrhea, and decreased accessibility to safe drinking water during the dry season, as contaminated surface water may be unable to be effectively treated (World Bank, 2014; Ullah et al., 2006).

Pesticides used in the growing of cotton and other crops have also been found to have harmful effects on biodiversity. The textile industry is estimated to account for between 10-20% of global pesticide use (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

Organisms can be exposed to chemicals either directly through application or indirectly through runoff, contamination, or secondary poisoning (Beyond Pesticides). Exposure to pesticides is linked to a wide array of health concerns in various species including birds, small mammals, insects, fish and humans. These health concerns consist of reproductive effects, neurotoxicity, endocrine effects and liver and kidney damage (Beyond Pesticides). Such harmful effects can occur after minimal exposure, as reproductive abnormalities have been observed in multiple species following "safe" levels of exposure as classified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (Beyond Pesticides).

The environmental impacts of fast fashion are not limited to the direct impacts from the manufacturing process. Fast fashion churns out poorly made clothes with limited lifespans because of the low quality of materials used and the industry thriving off the constant business from a quick turnover of garments. The quick turnover coupled with poor quality resulted in 60% of the items manufactured in 2012 being discarded only a few years after purchase (Shukla, 2022). One survey in Britain found that 1 in 3 young women believed clothes to be "old" following as few as one or two wears (McKinsey & Company, 2018).

On average consumers are keeping purchased items about half as long as they did at the turn of the 21st century and purchasing 60% more clothing per year (Remy et al., 2016). Based on this trend and the low prevalence of clothing recycling, over 50%



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of these garments end up in landfills (Shukla, 2022). In 2018, 11.3 million tons of textiles entered landfills as municipal solid waste in the United States, averaging out to roughly 70 pounds of discarded garments per person (EPA).

Even for the clothing that continues to be worn and washed, an environmental toll is paid. Synthetic fabrics release microfibers at alarming rates of roughly 700,000 fibers per load of laundry, which often end up in the ocean and other environments (Ocean Clean Wash, 2019). This adds up to approximately 500,000 tons of microfibers per year entering the ocean (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). An IUCN report estimated that between 15%-31% of plastic pollution in the ocean could come from household or industrial products expelling these microplastics, with 35% of that microplastic coming from the washing of synthetic fabrics (Boucher and Friot, 2017).

Fibers such as polyester are slow to degrade in the ocean, taking potentially up to 200 years to decompose, then producing toxic substances when they do that pose dangers for marine ecosystems (Brewer, 2019; Shukla, 2022). Microplastics pose the additional danger of being consumed by marine organisms, then entering the food chain and being consumed eventually by humans. For marine organisms that consume microplastics, impacts may include delayed growth, abnormal behavior, or reduced intake of food (Li et al., 2021). For humans, microplastics that have made their way up the food chain pose risks of allergic reactions or cell death (Parker, 2022).

Despite the majority of fiber production being attributed to synthetic fabrics, a 2020 study found that most microfibers were actually from cellulosic and plant-based fibers, followed by animal fibers (Suaria et al., 2020). While such natural fibers are often assumed to be biodegradable, modifications made during textile production often include alterations with chemicals, dyes, or coatings that in turn impact the biodegradability of the material (Henry et al., 2019). Additional modifications that occur during manufacturing are seen with wool, where natural fibers are often blended with synthetics for fast fashion, impacting the biodegradability of the fabric (Center for Biological Diversity, 2021).

As much of the research on the biodegradability and risks of microfibers is new or still developing, the problem of microfiber introduction from the fast fashion industry cannot yet be limited to the impacts from synthetics, as the full scope of risks of all microfibers is still being realized. This brings the issue of fast fashion back to the immense scale of production, as there is not one specific fiber to blame for the environmental degradation but the business model as a whole.

HARMS TO HUMANS

The introduction of chemicals to the environment is not the only harm associated with the fast fashion industry. The harsh chemicals used in manufacturing create potential health hazards for workers and consumers. These risks can be felt in a wide range of communities, as fast fashion garments are usually produced in low-income countries but purchased in high-income countries.

At the beginning of the production process, pesticides can cause harm to workers as they have been linked to acute and chronic health issues including reproductive disorders, neurological disorders, respiratory conditions, certain cancers and death (Farmworker Justice, 2013). In garment factories, workers are exposed to occupational hazards including respiratory harms from chemicals and musculoskeletal harms from repeated motions (Islam, 2022).

