

**BEYOND THE LABEL: A COMPARATIVE LAW PERSPECTIVE OF  
OVERCONSUMPTION, AND THE HIGH COST OF CHEAP FASHION**

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## **I. Introduction**

### **A. Definition of fast fashion and overconsumption**

This paper provides an analysis of the environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry. Fast fashion refers to the rapid production of inexpensive clothing that mimics current fashion trends, enabling consumers to purchase trendy styles at a low cost but often at the expense of environmental and labor standards.<sup>1</sup> Overconsumption refers to the excessive use of resources and goods beyond what is necessary for basic needs, often leading to environmental degradation, resource depletion, and unsustainable economic practices.<sup>2</sup>

### **B. The environmental and social impact of fast fashion**

Fast fashion has significant environmental and social consequences, making it a pressing issue in global sustainability discussions. Environmentally, the industry contributes to pollution, resource depletion, and waste accumulation. The production of textiles, especially synthetic fibers like polyester, relies heavily on fossil fuels, releasing greenhouse gases that exacerbate climate change.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, textile dyeing and finishing processes are among the largest contributors to

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<sup>1</sup> Joy, A., Sherry, J. F., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J., & Chan, R. (2012). Fast fashion, sustainability, and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. *Fashion Theory*, 16(3), 273–295. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340749707123>

<sup>2</sup> Schnaiberg, A. (1980). *The environment: From surplus to scarcity*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(4), 189–200. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>

water pollution, with untreated wastewater often discharged into rivers, contaminating drinking water sources and harming aquatic ecosystems.<sup>4</sup> The short lifecycle of fast fashion garments also leads to massive textile waste; many items are discarded after only a few uses, contributing to the growing problem of landfill overflow and microplastic pollution<sup>5</sup>

Socially, fast fashion raises ethical concerns regarding labor conditions and workers' rights. Many fast fashion brands outsource production to countries with lax labor regulations, where workers, often women and children, face exploitative conditions, including long hours, low wages, and unsafe workplaces.<sup>6</sup> One of the most tragic examples is the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, which killed over 1,100 garment workers.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the pressure to produce garments rapidly and at a low cost often results in human rights violations, such as forced labor and gender discrimination in garment supply chains.<sup>8</sup>

### C. The role of law and regulation in addressing these issues

Governments and international organizations play a key role in tackling the environmental and social issues caused by fast fashion through laws and regulations. One major area of focus is reducing pollution and promoting sustainability in textile production. For instance, the European Union has introduced the *Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles*, which requires fashion brands to meet eco-design standards, participate in recycling programs, and follow stricter rules

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<sup>4</sup> Kant, R. (2012). Textile dyeing industry: An environmental hazard. *Natural Science*, 4(1), 22-26.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ns.2012.41004>

<sup>5</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2017). A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future.  
<https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org>

<sup>6</sup> Hoskins, T. (2014). *Stitched up: The anti-capitalist book of fashion*. Pluto Press.

<sup>7</sup> Kara, S. (2019). *Tainted garments: The exploitation of women and girls in India's home-based garment sector*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign. (2021). *Fashioning justice: A call for living wages in the garment industry*.  
<https://cleanclothes.org>

on chemical use.<sup>9</sup>

In the U.S., California's *Garment Worker Protection Act* was passed to improve labor conditions by ensuring garment workers receive fair wages and banning pay-per-piece systems, which have historically contributed to sweatshop-like conditions.<sup>10</sup> These policies show how governments can regulate the industry to create a more ethical and sustainable fashion market.

Labor laws also play a crucial role in protecting garment workers, particularly in countries where fast fashion brands outsource production. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has set global standards to prevent forced labor, workplace discrimination, and unsafe working conditions.<sup>11</sup> However, because many brands manufacture clothing in countries with weak labor protections, enforcing these standards is challenging. To address this, countries like Germany have introduced mandatory human rights due diligence (HRDD) laws, such as the *Supply Chain Due Diligence Act*, which requires companies to identify and fix human rights violations in their supply chains.<sup>12</sup> These laws push fashion brands to take responsibility for working conditions in their factories, even when they operate in other countries.

