

Research Report

COMMITTEE : Environment (ILO3)

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

CHAIRS : Elouafi Nada, Waliya Said Abasse & Mandisa Mathew

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.

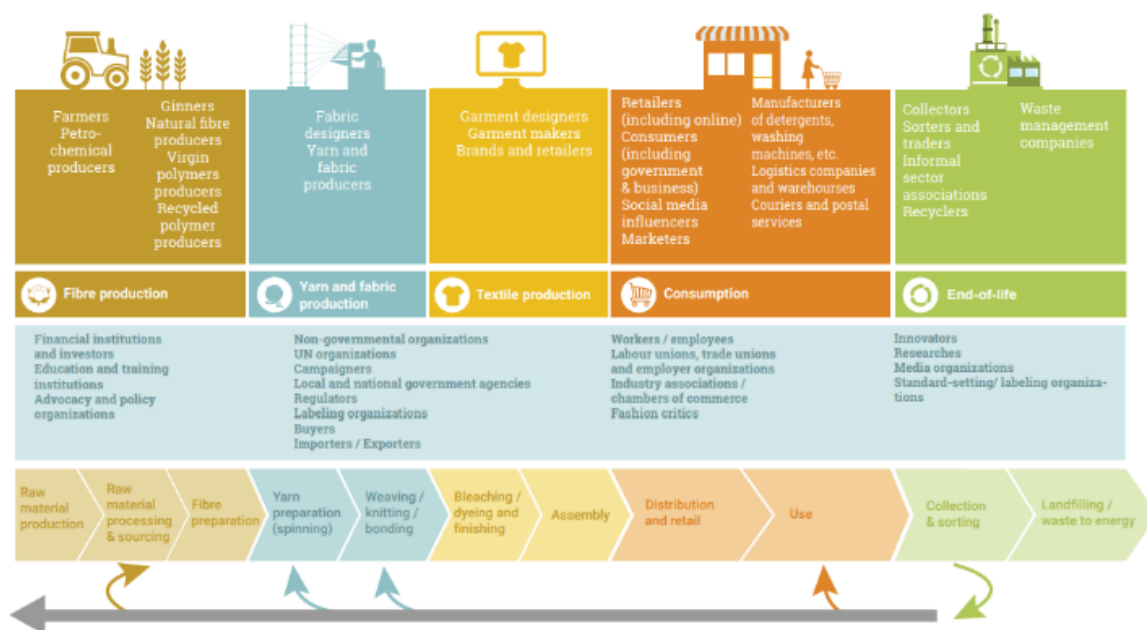
Sustainable fashion : Contrary to fast fashion, sustainable fashion refers to practices within the fashion industry that aim to minimise the negative effects on the environment, society, and economy.

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. This concept is closely linked to that of the value chain. The actors and stakeholders of the textile value chain are defined as all individuals and entities that provide or receive value from designing, making, distributing, retailing or consuming a textile product (UNEP). In the case of fast fashion this supply chain includes every process starting from the extraction of raw materials to consumer use as well as the activities involved with the textile after its useful service life has ended. 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.

Figure 4: Stakeholders associated with the textile value chain

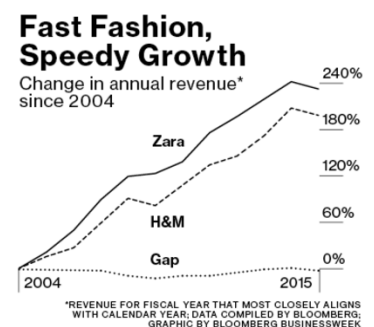


Source: Sustainability and Circularity in the Textile Value Chain: Global Stocktaking - UNEP report 2020

OVERVIEW

1. The growth of the fashion industry:

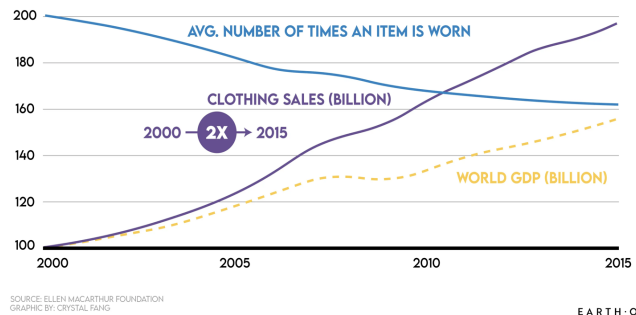
Nowadays, it is hard to imagine a world without a wide variety of styles of clothes and textiles as they provide us comfort and also represent a form of expression for so many whose clothing is a symbol of their individuality. The textile and fashion industry has become a significant sector in the global 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. The climate impact of the global fashion industry is enormous, with over 3.3 billion metric tons of greenhouse gases emitted across the value chain per year (Quantis, 2018). 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 water source pollution due to chemical use during the production of garments.

