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ECOSOC 1: High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF)

Research Report

Topic 1: Promoting sustainable practices in the textile industry.



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Introduction

Unsustainable practices in the textile industry (a popular example is the ‘fast fashion’ phenomenon) refer to the unsustainable and unethical production and consumption of low-quality and environmentally damaging goods- usually clothes, shoes, or accessories. As of 2023 the fashion industry produced 10% of the global CO2 emissions, which amounts to 1,2 billion tons of Carbon Dioxide annually¹. This is predicted to have increase by 50% to 2030.

Definition of Key Terms

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 17 goals which were developed by the UN and all nations should work together to achieve.

Sustainable: Something which can be maintained for a long period of time- with three main “pillars”: environment, economy, and society.

Textile: natural or synthetic fibre-based materials

Fashion: “clothing, leather and footwear made from textiles and related goods”²

Fast Fashion: Term coined in the 1990s by the New York Times to describe Zara’s mission to make it take only 15 days for a product to go from the design to distribution stages, meaning mass produce and, cheap clothing in the latest styles.

Slow Fashion: A term created in 2007 meaning sustainable, eco-friendly, and long lasting, frequently costly clothing.

¹ Action for Climate Emergency, Fast Fashion, and climate change 101, <https://acespace.org/2022/06/17/fast-fashion-101/>

² UN fashion alliance <https://unfashionalliance.org/>

Background Information

Today's fashion industry employs more than 300 million workers worldwide³ and has a net worth of 2,4 trillion dollars⁴. As well as this, the fashion industry is expected to grow by 2-4% on average in 2024⁵ (though different nations may experience different levels of increase). This increase is achieved through the constant striving of fashion companies to lower the price of their products and make them seem more appealing using marketing, PR and other promotions. This constant competition between fashion companies is due in part to the transitory and uncertain nature of trends and style which can change in short periods of time- and to keep up with this everchanging demand companies such as Zara or H&M refresh the clothes in their stores weekly⁶- allowing their consumers to keep up to date with the latest trends.

Many companies achieve this variety through decreasing the cost of the production of their clothes- which also lowers the price of the clothes themselves and increases their customer satisfaction rating. This lowering of costs is often achieved by companies, through lowering the cost of their factories- by paying their workers less than minimum wage and not investing in the necessary safety equipment to ensure their safety. Of all the fashion workers worldwide, less than 2% are paid a liveable salary⁷ and few follow their countries health and safety regulations. This leads to disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse (or Savar Building collapse) in Bangladesh which took place on the 24 of April 2013- killing 1,134 and injuring 2,500 others. This catastrophe is thought to be caused by an accidental structural failure. Even when cracks appeared in the walls of the building, the workers were forced to return to the building and work.

Not only does the fashion industry cause untold humanitarian losses, but it also causes environmental destruction. The Rana Plaza event led to raised awareness of the problems in the textile industry yet other problems persist. The cotton industry, for example, which occupies 2,4% of the worlds cropland yet is responsible for 1/5 of the total insecticide use globally.⁸ As well as this, the wool industry requires wool to be scoured with hot water and chemicals before it is turned into fibres as many impurities can remain in the wool. For every kilo of clean wool, 17 litres of effluent runoff is generated which can cause eutrophication and biodiversity loss.⁹ Similarly detracting from global biodiversity is, for example, the production of jeans- which require 8,000 litres for 1 pair- 8,000 litres being the average amount a person drinks in 7 years.¹⁰

The effects of this underutilisation and waste were felt as far back as the 1970s- in which

³ Global Garment and Textile Industries <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Garment-Textile-Industry-Fact-Sheet.8.2019.pdf>

⁴ <https://unfashionalliance.org/>

⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/state-of-fashion>

⁶ <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/sustainability/our-insights/style-thats-sustainable-a-new-fast-fashion-formula>

⁷ <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/usa-blog/how-much-garment-workers-really-make/#:~:text=According%20to%20these%20brands%C2%B4,brands%20to%20do%20the%20same.>

⁸ https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/pdfs/Unravelling-Harms-of-Fast-Fashion-Full-Report-2023-02.pdf

⁹ https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/population_and_sustainability/pdfs/shear_destruction_final_report.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2019-march-2020/battling-damaging-effects-%E2%80%98fast-fashion%E2%80%99>

sustainable or “slow” fashion has its roots. The practice of sustainably producing clothes arose at the same time as the sustainability movement in the 70s- after mass produced cheap fashion had become the norm around the middle of the 1950s. A major part of the movement was the “punk-rock” faction- who rebelled against conformity and saw generic globally distributed clothing as part of that. In the late 80s the anti-fur movement arose as the ethical problems of killing an animal simply for its fur arose- however, at the same time the demand for fast fashion was increasing and the manufacture was not distributed to less economically developed countries.

