

A photograph of a clothing store with multiple rows of metal racks filled with various garments, including shirts, blouses, and jackets in a wide range of colors like red, orange, blue, green, and purple. The racks are arranged in a perspective that recedes into the background.

Forum: EC
Issue: Creating measures to slow down resource consumption in the fast-fashion industry



Forum: Environmental Committee

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Position: Deputy President

Introduction:

This topic will be focusing on three main things. What is fast fashion, the resources used during its production and the negative effects this has on the environment. Fast Fashion refers to inexpensive clothing being quickly produced on a mass scale to cater to the latest fashion trends. In the past, there were only about four clothing seasons a year, new collections would come out each season. Today there are about 52 micro seasons, new clothing is produced every week (Stanton). Fast fashion came about as a way that people could easily and cheaply get access to all the trendy clothes. However, all of this has many negative effects. These include pollution of our planet, exploitation of workers and the harm of animals and the environment. This report will only be looking at the environmental effect of the clothing production rather than the effect on workers and their communities.

Definition of Key terms:

Fast Fashion: The quick and inexpensive production of clothing in response to the latest trends (Oxford Languages)

Sustainable development goals: A set of 17 goals created by the UN as a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future" (United Nations, "The 17 Sustainable Development Goals")

Environment: The environment refers to the outdoor, natural surroundings. It refers to the nature and wildlife in an area. (Oxford Languages)

Sustainability: Sustainability refers to the idea of living in a state where we fulfill the needs of our current generation without taking away from future generations. It is a state where humans can live in harmony with nature without harming it or taking away from it to a point of no recovery. (Oxford Languages)

Background:

People have worn and made clothing for centuries. Before and during the 1800's people mostly made their own clothes from materials like wool. Everything was done at home, by hand, and it took a long time. However, things started to get a bit quicker during the industrial revolution with the creation of machines and factories that allowed for mass production of clothing. It was only in the 1960's when clothing started to be made and worn at a much quicker speed. This only accelerated. In the 1990's and 2000's is when fast fashion first really became a thing. It was only then when it became especially desirable to have cheap trendy clothing. It was at this time when the fashion industry was changed forever. Clothing became cheaper and more accessible. This is what essentially led to the creation of fast fashion. Today fast fashion is even more accessible with the rise of online shopping as it only takes one click to buy a piece of clothing and have it at home the next day.

This all seemed great but when a closer look is taken at how these clothes are so quickly produced, we start to see the detrimental environmental impacts it is causing. It is believed that fast fashion is the second largest most polluting industry in the world. It produces about 10% of global carbon emissions it releases more carbon into the atmosphere than all international flights and maritime shipping (United Nations, “UN Helps Fashion Industry Shift to Low Carbon”).

Creating clothes also requires lots of materials, these include cotton, polyester, water and dyes. Though many of these resources are neither sourced nor disposed of in a sustainable way. The creation of a single pair of jeans requires about 7,500 liters of water (United Nations, “UN Launches Drive to Highlight Environmental Cost of Staying Fashionable”). And in total, about 93 billion cubic meters of water are used by the industry each year. All this water could be used to meet the needs of 5 million people (United Nations, “UN Launches Drive to Highlight Environmental Cost of Staying Fashionable”).

Along with water resources, to produce the textiles, many fabrics use cotton. Cotton is one of the reasons why clothing production requires such large amounts of water as it is needed for the crop to grow. But cotton is also harmful because the manufacture of this crop also requires harmful pesticides and chemicals which are released into water systems and the soil, resulting in pollution of the environment by affecting biodiversity with their toxicity. Other fabrics that are commonly used in fast fashion are made from synthetic fibers. Each year about 92million tones of clothing end up in land fill (Ruiz).

When clothes are not disposed of properly, they break down and result with around half a million tons of microfibers being dumped into the ocean every year. This pollutes the oceans and even makes its way into our diets as many fish that humans consume end up eating the microplastics.

Textile dyes are another resource that are polluting our environment. It is responsible for about one fifth of industrial water pollution. In places like Bangladesh where many of our clothes are produced, wastewater from the factories is dumped directly into rivers and streams. This pollutes the environment. Many of the dyes are very toxic for the aquatic life and it also pollutes drinking resources. Many people in such areas are too poor to invest in a water filter and they are left with no other choice than to drink this toxic water which could lead them to many illnesses.

Major parties involved:

People's republic of China: China is the world's leading exporter and manufacturer of textiles. The government tries to aid growth for this industry. In 2020 their export value was about 266.41 billion dollars ("Top 10 Textile and Apparel Exporting Countries of the World"). China makes 65% of the worlds clothes (CWR). However, fast fashion is affecting China's waters and is creating a lot of pollution. Though they have become stricter with violations of laws surrounding this issue.

People's republic of Bangladesh: Bangladesh emerged as the third largest exporter with an approximate 38.73 billion export value in 2020 ("Top 10 Textile and Apparel Exporting Countries of the World").

This is largely due to their cheap labor and their number of workers. They are the second largest exporter of Western Fashion. However, Bangladesh is highly hit by the negative effects of fashion such as pollution of water systems and underpayment of workers.

UNEP: The UNEP is a UN organization that tackles environmental issues. They have created the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion in attempt to tackle the issue at hand.

UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion: This is an Alliance created by the UNEP. It has eight member organizations. Its aim is to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals through action in the fashion sector. It wants to stop the environmentally and socially harmful practices of fast fashion.

Previous attempts to solve the issue:

On March 14th 2019 the UN launched the UN Alliance for Sustainable fashion. It was created with the intention of achieve the UN Sustainability goals. The alliance tries to support cooperation between UN bodies and the promotion of projects that that will help tackle the issue. This alliance is also identifying solutions and gaps in the actions that the bodies are taking, and these gaps are then being presented to governments. The World Bank is also contributing towards this alliance through the Connect4Climate

Initiative which is an organization that brings together more than 500 actors around the world to support climate leadership. Connect4Climate has created multiple campaigns to help raise awareness of fast fashion such as Fashion4Climate and XR-RayFashion VR. They are also one of the members of the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion.

Besides this alliance the UN and their alliances have had other initiatives to tackle the issue. For example, the International Trade Center created an Ethical Fashion Initiative to promote sustainable production and manufacture of fashion. The European UNEC and the Food and Agriculture Committee have worked to promote sustainable forest fibers as an alternative for materials like cotton. Another example of action was taken by the UNGC who created a Code of Conduct for the Nordic fashion industry.

Possible Solutions:

There are many solutions individuals can take such as buying less clothing, buying second hand rather than new, repairing and upcycling clothes or buying from more sustainable brands. However, these solutions will not help completely stop fast fashion and the unsustainable production of clothing. To tackle this issue, it needs to be looked at from the root cause. While it may be good to implement awareness campaigns on what individuals can do and on the risks of fast fashion, this will not completely solve the problem. It may be a good idea to think about implementing more regulations or bans on the production of clothes. Perhaps creating limits regarding the number of garments and materials one company can produce. The investigation into and promotion of sustainable materials and processes of clothing production that could replace the ones currently being used in the industry should also be considered.

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