CO2 consumption in comparison

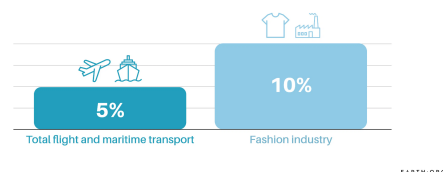
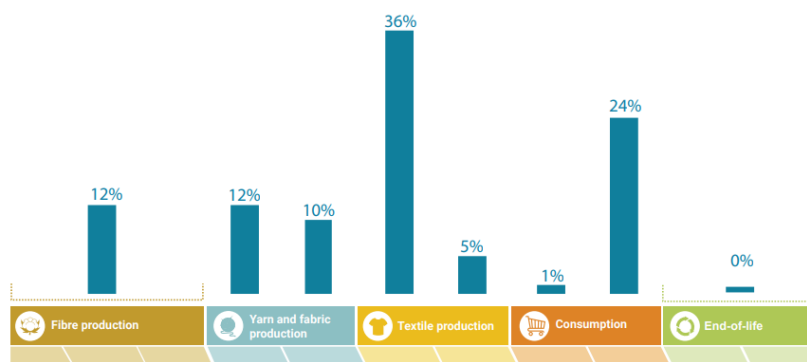


Figure 8: Climate impact across the global apparel value chain



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.



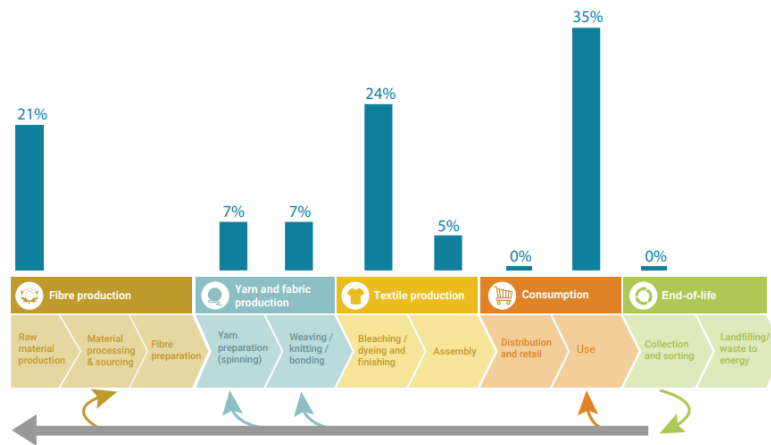
A fifth of water pollution comes from the fashion industry. Image: REUTERS/Andrew Biraj (Bangladesh Environment Society)

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.

Figure 9: Freshwater use across the global apparel value chain



Source: LCA on global apparel, see Box 1.

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.

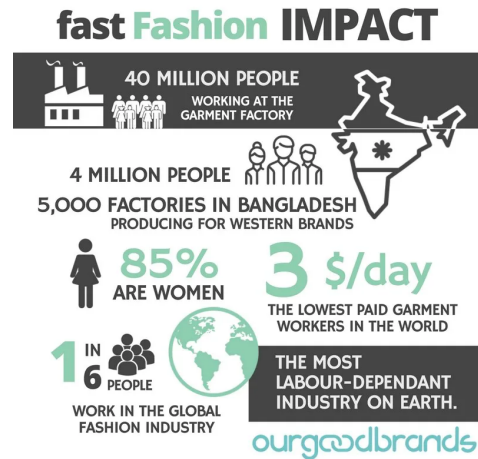
Fast fashion often involves excessive packaging, including plastic bags, tags, and other materials which adds to the overall waste generated by the industry and contributes to plastic pollution.



Landfill sites all across the world are filled with clothes. Image: REUTERS/Mohamed Azakir