The harmful effects can even be experienced by the consumer of fast fashion. Garments contain a variety of harmful chemicals including PFAS, azo dyes, phthalates, and formaldehyde (Fashioninnovation, 2022). These chemicals come with risks of irritation; respiratory, developmental, and reproductive problems; and certain cancers. On top of that, the spillover of cheaply made fast fashion can also affect the economies of low-income countries, even if they are not involved directly in the production of garments.

Every year the United States exports roughly 500,000 tons of secondhand clothing to low- and middle-income countries that do not always possess the infrastructure to handle it (Brooks, 2019). Reports from various African communities note how these imports can decimate local textile businesses, as they are unable to compete with the competitive costs of these used garments (Brooks, 2019). While this opens a new market for secondhand clothing, it increases reliance on foreign countries and suppresses local industries, resulting in a loss of culture and traditional styles (Porter, 2019).

The continuing desire around the world for these garments at low costs also contributes to the ongoing injustice related to low wages and working conditions in the low-income countries where most factories are based. In April 2013 the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed, resulting in more than 1,100 textile-worker fatalities and bringing to light the subpar conditions in which fast fashion industries operate. Between 2006 and 2012, more than 500 workers in Bangladesh garment factories died in factory fires, usually due to faulty wiring (Thomas, 2018).

Following these tragic events, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety was signed by various fast fashion companies, including American Eagle, H&M, and Inditex. This agreement resulted in 97,000 hazards being repaired in 1,600 factories, and 900 factories being shut down for not meeting compliance standards (Thomas, 2018).



Photo Source: Rio Lecatompessy - Unsplash

Following the expiration of the Accord in 2018, the 2018 Transition Accord was signed to extend similar protections until 2021 (Clean Clothes Campaign). Most recently, the International Accord took effect in September 2021 (International Accord, 2021). This legally binding agreement promises to ensure factory structural safety for 26 months by the brands that have signed, which can be found [here](#).

Though a small step toward remedying the worker injustices in the fast fashion industry, these pacts have yet to address low wages or health hazards associated with this type of factory work. Beyond historical structure-related tragedies, textile workers are exposed to various occupational hazards, including respiratory and musculoskeletal harms (Islam, 2022). Reported health conditions that have been documented include endocrine damage and reproductive harms, along with accidental injuries and death (Sant’Ana and Kovalechen, 2012).

These effects are spread disproportionately across genders, as most workers in these factories are young women (Thomas, 2018). An estimated 80% of global workers in the garment industry are women, and despite this workplace majority, discrimination, gender pay gaps, and sexual harassment continue to be reported (Baptist World Aid Australia, 2019).

While many companies have — or are working to establish — systems to remedy this, inequalities continue to exist in many of these garment manufacturing environments (Baptist World Aid Australia, 2019). A reported 9 out of 10 garment workers in Bangladesh are paid so unfairly for their labor that they cannot afford food for themselves or their families (Oxfam). Yet to provide workers with a livable wage would cost some companies as little as an estimated 1% of the retail price of garments (Oxfam).

The gross injustices occurring within the fast fashion industry stand against the narrative that fast fashion benefits low-income people. Rather, it exploits workers and consumers alike.

GREENWASHING BY COMPANIES

Despite the various claims made by companies showcasing their sustainable efforts through partial recycling or “conscious” collections, overall efforts are still relatively low. Even the actions of companies that are following through on their pledges to be more sustainable are not necessarily having a significant positive impact.

One of the most common recycled materials to substitute the creation of new synthetics are polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles. In a survey of roughly 50 fashion brands, 85% claimed that they were working toward using recycled polyester sourced from plastic bottles (Circular). Using recycled polyester has the potential impact of reducing carbon emissions by 32% (Federal Office for the Environment, 2017). But while recycling sounds green in theory, there are several logistical drawbacks.

Recycling synthetic materials does not fix the emerging problem of microplastics, as recycled materials will expel just as many fibers as new materials (Bryce, 2021). Additionally, removing plastic bottles from their established, closed-loop system may actually harm their overall recyclable potential. These bottles can be recycled at least 10 times in the current system. Feeding them into the fashion industry decreases their likelihood and potential to be recycled as most garments end up in landfills (Bryce, 2021). Despite the potential that exists with recycling plastic bottles, the actual rate at which PET bottles are recycled remains relatively low, with only 29.1% being recycled in 2018 (EPA). Textile recycling involves a similar shortcoming, as it's estimated that less than 1% of textile waste is recycled into new fibers due to logistical issues including the collecting, sorting, and processing of garments (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Many claims made by fast fashion companies hint at sustainability but fall short, and a lack of transparency contributes to the problem of greenwashing. Greenwashing is infamous in the fast fashion industry, and multiple companies have had attention drawn to their misleading claims in the past. Companies like Boohoo, SHEIN, H&M, ASOS, and Zara have all released claims on their efforts to improve their sustainability, but there's little evidence they are realizing those claims (Rauturier, 2022; Igini, 2022).

