

## Research Report

**COMMITTEE :** Environment (ILO3)

**ISSUE :** How can we limit the environmental impact of fast fashion?

**CHAIRS :** Elouafi Nada, Waliya Said Abasse & Mandisa Mathew

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### INTRODUCTION: PRESENTATION OF THE CHAIR

Hello everyone my name is Elouafi Nada and I am 16 years old. It is an honour to be your co-chair during this conference. I was born and raised in Casablanca, Morocco and there, I study at a French school called, Lycée Français International Louis Massignon. I really enjoy dancing, figure skating and playing the piano. It has been 6 years now since I have joined my school's MUN club and it has been such an enriching experience. In this committee we will have the occasion to debate on an extremely important subject related to our environment and the negative impact that fast fashion and overconsumption has on it. Human activity and more specifically the fashion industry, are polluting our planet and causing many negative social impacts on workers. Therefore, I hope you will all find great solutions to tackle this issue. I wish you good luck in your research and am really looking forward to meeting all of you in January!



### KEY WORDS

**Fast Fashion :** Fast fashion refers to a business model and approach within the fashion industry that focuses on rapidly producing and delivering cheap clothing to consumers. It consists in translating runway trends into affordable garments available for purchase in retail stores. Fast fashion brands typically aim to provide a wide variety of styles and frequently update their collections to keep up with ever-changing fashion trends.

**Sustainable fashion :** Contrary to fast fashion, sustainable fashion refers to practices within the fashion industry that aim to minimise the negative effects on the environment, society, and economy.

**Linear economy :** In this context, linear economy is an economic model that consists in extracting finite raw materials, turning them into products and then discarding them. Some even refer to it as the “take-make-waste economy” or “take-make-dispose”.

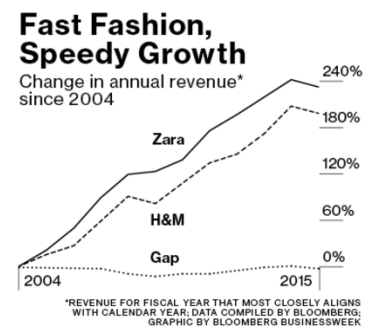
**Circular economy :** Circular economy is a system that aims to redesign production and consumption patterns to minimise waste generation while promoting resource efficiency and maximising the value of products and materials throughout their lifecycle. This closed-loop system consists in keeping products and materials in use for as long as possible, and at the end of their life, they are recovered, recycled, or regenerated to create new products or materials. It also reduces the need for extraction of raw materials. By using this economic model's principles, the fast fashion industry can transform its practices and mitigate its environmental impact.

**Supply chain** : A supply chain is a network of organisations, activities, resources, and processes involved in the production, distribution, and delivery of goods or services from the point of origin to the end consumer. In the case of fast fashion this supply chain includes every process starting from the extraction of raw materials to consumer use. Multiple UN bodies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) are now promoting more responsible practices to make this supply chain more sustainable and limit its impact on our planet.

## OVERVIEW

### 1.The growth of the fashion industry:

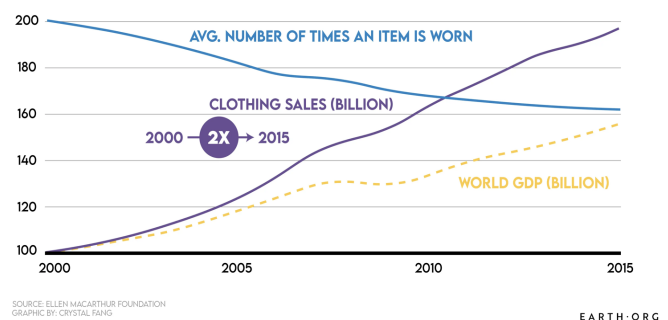
Nowadays, it is hard to imagine a world without a wide variety of styles of clothes and textiles as they provide us comfort and also represent a form of expression for so many whose clothing is a symbol of their individuality. The textile and fashion industry has become a significant sector in the global economy as this industry is valued at more than 2.5 trillion \$USD and employs over 75 million people worldwide. The sector has seen enormous growth over the past years, as global clothing production doubled between 2000 and 2014.



The term fast fashion (definition above) was first used in 1990 when Zara first set foot in New York. The New York Times then used this term to describe Zara's mission to take only 15 days for a garment to go from the design stage to being sold in stores.

Fast fashion represents an important growth opportunity for clothing brands because thanks to it, they manage to offer new clothing collections quickly to allow shoppers to expand their wardrobes according to new fashion trends. This explains how in the past two decades, consumers have been buying 60% more clothes and have kept them for about half as long as they did before.