3. The social impact of fast fashion:

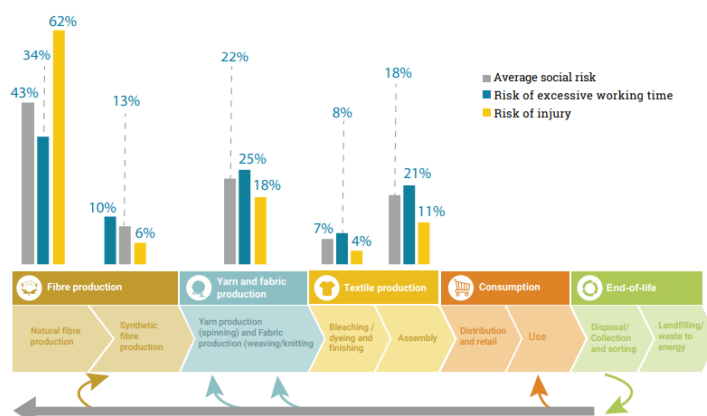
While the environmental sustainability of the industries is a growing concern, labour rights abuses continue to dominate reports and news articles about these industries. Despite job creation, the social repercussions of fast fashion are undeniable. The sector is known for taking advantage of inexpensive labour, particularly in developing nations where labour regulations are either lenient or not effectively enforced. In these regions, workers frequently receive minimal wages and are forced to work extensive hours in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Fast fashion labels have been linked to numerous cases of labour exploitation such as child labour, forced labour, and human trafficking. The growing number of young unskilled women and men in the industries in developing countries is likely to lead to an increasing proportion of vulnerable workers in the industries in the future. Therefore, it is critical to ensure that all groups of workers have equal access to training and to social security, and are able to realise their rights at work and join representative worker's organisations so that their voice can be heard.



a) Risks associated with garment production:

The clothing industry plays a big role in providing jobs in numerous countries, especially for women, and offers important economic opportunities in developing nations. However, workers are subjected to abusive practices like sexual harassment and unsafe work environments. Unacceptable labour conditions, instances of modern slavery, and child labour have drawn attention of several NGOs campaigns and gathered significant media focus on cotton cultivation and textile production. For instance, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh in April 2013, in which more than 1,132 people were killed and more than 2,500 injured, most of them women and girls, brought the poor labour conditions faced by workers in the fashion industry to global attention (ILO). In addition, many risks (corruption, forced labour, gender inequality, fragility in the legal system, exposure to toxins and hazards...) are associated with different steps of the supply chain. Nonetheless, activities at the fibre production stage are responsible for the highest proportion of these risks as the probability of fatal and non-fatal injury in this specific sector is 62% without forgetting the fact that natural fibre production (cotton farming) has a higher social risk than synthetic fibre production (petrochemical industry). These numbers are even more striking as these results are for a low-cost garment made up of 70% synthetic fibres and only 30% natural fibres.

Figure 14: Social risks across the textile value chain



b) Impact on human health:

Fast fashion can have various impacts on human health, both directly and indirectly. First of all, the production of garments often involves the use of a variety of chemicals, including dyes, finishes, and flame retardants. Moreover, the extensive use of hazardous chemicals in textile production has wide-ranging consequences. While textile workers in direct contact with these chemicals face heightened toxicity and increased risks of cancer, the discharge of these chemicals into rivers extends their impact to local communities, contaminating drinking water. Without forgetting the fact that, prolonged skin contact with these textiles can result in dermatological problems and allergic reactions. In addition, the fact that women make up the majority of the textile workforce means they are disproportionately affected by these health impacts.



source: earth.org

Furthermore, the high fossil energy use in textile finishing and the high consumption of electricity in the use phase and consumption phase of the supply chain contributes significantly to the diffusion of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere but also to the air pollution that can cause respiratory disorders.

The potential for ingestion and inhalation of microfibres in humans, and their possible impacts on human health are also an emerging concern. These microfibers are released through the washing process into water (particularly ocean water) which could lead to the contamination of water sources. They could also find their way into the food chain of different marine species and eventually impact human health.

c) Women in fast fashion industry:

A particular feature of the textile industry is the large number of women in its workforce. However, and particularly in developing countries, their voices are still not heard and their rights not totally respected. In a recent study on the impact of the “Better Work programme”, researchers found that gender discrimination is still important in job assignments, pay, promotions, and working hours, and that sexual harassment is clearly a key concern. According to UNEP, women make up 70% of the 3 million people employed in garment factories in Bangladesh without forgetting that Mexico and Cambodia have even higher percentages. However, in India the majority of garment workers are men. Economic practices such as the continual search for lower prices, are also responsible for the prevalence of women in this industry because they are universally paid less than men which is seen as a way to enhance investments and increase profits.

Furthermore, The fact that women are given “unskilled” jobs which are in the “bottom tier” of the garment production and supply chains means they have the highest risks of occupational injuries and exposure to dangerous chemicals which could, according to UNEP, contribute to the development of diseases like breast cancer.

Therefore, it is necessary in transitioning to a sustainable and circular textile value chain that the structural and economic factors preventing the inclusion of women are addressed. In

fact, as well as financial inclusion, fast fashion companies should ensure that women are included in decision making processes and enabled to have equal and meaningful participation in consultations and negotiations.



