

# Environmental Committee

Research Reports

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**Forum:** Environmental committee

**Issue:** Addressing the environmental impact of the global fashion industry

**Student Officers:** Aline Salib, Zeina Aboughali

**Position:** Co-chairs

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## **Introduction**

The fashion industry is one of the world's largest and most influential industries, with a global value of over \$2.5 trillion. However, this industry also has a significant environmental impact, from the production of raw materials to the disposal of clothing. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, the fashion industry is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions, more than the emissions of all international flights and maritime shipping combined. In addition, fashion production dries up water sources and pollutes rivers and streams.

One of the main environmental issues associated with the fashion industry is the production of textiles. The production of textiles requires large amounts of water, energy, and chemicals, leading to pollution of waterways and air. For example, it takes approximately 2,700 liters of water to produce one cotton t-shirt, and the production of synthetic fibers such as polyester releases harmful chemicals into the environment. Furthermore, more than 85% of textiles get disposed of in landfills and dumps each year, and even washing specific types of clothing releases considerable amounts of microplastics into the ocean.

The environmental effects of the fashion industry are likely to increase due to the rising population and industrialization, leading to fast fashion development. As a result, consumers are purchasing 60% more clothing as each garment is now kept half as long. Additionally, some stakeholders include fashion designers and brands, suppliers, retailers, customers, and governments.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **Fast fashion**

A contemporary term used to describe the rapid production of high volumes of clothing, mimicking the latest fashion trends, at low cost.

### **Microfibers**

Tiny synthetic fibers shed from textiles, especially during washing, contribute to marine pollution.

### **Textile Waste**

Waste generated from the production and disposal of textiles, including fabric scraps, unsold inventory, and discarded clothing.

### **Circular Economy**

An economic system aimed at eliminating waste and the continual use of resources through principles like recycling, reuse, and designing for longevity.

### **Water Footprint**

The total volume of freshwater used to produce goods and services, including the water consumed during production and the water required to assimilate waste products.

### **Upcycling**

The process of transforming waste materials or unwanted products into new, higher-quality items.

## **Major Countries and Organizations Involved**

## **The European Union (EU)**

The EU is a major player in driving sustainability in the global fashion industry through its regulatory frameworks. The EU Circular Economy Action Plan aims to make the fashion industry more sustainable by focusing on the entire lifecycle of products, from design to recycling. The EU has introduced several initiatives to promote sustainable fashion, including eco-design requirements, extended producer responsibility schemes, and measures to encourage recycling and reduce waste.

## **China**

China is the world's largest producer and exporter of textiles and garments, accounting for over 50% of global textile production. Its vast manufacturing infrastructure and relatively low labor costs have made it the center of global apparel supply chains. China has begun to focus on more sustainable practices by introducing stricter environmental regulations, such as passing the Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law. This law aims to address water pollution from industries like textiles by setting stricter standards and enforcement mechanisms.

## **The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP):**

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has played a significant role in addressing the environmental impact of the global fashion industry through various initiatives and partnerships. One initiative is The UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion: UNEP launched the UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion in 2019 to bring together key stakeholders in the fashion industry, including governments, businesses, and civil society, to address the environmental and social impacts of the sector. The alliance aims to promote sustainable practices, innovation, and collaboration to create a more sustainable and ethical fashion industry. Not only has this organization created initiatives but UNEP has also worked to raise awareness about the environmental challenges of the fashion industry through reports, campaigns, and events. By highlighting the impacts of textile production, water consumption, and waste generation, UNEP has helped to mobilize action and advocacy for more sustainable practices in the industry.

Capacity Building and Support: UNEP provides technical assistance and capacity-building

support to governments, businesses, and other stakeholders in the fashion industry to help them adopt more sustainable practices. This includes guidance on sustainable sourcing, production processes, waste management, and circular economy principles. Furthermore.

### **The Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC)**

The Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) is actively involved in addressing the environmental impact of the global fashion industry through various initiatives. The SAC has developed the Higg Index, a suite of tools that enables companies to measure and score sustainability performance. By using the Higg Index, companies can identify areas for improvement and track progress toward more sustainable practices. Additionally, the SAC facilitates collaboration among its members and partners to drive collective action towards sustainability goals. Through sharing best practices, tools, and resources, the SAC promotes transparency and knowledge exchange within the industry. Furthermore, the SAC works to develop industry standards and guidelines for sustainable practices in areas such as materials sourcing, manufacturing processes, and supply chain management. These standards help companies align their sustainability efforts and drive continuous improvement across the industry. Moreover, the SAC provides training, workshops, and educational resources to help companies build their capacity to implement sustainable practices. By offering guidance and support, the SAC empowers companies to make informed decisions and take action to reduce their environmental impact. Overall, the Sustainable Apparel Coalition plays a pivotal role in driving sustainability in the fashion industry by providing tools, resources, and collaboration opportunities to help companies measure, improve, and communicate their environmental and social performance.

