

# The environmental impact of fast fashion

An interesting article by Fast Company, “We have to fix fashion if we want to survive the climate crisis”, relentlessly and justifiably criticizes the fashion industry for the high environmental impact of the fast-fashion phenomenon. They have developed a very important business model based on the manufacturing of extremely cheap garments in countries with low unit labour costs, with a very strong turnover. Basing a business model on the sale of clothes that can only resist a few years wear, with prices and quality levels that endorse short term use, whilst all the while generating billions of dollars in unsold stock that ends up being incinerated, is a habit that we simply cannot continue to afford.

The fashion industry thus joins the usual villains such as the oil companies or the automobile companies in the club of those responsible for the greatest catastrophe that humanity has ever experienced. This is a major crisis that we are already experiencing, in an increasingly threatening reality.



The world is not on track at all. The only answer is the constant, obsessive focus on sustainability. This is only going to change if we force some industries to make

radical changes, either through regulation or through changes in our consumption patterns.

Awareness of the importance of climate change is growing, but not fast enough. It is time to panic, to understand that we are the last generation that has the possibility of avoiding climate change. [The report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#) raised the same alarm and came to a conservative consensus that leaves out some of the most concerning factors.

According to various international reports, the textile sector is the second largest in the world – after the energy sector – which uses the most water, as well as being responsible for 10% of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions (the main gas involved in climate change). It also produces 20% of the total \*toxic substances that reach the rivers and seas around the world.



The model of global delocalization of textile production entails an intensive and massive use of transport. Consequently causing a large environmental impact. A garment may have travelled around the world twice before reaching its consumer. It is also one of the clearest examples of the current economic model of a

throwaway that generates so many problems in the global environment. **Every year some 440 billion euros are lost due to wasted garments, according to a report by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. According to this study, 87% of textile fiber ends up being incinerated or in landfills, and only 1% of the materials are recovered.**

The fashion industry is responsible for 20% of total global water waste. The production of clothes and shoes produces 8 per cent of greenhouse gases. The process of dyeing clothes on an industrial scale also makes fashion the second largest water pollutant in the world.

Every time a batch of clothing made of polyester, acrylic and cotton mixed with polyester – the most common synthetic fabrics in mass consumer clothing – is washed in the washing machine, at least 700,000 microplastic fibers are released into the oceans, **according to a study by the University of Plymouth.** Multiplied by all the private and industrial washing machines in the world, the results are scandalous. **The UN estimates that every year half a million tons of microplastic are thrown into the sea for washing clothes.**

**Moreover, according to the UN, every second the equivalent of a garbage truck full of textiles is taken to the landfill or burned.** The use of synthetic fibers and petroleum derivatives, such as polyester, making it difficult and even impossible to recycle them. If in 2015 the sector was responsible for 2 per cent of CO2 emissions on the planet, by 2050 it is estimated that it will generate 26%. That's not counting the number of microfibers that synthetic garments release in each wash and end up in the oceans: **22 million tons of these plastics will be dumped into the sea by 2050, according to estimates by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.**

Eliminating textile waste is not the only problem. Giving them a second life is also getting complicated. India is still the first market to receive second-hand clothes, but some East African countries (such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda) are the world's second-largest destination, already putting a stop to their importation. **According to the World Resources Institute (WRI),** producing a cotton shirt consumes 2,700 liters of water and the textile industry generates 20% of industrial water pollution. Likewise, it is estimated that between 2.1 and 5.5 kg of CO2 are emitted in the production of a shirt, with garments made of polyester being the ones that generate the highest emissions – close to 706 billion kg of

CO2 in 2015.

[\*\*The Pulse of the Fashion Industry report by Global Fashion Agenda and Boston Consulting Group\*\*](#) estimates that, according to current consumption trends and growth prospects, water consumption, CO2 emissions, and waste generation will increase by 50-63% by 2030. Social and labor concerns, such as labor abuse, are also emerging. The documentary [\*\*'The True Cost'\*\*](#), which explores the prejudices of fast fashion, reveals that there are some 40 million textile workers in the world, 85% of whom are women, many of them minors, earning two dollars a day under inhumane working conditions.

*"Today we are making more clothes, consuming more, using more resources and paying less than in any other era,"* says **Andrew Morgan, director of the documentary.**



The saying "Easy come, easy go" is evident. Although, Fast Fashion allows for the acquisition of pieces quickly and at a low price, the clothes are generally not usually of the best quality. Besides, due to their short duration as the *"latest*

*trend*” collections and at very low prices, it makes the consumer want to automatically and emotionally buy the garments. With all of this begins the tragedy and the vicious circle of buying, little use, and quick throw away. This is why Fast Fashion is often associated with the expression “*disposable fashion*”. This is according to the detractors of Fast Fashion which, in one way or another, hurt the consumer’s pocket. It’s a system that, while it makes them feel “*rich*” because they can buy multiple pieces at once, also impoverishes them. It seems to be an unsustainable model since new collections are introduced every two weeks.

On the other hand, it has been proclaimed that not all companies offer honest information to their clients about the production of the clothes, the impact they generate, and the violation of their workers’ rights.

What happens in this industry is that while production costs increase, there is product deflation. This is a clear consequence of the fierce subcontracting of clothing production. **Only 3 per cent of American clothing is made in the United States; the other 97% is outsourced to developing countries around the world, where wages are often very low.** However, these people have no choice. Forced by necessity, they accept inhumane conditions for such work and undignified remuneration. The textile workers have to bear the great cost of cheap clothing. From a gender perspective we see women and girls are undoubtedly the most affected.

Thus, for example, **according to the Bangladesh Manufacturers Association, it is estimated that the textile industry employs some four million workers, of whom around 80% are women, who work up to 60 hours a week.** They are afforded extremely low pay and unpaid overtime. They also belong to unions with very limited power. On top of all that, they are forced to endure violence of all kinds in their workplaces.

Many workers in the textile industry die each year, some of the causes being work-related accidents and suicide.



[Global production chains in the fast fashion sector, transport, and logistics: the case of the Spanish retailer Inditex.](#)

Seen in this light, the model proposed does not seem to be ethical or sustainable. Furthermore, we are also talking about human rights. In this sense, it is imperative to have legislation that protects, at the very least, workers and the environment. We must also strive to stimulate consumer education and responsibility. It is necessary to have the intervention of the law to seek a more responsible industry where brands and companies control the working and environmental conditions of their production chains.

Environmental laws need to be developed and properly implemented. At the very least, it is important that bans are placed on the use of certain chemicals, and that limits are set for the use of others. The laws should encourage the design of sustainable plans, as well as establish relevant sanctions. Besides, it would be appropriate for them to establish that companies should seek to educate and raise awareness among their workers for the ethical and sustainable use of resources.

Regulations should be generated for companies to encourage the creation of value for consumers, as well as the development of programs and campaigns to educate them about more responsible consumption.

For more information, visit the [THRIVE](#) Project for those who want to make a positive contribution towards a prosperous future.

**Written in collaboration with THRIVE Tribe member Martha Fernandez.**

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