Consumer protection laws are also becoming an important tool in holding fashion companies accountable. Many brands engage in “greenwashing,” where they exaggerate their sustainability efforts to attract eco-conscious shoppers. To combat this, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) updated its *Green Guides* to ensure companies provide accurate sustainability claims backed by evidence.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the U.K.'s *Competition and Markets Authority* (CMA) released

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission. (2022). EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles. <https://ec.europa.eu/environment>

<sup>10</sup> California State Legislature. (2021). Senate Bill No. 62: Garment Worker Protection Act. <https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov>

<sup>11</sup> International Labour Organization. (2021). Fundamental principles and rights at work. <https://www.ilo.org>

<sup>12</sup> Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. (2021). Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains. <https://www.bmas.de>

<sup>13</sup> Federal Trade Commission. (2022). Guides for the use of environmental marketing claims (Green Guides). <https://www.ftc.gov>



guidelines to prevent companies from misleading consumers about their environmental impact.<sup>14</sup> These laws help consumers make more informed choices while encouraging brands to adopt truly sustainable practices.

Although laws and regulations are a step in the right direction, their success depends on proper enforcement and international cooperation. Many fast fashion brands operate across multiple countries, making it difficult to hold them accountable under a single nation's laws. Stronger global policies and stricter monitoring are needed to ensure fashion companies follow ethical labor practices and reduce their environmental impact. As the demand for sustainable fashion grows, legal frameworks will need to evolve to keep up with industry changes and consumer expectations.

This paper will thus analyze the environmental and social impacts of the fast fashion industry and examine the role of law and regulation in addressing these issues across multiple jurisdictions. This discussion will cover the industry's contributions to pollution, textile waste, and exploitative labor practices, as well as legislative measures aimed at improving sustainability and worker protections. Additionally, the paper will explore the effectiveness of current policies, including environmental regulations, labor laws, and consumer protection measures, highlighting their successes and limitations. By assessing these legal frameworks, this paper aims to provide insight into the challenges of regulating a globalized industry and the need for stronger international cooperation to achieve a more ethical and sustainable fashion system.

## **II. Environmental and Social Harms**

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<sup>14</sup> Competition and Markets Authority. (2021). CMA guidance on environmental claims on goods and services. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications>

Fast fashion causes severe environmental damage (pollution, carbon emissions, textile waste) and perpetuates labor exploitation through unsafe working conditions and human rights violations in global supply chains.

#### A. The rise of fast fashion: history and key players

The fast fashion industry emerged in the late 20th century as advancements in global supply chains and manufacturing processes allowed for the rapid production of inexpensive, trend-driven clothing. Traditionally, the fashion industry operated on a seasonal schedule, with designers releasing collections months in advance and retailers following a structured production cycle.<sup>15</sup> However, as production costs decreased and outsourcing became more widespread, brands began to accelerate their manufacturing timelines. By the 1990s and early 2000s, fast fashion had become a dominant force in the retail market, offering consumers affordable, rapidly produced clothing that closely followed high-fashion trends.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most influential companies in the rise of fast fashion was Zara, a Spanish retailer under the Inditex group. Zara transformed the industry by implementing a highly responsive supply chain, allowing the company to design, manufacture, and distribute new clothing items in just a few weeks.<sup>17</sup> This rapid turnaround created a sense of urgency among consumers while reducing excess inventory. Other brands, such as H&M, Forever 21, and Topshop, quickly adopted similar

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<sup>15</sup> Tokatli, N. (2008). Global sourcing: Insights from the global fast-fashion sector. *Journal of Economic Geography*, 8(1), 21-38. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbm035>

<sup>16</sup> Cachon, G. P., & Swinney, R. (2011). The value of fast fashion: Quick response, enhanced design, and strategic consumer behavior. *Management Science*, 57(4), 778-795. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1100.1303>

<sup>17</sup> Ghemawat, P., & Nueno, J. L. (2006). *Zara: Fast fashion*. Harvard Business School Press.



business models, relying on outsourced labor in countries like China, Bangladesh, and Vietnam to keep production costs low.<sup>18</sup>

As fast fashion expanded, concerns over its environmental and social consequences grew. The industry's reliance on synthetic materials and mass production contributed to pollution, resource depletion, and excessive textile waste. Additionally, labor exploitation in garment-producing countries became a major issue, with factory workers facing poor wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions.<sup>19</sup> One of the most devastating incidents highlighting these concerns was the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, which resulted in the deaths of over 1,100 workers and drew international attention to the dangers of unregulated supply chains.<sup>20</sup> Despite growing criticism, fast fashion brands continued to thrive, with companies such as Shein and Boohoo taking the model even further by leveraging e-commerce and social media to produce and sell clothing at an even faster rate.<sup>21</sup>

Today, while fast fashion remains a major industry, increasing consumer awareness and regulatory efforts are pushing brands toward more sustainable practices. Companies like Zara and H&M have introduced initiatives focused on recycling programs and sustainable materials.<sup>22</sup> However, many critics argue that these efforts amount to greenwashing rather than genuine systemic change. As pressure from both policymakers and consumers continues to grow, the future of fast fashion will

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<sup>18</sup> Bick, R., Halsey, E., & Ekenge, C. C. (2018). The global environmental injustice of fast fashion. *Environmental Health*, 17(1), 92. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>

<sup>19</sup> Hoskins, T. (2014). *Stitched up: The anti-capitalist book of fashion*. Pluto Press.