In the 90s well known fashion brands such as Zara began to market themselves as “sustainable” or “eco-friendly” though this often led to greenwashing as companies sold their customers peace of mind- if not necessarily sustainable clothing. Brands which did, in fact, evaluate their sustainability and change it for the better did emerge- such as Patagonia (becoming one of the first brands to only use organic cotton in 1996¹¹) or People Tree in 1991. Fast fashion continued to prosper however, until the Rana Plaza accident in Bangladesh. Many brands began to alter their image completely, investing their efforts in sustainable fashion and brands such as the Global Fashion Agenda (formed 2016 which “fosters industry collaboration on sustainability in fashion to accelerate impact”¹²) and, in 2018, many members of the UN attended the conference titled: Fashion and the SDGs: what role for the UN in Geneva, Switzerland. In 2019 the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion was formed and since then it has been working for a more sustainable and eco-friendly textile industry.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (UNASF):¹³ An organisation formed to reduce the negative impacts of the Fashion Industry- especially its carbon footprint- and implementing the SDGs in the Fashion Industry. Formed 2019 at the 4th UN environment assembly in Nairobi, Kenya.¹⁴

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP):¹⁵ Established at a UN conference in Stockholm, 1972 and exists to coordinate the UN response to global environmental issues.

Global Fashion Agenda (GFA):¹⁶ A Non-profit which hosts the annual Global Fashion Summit and encourages companies in the textile industry to be more sustainable, aiming for a “Net-positive” fashion industry. It was established in Copenhagen, 2016.

Sustainable Fashion Forum (SFF):¹⁷ A modern media company which organises the SFF offline conference and discusses important topics in the fashion industry. It was founded in 2015 by Brittany Sierra who was formerly working in digital marketing.

¹¹ <https://pomp.store/blogs/journal/the-history-of-sustainable-fashion#:~:text=The%20sustainable%20fashion%20movement%2C%20and,mass%20production%20became%20the%20norm.>

¹² <https://globalfashionagenda.org/#:~:text=Global%20Fashion%20Agenda%20is%20a,influencing%20and%20educating%20all%20stakeholders.>

¹³ <https://unfashionalliance.org/>

¹⁴ https://unfashionalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/UN-Fashion-Alliance-Mapping-Report_Final.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.unep.org/>

¹⁶ <https://globalfashionagenda.org/>

¹⁷ <https://www.thesustainablefashionforum.com/>

Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC):¹⁸ Established 1989 in the Netherlands CCC is a global coalition of organisations working to improve conditions for workers in the fashion industry- focusing in particular on the gender inequality and sex discrimination faced by women in the industry. They have launched campaigns such as the Pay Your Workers Campaign or the European Floor Wage Campaign.

Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI):¹⁹ A public-private partnership of the UN International Trade Centre, the EFI connects marginalised artisans in countries such as Africa, Afghanistan and Haiti with larger markets and businesses to produce ethical, high-quality clothing.

Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC):²⁰ Non-profit alliance with 300 member organisations which created the Higgs index; an index which measures the social and environmental impact of a company's value chain and specific products to gauge how sustainable and eco-friendly it is.

New Standards Institute (NSI):²¹ An organisation backed by scientists which investigates whether companies which claim to be sustainable actually are as well as supporting companies which are what they claim with scientific development.

Fashion Revolution:²² Founded 2013 after the Rana Plaza incident, based in the UK and demands transparency from companies about their workers and production. They are supported by organisation such as the British council, European Union, and Laudes Foundation.

Fashion For Good:²³ A Non-Profit trying to come up with technological solutions to alter the fashion industry for good. They were founded in 2017, in Amsterdam.

Relevant UN Resolutions

Universal Declaration of Human

Rights²⁴

Article 5

“No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or Punishment.”

Article 23

- 1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.*
- 2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.*
- 3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.*

¹⁸ <https://cleanclothes.org/>

¹⁹ <https://ethicalfashioninitiative.org/>

²⁰ <https://apparelcoalition.org/>

²¹ <https://www.newstandardinstitute.org/>

²² <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/>

²³ <https://fashionforgood.com/>

²⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

The Paris Agreement The Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action²⁵

“To drive the fashion industry to net-zero gas emissions no later than 2050 in line with keeping global warming below 1,5°”²⁶

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Sustainable Development Goals for Textiles and Fashion

The SDGs- in particular SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action) target not only the fashion industry but all industries to encourage them to reduce their carbon footprint.

Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action

Charter created with the mission to reduce the CO₂ output of the fashion industry by promoting sustainable and eco-friendly practices within the industry.

Possible Solutions

One viewpoint could be that unsustainable practices in the textile industry will not end until consumers are aware of the impact of their purchases and make an active decision to not purchase unsustainable textiles. This could be achieved through mainstream education about the negative impacts of the textile industry so as to change the views of the consumers and decrease the demand for unsustainable fashion and textile in the global market.

Another viewpoint might be that it is most important to offer an alternative to unsustainable textiles and fast fashion by investing in eco-friendly companies or reducing taxes such companies pay so that they can distribute their products at a lower price, making them a more popular alternative as sustainably sourced textiles and fashion are usually more expensive so not everyone can afford them, which leads to those with limited resources turning to Fast Fashion or other alternatives.

Another opinion could be that companies do not exhibit enough transparency about their production. This could be changed if consumers were to actively enquire about the production methods and workers of companies.

A solution might also be to represent sustainable clothes and fashion in the media more. Many influencers on social media platforms such as TikTok or Instagram advertise unsustainable textiles and fashion. By having influencers market more sustainable options instead, a younger generation could be made aware of the alternatives to textiles sourced from environmentally destructive and morally dubious companies.

²⁵https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Fashion%20Industry%20Carter%20for%20Climate%20Action_2021.pdf

²⁶<https://unfccc.int/climate-action/sectoral-engagement-for-climate-action/fashion-charter>

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