### **India**

India is a major player in the global textile industry, known for its large-scale production of cotton and a rich tradition of textile crafts. The Indian textile industry faces environmental challenges, including water pollution from dyeing and finishing processes and high water consumption in cotton cultivation. Efforts are being made to adopt more sustainable practices through initiatives like the Sustainable Apparel Coalition.

## Timeline of Events

<b>Date</b>	<b>Description of Event</b>
Early 1990s	The rise of Fast Fashion Brands like Zara and H&M started mass production, making fashion more affordable and disposable.
2010	Sustainable Apparel Coalition was launched to reduce the environmental impact of the apparel and footwear industries.
September 25, 2015	Adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals: UN member states adopt 17 SDGs, including goals related to sustainable fashion.
December 10, 2018	Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action: Launched by the UNFCCC to drive the fashion industry towards net-zero emissions by 2050.
March 11, 2020	EU Circular Economy Action Plan: Introduced measures to make the fashion industry more sustainable, focusing on product life cycles.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

1. UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion (2019): The UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion seeks to coordinate action in the fashion industry to achieve the SDGs. It aims to halt the environmental and social harm caused by the fashion industry and ensure that fashion contributes to sustainable development.
2. UN Global Compact (2012): Collaborated with the Nordic Fashion Association to develop the first industry-specific sustainability campaign for fashion. The program included the publication of a Code of Conduct. They collaborate with garment firms to address water, supply chain, and health concerns, among others.

3. Dialogue on Fashion and Climate Action (under UNFCCC) (2018): This event convened stakeholders from the fashion industry to explore the establishment of collaborative approaches necessary for the industry to contribute to global net-zero emissions by 2050. It is part of the broader efforts under the UNFCCC to engage various sectors in climate action.
4. Paris Agreement (2015): The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change. It aims to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The textile industry, being a significant contributor to global carbon emissions, is indirectly addressed through the broader goals of reducing emissions and promoting sustainable practices.

## **Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue**

2017, Ellen MacArthur Foundation: Launched to transform the fashion industry into a circular economy model. The initiative focuses on designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. It has partnered with major brands and organizations to promote circular design principles and innovative business models that reduce environmental impact.

Voluntary Sustainability Initiatives: Many fashion brands have implemented voluntary sustainability initiatives, such as recycling programs or using organic materials. (This worked for a while, However, these efforts have been criticized for not going far enough to address the industry's overall impact) One such initiative is the Sustainability Initiative by Patagonia. Patagonia is renowned for taking a firm stand on environmental problems. Through programs like the "1% for the Planet" program, where they donate 1% of their purchases to environmental charities, they actively support a variety of environmental issues and programs. They also make their clothes with organic cotton, recycled polyester, and other eco-friendly materials. Using recycled materials in their goods and encouraging customers to recycle or repair their gear through the Worn Wear program are two examples of their dedication to

reducing waste. Patagonia encourages customers to purchase old goods rather than new ones by providing repair services for their merchandise.

Greenwashing: Some companies, such as Zara have engaged in greenwashing, where they promote themselves as environmentally friendly without making substantial changes to their practices. In 2016, Zara promoted its “Join Life” collection as an eco-friendly option; however, its mass production contradicts this image of sustainability. (Although it was effective for a period of time it eventually led to consumer confusion, skepticism, and backlash about sustainability claims in the industry)

## **Possible Solutions**

1. Energy Efficiency Improvements: Implementing energy-efficient technologies in manufacturing processes and transitioning to renewable energy sources can cut emissions by up to 50%, significantly lowering the industry's carbon footprint.
2. Circular Economic Models: Designing clothing for recyclability and reuse, along with promoting repair and upcycling, can keep materials in use longer and reduce waste. However, infrastructure for recycling textiles into new garments needs substantial development.
3. Adoption of Sustainable Materials: Encouraging the use of materials like organic cotton, recycled polyester, and lyocell can significantly reduce the environmental impact of fashion production by minimizing resource usage and pollution.
4. Consumer Awareness Campaigns: Educating consumers about the environmental impacts of fast fashion and promoting sustainable purchasing habits can drive demand for eco-friendly products and pressure companies to adopt greener practices.



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