<sup>20</sup> Kara, S. (2019). *Tainted garments: The exploitation of women and girls in India's home-based garment sector*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Gwilt, A. (2020). *Fashion design for sustainability*. Routledge.

<sup>22</sup> Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(4), 189-200. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>



likely depend on a combination of stronger regulations, corporate responsibility, and shifts in consumer behavior.

## B. Consumer culture and the demand for cheap, trendy clothing

The modern consumer landscape is heavily influenced by a desire for affordable and fashionable clothing, leading to the increased popularity of fast fashion. This is particularly pronounced among Generation Z who frequently purchase from fast fashion retailers like Shein and Temu.<sup>23</sup> This paradox highlights a significant hypocritical approach to fashion, where the allure of low prices and the influence of social media trends often overshadow environmental considerations.<sup>24</sup> The rapid turnover of fashion trends, amplified by social media, fuels a cycle of continuous consumption and disposal, worsening environmental degradation.<sup>25</sup>

The modern consumer culture of fast fashion is driven by a complex of affordability, social media influence, and the gratification from shopping. The widespread appeal of cheap, trend-driven clothing has cultivated a disposable mindset, where garments are now viewed as short-term fashion statements rather than long-term investments. This mentality enforces capitalist ideologies that equate identity with consumption, encouraging consumers and young people to purchase clothing not out of necessity but to maintain social status.<sup>26</sup> Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram further worsen this trend by popularizing micro-trends, which encourage rapid

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<sup>23</sup> New York Post. (2024). Hypocritical Gen Z can't stop buying this planet-destroying product: study. Retrieved from <https://nypost.com/2024/10/02/lifestyle/hypocritical-gen-z-cant-stop-buying-this-planet-destroying-product/>

<sup>24</sup> Id.

<sup>25</sup> Id.

<sup>26</sup> Joy, A., Sherry, J. F., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J., & Chan, R. (2012). Fast fashion, sustainability, and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. *Fashion Theory*, 16(3), 273–295. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340749707123>



consumption and disposal.<sup>27</sup> Fast fashion brands have capitalized on these trends by producing low-cost replicas of runway or influencer styles within days, thereby fostering impulsive purchasing behavior among consumers. Research has shown that the frequency of clothing purchases has increased significantly over the past two decades, with the average consumer buying 60% more garments than they did 15 years ago while keeping each item for only half as long.<sup>28</sup> This trend is especially evident among younger consumers, who simultaneously express environmental concerns while continuing to support fast fashion brands. This is a phenomenon often described as the “attitude-behavior gap”.<sup>29</sup> The ease of online shopping, combined with exposure to others lifestyles and influencer endorsements via social media, reinforces this cycle of overconsumption, contributing significantly to the environmental footprint of the fashion industry.

### C. Environmental consequences: textile waste, pollution, and carbon footprint

The environmental impact of fast fashion encompasses substantial textile waste, pollution, and a significant carbon footprint. Annually, approximately 92 million tons of textile waste are generated, with projections suggesting an increase to 134 million tons by the end of the decade.<sup>30</sup> In the United States, an estimated 11.3 million tons of textile waste end up in landfills each year, equating to about 81.5 pounds per person.<sup>31</sup> The fashion industry is responsible for 10% of global carbon emissions, surpassing the combined emissions from international flights and maritime

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<sup>27</sup> Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(4), 189–200. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>

<sup>28</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2017). A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion’s future. <https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org>

<sup>29</sup> McNeill, L., & Moore, R. (2015). Sustainable fashion consumption and the fast fashion conundrum: Fashionable consumers and attitudes to sustainability in clothing choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 39(3), 212–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12169>

<sup>30</sup> Earth.Org. (2023). 10 Concerning Fast Fashion Waste Statistics. Retrieved from <https://earth.org/statistics-about-fast-fashion-waste/>

<sup>31</sup> Id.