GROWTH OF CLOTHING SALES AND DECLINE IN CLOTHING UTILISATION SINCE 2000



### 2.The environmental impact of fast fashion:

To keep up with this overconsumption model, fast fashion has an important environmental and social cost. In fact, 85% of all textiles are sent to landfills each year (UNECE, 2018) and washing some types of clothes sends a significant amount of microplastics into the ocean. In addition, textile workers, predominantly women in developing nations, frequently receive derisory wages and endure extensive work hours under deplorable circumstances. The use of chemicals in garment manufacturing also poses significant health risks for both industry workers and consumers.



### a) Significant carbon emissions:

One of the main negative aspects of fast fashion is its terrible environmental impact. In fact, an estimated 92 million tonnes of textile waste is produced every year and that number is expected to reach 134 million tonnes by 2030. According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), to achieve the creation of the huge amount of synthetic fabrics needed to meet the seasonal fashion trends, factories consume huge amounts of energy (more than 2% of the world's energy consumption). This causes the fashion industry to account for nearly 10% of global carbon emissions, which is more than both the aviation and shipping sectors combined. On top of this, fast fashion is also responsible for dangerous watersource pollution due to chemical use during the production of garments.

CO<sub>2</sub> consumption in comparison

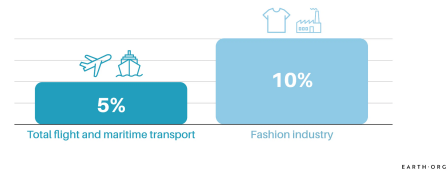
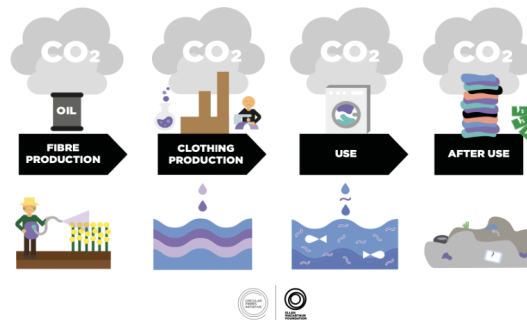


FIGURE 2: TODAY'S CLOTHING SYSTEM PUTS PRESSURE ON RESOURCES, POLLUTES THE ENVIRONMENT, AND CREATES NEGATIVE SOCIETAL IMPACTS



Source: Ellen MacArthur Foundation, A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future (2017).

### b) Resource consumption:

Resource consumption is one of the main causes of fast fashion's negative impact on our environment. In fact, fast fashion heavily relies on the extraction of natural resources, such as cotton, oil (for synthetic fibres like polyester), and various other materials.

The demand for these resources puts pressure on ecosystems and depletes finite resources. For example, cotton is a widely used raw material in the fashion industry. Conventional cotton cultivation requires extensive water irrigation and the heavy use of pesticides and fertilisers. This leads to water scarcity, soil degradation, and the contamination of surrounding ecosystems. Fast fashion is also linked to deforestation due to the demand for cellulose-based fibres (used to create fabrics like denim, corduroy or organza) that can be manufactured through chemical processes that extract cellulose from wood pulp or other plant materials. The production of these fibres often involves clearing large areas of forests, leading to habitat loss, biodiversity decline and increased carbon emissions.

### c) Water use and pollution:

The fashion industry is the second largest consumer industry of water. According to the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, around 215 trillion litres of water per year are consumed by the industry during the process of making products and sending them to consumers. To explain this phenomena two examples are given: It takes about 2650 litres (700 gallons) of

water to produce one cotton shirt which is enough water for one person to drink at least eight cups per day for three-and-a-half years and it takes about 7571 litres (2000 gallons) of water to produce a pair of jeans which is more than enough for one person to drink eight cups per day for 10 years. All of this just because both the jeans and the shirt are made from cotton which production is highly water intensive (*World Economic Forum*).

Furthermore, brands use synthetic fibres like polyester, nylon and acrylic which take hundreds of years to biodegrade and whose production releases an enormous amount of carbon emissions. Washing clothes releases 500,000 tons of microfibers into the ocean each year which is the equivalent of 50 billion plastic bottles. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) estimated in 2017 that 35% of all microplastics in the ocean came from the laundering of synthetic textiles like polyester. Overall, microplastics compose up to 31% of plastic pollution in the ocean and they have become a threat to marine life because they can enter the food chain of many different species, potentially affecting human health.