The popular brand H&M released environmental scorecards informing consumers about how environmentally friendly their garments were. In an investigation by Quartz, more than half of the scorecards claimed pieces to be more environmentally friendly than they actually were, and in some instances the statements were described as being “the exact opposite of reality” (Quartz, 2022). The garments included in the controversial claims were those labeled as “Conscious Choice.” This specific label was described by H&M to mean “pieces

created with a little extra consideration for the planet,” with products containing at least 50% of “more sustainable materials” (H&M). These vaguely defined “eco-friendly” labels are another popular industry greenwashing technique. But simultaneously producing and promoting the purchase of billions of garments per year, many of which get discarded and replaced quickly, reduces the potential positive impacts of so-called “conscious collections” and falsely reassures consumers.

A PUSH TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

While many companies have environmentally harmful business models, there are others that are taking a more meaningful approach to sustainability. These companies are actively encouraging people to extend the life of their clothing, providing customers with the resources to do so, and using data to back up their sustainability claims. These claims have been published by the companies and their accuracies have not been evaluated by this report.

Levi’s, for example, urges customers to wash their jeans less: after about 10 wears. This not only lengthens the lifespan of jeans but saves water from washing machines and reduces the expelling of microfibers in the wash. Data published on Levi’s website states that taking care of your jeans and wearing them for 10 months or longer will reduce their carbon footprint by 18% and water footprint by 23%.

Levi’s also offers solutions for old or damaged clothing, like opening Levi’s Tailor Shops where clothes can be altered or repaired, offering tutorials on how to perform various DIY projects on jeans, and suggesting that you donate unwanted clothing to secondhand shops or pass items along as hand-me-downs.

Other ways that brands are trying to lessen the waste in fashion is through product guarantees and resale initiatives. Patagonia includes a guarantee that if clothing develops damage due to wear, the company will repair it at a “reasonable charge.”

Like Levi’s, Patagonia offers DIY repair guides to extend the life of products. It also hosts Worn Wear, a site where you can trade in used clothing so it can be washed and resold, lengthening the garment’s lifespan. As an incentive, trading in a garment will get you credit that can be used to purchase new or used from the brand. Worn Wear also has the additional bonus that the used articles are sold at a reduced cost compared to new items. This increases accessibility of quality, long-lasting products to individuals who might not be able to afford them otherwise and resort to fast fashion for financial reasons.

A different approach can be seen with MUD Jeans, which in 2013 introduced a program called Lease a Jeans, where customers can pay a monthly fee to lease jeans for a year, after which the payments stop and the customer can either keep the jeans or return them to be recycled. In 2021, 11,512 pairs of jeans were recycled, with a donation to plant one tree with the nonprofit Justdiggit with every pair. By promoting a circular economy through jeans recycling, MUD Jeans states, it's producing no additional end-of-life waste for those articles and using 92% less water than the average jeans.

In addition to creative solutions to extend the lifespans of garments and reduce waste, efforts are being made by some companies to use more sustainable materials and manufacturing processes. For plant-based fibers like cotton, organic and recycled materials tend to be more sustainable than conventional and virgin materials, respectively.

To grow cotton — one of the most commonly used fabrics in the world — a substantial amount of pesticides are conventionally used. Certified organic cotton, especially grown in countries like the United States that have strict organic standards, does not contain the dangerous pesticide load of conventional cotton. And recycled cotton does not take any additional pesticides to produce, reduces water consumption, and prevents garments from being sent to landfills.

Flax (linen) and hemp are two additional, versatile crops that can be used for textiles. Both are relatively environmentally friendly alternatives as they require minimal water and are often grown with little to no pesticides. Hemp grows so densely that it can reduce competition, and it also naturally deters pests (Hymann, 2020). Linen uses less water and fewer pesticides than conventional cotton and has the benefit that the plant it's derived from is typically used in its entirety, reducing overall waste during production (Newman, 2020). Linen's natural hues come in a variety of colors including ivory, tan, and grays, reducing the amount of dyes necessary (Newman, 2020). When untreated, linen is entirely biodegradable.