shipping.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, textile dyeing and finishing processes contribute to over 20% of global wastewater, introducing harmful chemicals into water systems and adversely affecting aquatic life and human health.<sup>33</sup>

Most garments are produced in low-cost manufacturing hubs such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and China, where loose environmental regulations allow companies to ignore the environmental costs of production.<sup>34</sup> This results in extensive transportation networks that rely heavily on fossil fuels, from shipping raw materials to distributing finished goods. This leads to high levels of greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, fast fashion's reliance on speed and low cost encourages rampant overproduction, with many brands releasing new collections weekly rather than seasonally.<sup>36</sup> This model leads to unsold inventory being burned or landfilled.<sup>37</sup> Further, the production facilities often rely on coal-powered energy, making the entire lifecycle of fast fashion garments even more energy-intensive.<sup>38</sup>

#### D. Social and ethical concerns: labor exploitation and human rights violations

Beyond environmental issues, fast fashion raises significant social and ethical issues, particularly concerning labor practices. A substantial portion of garment production is outsourced

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<sup>32</sup> United Nations Environment Programme. (2022). The environmental costs of fast fashion. Retrieved from <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/environmental-costs-fast-fashion>

<sup>33</sup> Earth.Org. (2020). Impacts of Fast Fashion on the Environment. Retrieved from [https://earth.org/data\\_visualization/impacts-of-fast-fashion-on-the-environment/](https://earth.org/data_visualization/impacts-of-fast-fashion-on-the-environment/)

<sup>34</sup> Claudio, L. (2007). Waste couture: Environmental impact of the clothing industry. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 115(9), A449–A454. <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.115-a449>

<sup>35</sup> Bick, R., Halse, A., & Ekenga, C. C. (2018). The global environmental injustice of fast fashion. *Environmental Health*, 17(1), 92. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-018-0433-7>

<sup>36</sup> Joy, A., Sherry Jr, J. F., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J., & Chan, R. (2012). Fast fashion, sustainability, and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. *Fashion Theory*, 16(3), 273–295. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340749707123>

<sup>37</sup> Id.

<sup>38</sup> Niinimäki, K., & Karell, E. (2021). Addressing the role of energy use in fast fashion production: A global perspective. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 279, 123715. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.123715>

to developing countries where labor laws do not exist or are inadequately enforced.<sup>39</sup> Reports indicate that approximately 93% of fast fashion brands do not pay garment workers a living wage, with workers in countries like Bangladesh earning as little as \$96 per month.<sup>40</sup> These workers often endure unsafe working conditions, long hours, and lack job security. Notably, the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, which resulted in over 1,100 deaths, showed just how perilous the conditions are in garment factories.<sup>41</sup>

Addressing the environmental and social harms of fast fashion requires a multilevel approach. Below is an overview of the existing legal frameworks that includes promoting sustainable consumption, enforcing labor laws, and encouraging corporate responsibility.

#### **IV. Weakened and Fragmented Legal Frameworks**

The global fashion industry is governed by a tangled set of laws that often fail to tackle the many issues of overproduction, waste, poor working conditions, and environmental harm. These problems are made worse by weak enforcement, legal loopholes, and the lack of coordination between countries, making it hard to hold large, international fashion companies responsible for their actions.

##### **A. The inadequacy of current laws in curbing overproduction and waste**

Existing legislation has struggled to effectively mitigate overproduction and waste in the fast fashion industry. While some regions have introduced measures aimed at promoting sustainability, enforcement is inconsistent, and penalties for non-compliance are insufficient to deter harmful

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<sup>39</sup> SewGuide. (n.d.). Fast Fashion: Problems & Shocking Environmental Impact Stats. Retrieved from <https://sewguide.com/fast-fashion-facts-environmental-impact-statistics/>

<sup>40</sup> Id.

<sup>41</sup> Earth Day. (n.d.). Driven to Shop: The Psychology of Fast Fashion. Retrieved from <https://www.earthday.org/driven-to-shop-the-psychology-of-fast-fashion/>



practices. For instance, the European Union has implemented directives to enhance corporate sustainability reporting, yet the impact on reducing overproduction and waste is limited due to lax enforcement and the voluntary nature of some guidelines.<sup>42</sup> In the United States, the varying state-level initiatives that lack cohesion and federal oversight further complicate efforts to address these issues.<sup>43</sup>