A fifth of water pollution comes from the fashion industry. Image: REUTERS/Andrew Biraj (Bangladesh Environment Society)

Indeed, some animals can confuse these microplastics with the small fish they usually eat which disturbs their food chain. On the other hand, when microplastics enter the food chain, they can accumulate in the tissues of marine animals, including fish and other seafood that humans consume. If we eat these contaminated seafood items, we may ingest microplastics ourselves which could affect our health.

In addition, textile dyes are the world's second-largest polluter of water, since the water leftover from the dyeing process is often dumped into ditches, streams, or rivers. According to an article from *World Economic Forum*, this process uses enough water to fill 2 million Olympic-sized swimming pools each year (1 Olympic-sized swimming pool contains approximately 2 500 000 litres of water).

Overall, the fashion industry is responsible for 20% of all industrial water pollution worldwide.

#### **d) Waste generation:**

The fast fashion industry has a significant impact on the environment in terms of waste generation. Since fast fashion revolves around producing large quantities of clothing at a rapid pace to meet new trends, it results in an excessive amount of clothing being produced, much of which goes unsold and eventually becomes waste. This huge amount of clothes is thrown away each year and takes a long time to decompose which provokes landfill accumulation. We should also acknowledge that usually these garments are made from synthetic fabrics that are produced from nonrenewable resources such as oil which makes the clothes often non biodegradable.

Fast fashion often involves excessive packaging, including plastic bags, tags, and other materials which adds to the overall waste generated by the industry and contributes to plastic pollution.





## RELEVANT UN TREATIES AND EVENTS

**12/12/2015**

The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015 under the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**, aims to combat climate change by limiting global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius while addressing the fashion industry's important carbon footprint.

**14/03/2019**

The **United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion** brings together various United Nations agencies (UNEP, ILO...) and allied organisations to promote sustainability within the fashion industry. It encourages collaboration and supports initiatives that aim to reduce the industry's environmental footprint.

**12/2018 (COP24, Poland)**

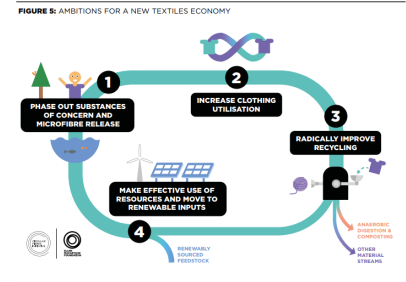
Led by the **UNFCCC's** Fashion for Global Climate Action initiative, the **Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action** seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition the fashion industry to a low-carbon economy. It encourages brands and companies to adopt sustainable practices, including reducing emissions and promoting circularity (definition of circular economy above).

**28/11/2017**

The **Ellen MacArthur Foundation** works to accelerate the transition to a circular economy, which promotes resource efficiency and waste reduction. Through initiatives like the "Make Fashion Circular" campaign, it collaborates with fashion industry stakeholders to drive systemic change and reduce waste in the sector.

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

- ❖ **Promoting sustainable and circular fashion:** Encouraging the adoption of sustainable practices, such as using organic and recycled materials, designing durable and timeless garments, and promoting circular economy principle.
- ❖ **Sensitising consumers on the issue:** Raising awareness among consumers about the environmental impact of fast fashion and promoting conscious consumption habits, such as buying less, choosing higher-quality items, and embracing second-hand.
- ❖ **Supporting ethical and transparent supply chains:** Brands should prioritise supply chain transparency, ensuring fair wages, safe working conditions, and responsible sourcing practices.
- ❖ **Investing in research and innovation:** Supporting research and development of eco-friendly materials, technologies, and manufacturing processes can drive innovation in the fashion industry and reduce its environmental footprint. This includes exploring alternative fibres, eco-friendly dyeing methods, and more sustainable production techniques.
- ❖ **Encouraging the development of charities that put in place second-hand shops:** Sensitising people on buying or getting clothes in second hand shops will extend the lifespan of these garments and reduce the overall waste generated by the fashion industry while raising awareness among consumers about the impacts of their purchasing choices.



### Guiding questions:

1. Is your country greatly affected by environmental issues caused by fast fashion?
2. Does your country count many factories involved in fast fashion activity?
3. Has your country created any initiative to encourage sustainable and ethical fashion?
4. Does your population mainly buy products from fast fashion brands?
5. How will your country sensitise the population over the issue?
6. Is there an organisation or body in your country that takes care of sanctioning fashion factories and brands that damage our environment?
7. How does your country promote ethical fashion? If not, did your country create any organisations or bodies that take care of helping and giving funds to more ethical brands?
8. Is your country involved in any research and/or innovation program to find alternative solutions to fast fashion?

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