In a push for more sustainable options, new materials are being derived from various types of plants. Bananatex is a relatively new fabric made from Abacá banana plants that is fully biodegradable and circular. This plant has many environmental advantages, including that it does not require the use of pesticides, fertilizers, or additional water (Bananatex). These characteristics have helped to contribute to reforestation in certain areas, strengthening biodiversity (Bananatex).

On top of using more sustainable fabrics, environmentally conscientious companies are taking additional steps to reduce waste in their supply chains. Efforts include using recycled, plastic-free, or compostable packaging, using less harmful chemicals, and getting energy from cleaner sources such as solar power. While there is room for additional reform in the fashion industry, a few examples of brands working towards more sustainable practices can be seen [here](#).

Necessary reform of the fast fashion industry must involve voices from all levels. This

includes individuals pushing for change, governments enacting policies that can oversee change, and companies committing to make the change. Fast fashion companies need to be held accountable for their destructive practices, including the waste they produce and the worker injustice that their business models are built around. Companies' flimsy claims of future reform are no longer enough.

Policy efforts to improve the fashion industry have involved the health and safety of garment workers, unfair wages, and transparency of environmental impacts. U.S. policies of note include The Fashioning Accountability and Building Real Institutional Change (FABRIC) Act, The Fashion and Sustainability and Social Accountability Act, and the SWEAT Bill.

The FABRIC Act is a federal bill that was introduced in May 2022. This legislature would protect nearly 100,000 American garment workers, improving working conditions and wages, revitalizing the U.S. garment industry and investing in domestic apparel production (The FABRIC Act).

The Fashion and Sustainability and Social Accountability Act was referred to the Consumer Protection Committee in early 2022 and requires fashion manufacturers and retail sellers to disclose environmental policies along with social due diligence policies. This state bill would also establish a community benefit fund that would help implement projects that directly benefit environmental justice communities (New York Senate).

The SWEAT Bill passed assembly in March 2022. This state bill involves ensuring the payment of wages for work that was already performed. It also “creates a lien remedy for all employees; provides grounds for attachment; relates to procedures where employees may hold shareholders of non-publicly traded corporations personally liable for wage theft; relates to rights for victims of wage theft to hold the ten members with the largest ownership interests in a company personally liable for wage theft” (New York Senate).

If companies are required or incentivized to pursue more sustainable practices, the scale of destruction caused by the fashion industry could be significantly lessened. Additional work that could help to reform the fashion industry includes making sustainable fashion more affordable, so people of limited means are not forced to buy fast fashion, along with making fast fashion companies internalize the environmental costs of their production and waste.



CONCLUSION

Combatting fast fashion must involve action at every level, from governments requiring reform to companies improving their practices and individuals making changes in their consumption. The accessibility of fast fashion has become one of its major appeals, and the rise of influencer culture with social media provides constant advertising to the target demographic of these companies. Reducing the prevalence of overconsumption must involve changing the narrative about the glamour of fast fashion and introducing people to more sustainable options. The most sustainable clothes are those that have already been used, like those in your closet or for sale at secondhand shops.

Other opportunities to reduce consumption and extend the lifespan of garments include thrifting, hand-me-downs, participating in clothing swaps, or completing DIY projects to refresh owned items. Even small, realistic changes surrounding the consumption of fashion can make a substantial impact if upheld by a large audience. The fashion industry and governments must also embrace this new paradigm to make sustainable options and practices more widely accessible and appealing.

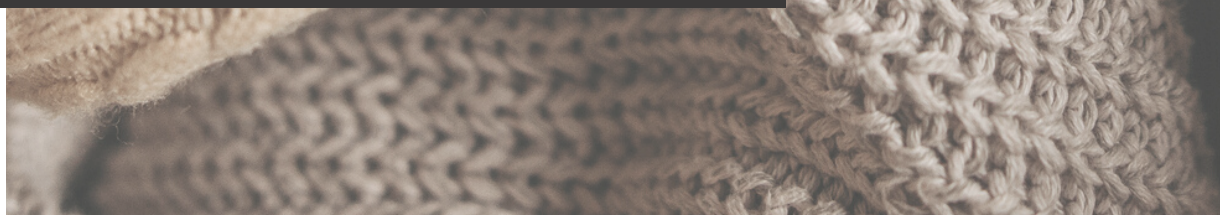


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