Source: News Deeply, Blog cover image source: Deccan Herald

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)

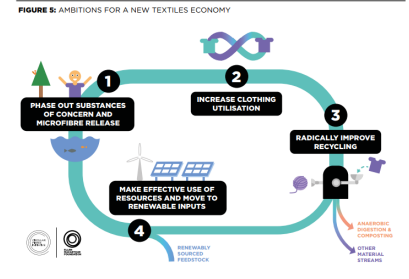
Led by the **UNFCCC's** Fashion for Global Climate Action initiative, the **Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action** seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and transition the fashion industry to a low-carbon economy. It encourages brands and companies to adopt sustainable practices, including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

- ❖ **Creating a regulatory framework by each country's governments:** for the respect of international labour standards and the protection of the environment.
- ❖ **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.

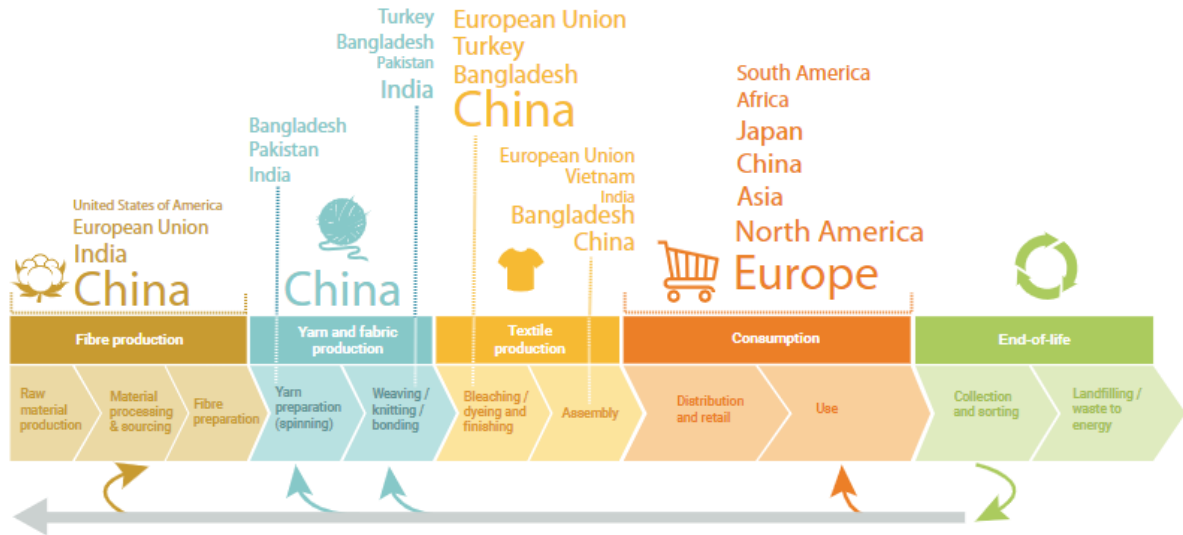


Guiding questions:

1. Is your country greatly affected by environmental and social 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? If so, who are the stakeholders involved in these initiatives (governments, unions, employers, civil society)?
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 a regulatory framework in your country which ensures the application of international labour standards in the fashion industry? How such framework is applied and implemented?
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?

9. Do governments, employers, organisations and trade unions in the fashion sector in your country negotiate agreements to address the social and environmental effects of fast fashion?

Figure 5: Geographical breakdown of global apparel production and consumption⁴



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sites:

- <https://earth.org/fast-fashions-detrimental-effect-on-the-environment/>
- <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/sustainable-fashion/#>
- <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/environmental-costs-fast-fashion>
- <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/un-alliance-sustainable-fashion-addresses-damage-fast-fashion>
- <https://unfccc.int/news/un-helps-fashion-industry-shift-to-low-carbon>
- <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/fashion-industry-carbon-unsustainable-environment-pollution/>

Reports:

- https://emf.thirdlight.com/file/24/uiwtaHvud8YIG_uiSTauTlJH74/A%20New%20Textiles%20Economy%3A%20Redesigning%20ofashion%E2%80%99s%20future.pdf
- https://unfashionalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/UN-Fashion-Alliance-Mapping-Report_Final.pdf
- https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_800026.pdf
- https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meeetingdocument/wcms_886647.pdf
- <https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/34184;jsessionid=ACE177B83017803755B1B14549978F5E>

FerMUN 2024, International Labour Organisation

- https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_869573.pdf
- https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/BW-Progress-and-Potential_Web-final.pdf
- https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms_669355.pdf