### *B. Loopholes in supply chain accountability and corporate responsibility*

Multinational fashion corporations often exploit legal loopholes to evade accountability for their sustainability practices. The differences of global supply chains enable companies to distance themselves from direct responsibility for labor violations and environmental harm. For example, the practice of subcontracting allows brands to claim ignorance of exploitative labor conditions, as these occur in facilities not directly under their control.<sup>44</sup> Further, existing regulations may not mandate supply chain transparency, allowing companies to lie about the origins of their products and the conditions under which they are produced.<sup>45</sup>

### *C. Lack of global coordination in addressing cross-border fashion industry issues*

The global nature of the fashion industry requires a coordinated global response to effectively tackle its associated challenges. However, differences in legal standards, enforcement mechanisms, and policy priorities across countries inhibit the development of unified legal

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<sup>42</sup> Venuez. (2023). Regulatory Aspects of Supply Chain Transparency in the Fashion Industry. Retrieved from <https://www.venuez.dk/regulatory-aspects-of-supply-chain-transparency-in-the-fashion-industry/>

<sup>43</sup> Trace For Good. (2023). A Guide to US Fashion Regulations: Sustainability and Compliance in 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.traceforgood.com/blog/a-guide-to-us-fashion-regulations-sustainability-and-compliance-in-2024>

<sup>44</sup> Jus Corpus. (2024). The Hidden Cost of Fast Fashion: Legal Accountability for Labor Exploitation. Retrieved from <https://www.juscorpus.com/the-hidden-cost-of-fast-fashion-legal-accountability-for-labor-exploitation/>

<sup>45</sup> Venuez. (2023). Regulatory Aspects of Supply Chain Transparency in the Fashion Industry. Retrieved from <https://www.venuez.dk/regulatory-aspects-of-supply-chain-transparency-in-the-fashion-industry/>



standards. For instance, while the European Union is combating greenwashing and enforcing sustainability claims, other regions are not, which creates a confusing disparity amongst countries.<sup>46</sup> This lack of cohesivity allows corporations to shift operations to jurisdictions with more lenient laws to avoid compliance requirements.<sup>47</sup>

#### D. The need for stricter regulations on greenwashing and misleading sustainability claims

Greenwashing, the practice of making misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a product or service, has become prevalent in the fashion industry, undermining genuine sustainability efforts.<sup>48</sup> In response, certain jurisdictions are beginning to implement stricter regulations. The European Union, for example, plans to ban terms like "climate neutral" and "eco" that rely on unsubstantiated carbon offsetting schemes by 2026.<sup>49</sup> Legal actions against brands such as H&M highlight the increasing scrutiny of sustainability claims and the demand for greater transparency and accountability.<sup>50</sup> Despite these developments, the overall regulatory framework remains fragmented, requiring a more comprehensive and enforceable standard to prevent deceptive practices and promote sustainability in the fashion industry.

### V. Urgent Need for Legal Reform

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<sup>46</sup> The Guardian. (2023). EU Bans 'Misleading' Environmental Claims That Rely on Offsetting. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/17/eu-bans-misleading-environmental-claims-that-rely-on-offsetting>

<sup>47</sup> Le Monde. (2024). Suspensions of Forced Labor and Lack of Transparency Could Complicate Matters for Shein. Retrieved from [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/08/22/suspensions-of-forced-labor-and-lack-of-transparency-could-complicate-matters-for-shein\\_6719751\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/08/22/suspensions-of-forced-labor-and-lack-of-transparency-could-complicate-matters-for-shein_6719751_23.html)

<sup>48</sup> Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Greenwashing. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved April 8, 2025, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/greenwashing>

<sup>49</sup> The Guardian. (2023). EU Bans 'Misleading' Environmental Claims That Rely on Offsetting. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/jan/17/eu-bans-misleading-environmental-claims-that-rely-on-offsetting>

<sup>50</sup> The Sustainable Fashion Forum. (2023). H&M is Being Sued for 'Misleading' Sustainability Marketing. What Does This Mean for the Future of Greenwashing? Retrieved from <https://www.thesustainablefashionforum.com/pages/hm-is-being-sued-for-misleading-sustainability-marketing-what-does-this-mean-for-the-future-of-greenwashing>

The fast fashion industry's rapid production cycles and high-volume manufacturing have led to significant environmental degradation and social issues. Addressing these challenges requires extensive legal reforms to enforce corporate responsibility, strengthen labor protections, combat greenwashing, and promote sustainable practices. Key areas for legal intervention include implementing extended producer responsibility (EPR) policies, enhancing supply chain due diligence, fostering circular economy initiatives, improving consumer education and labeling requirements, and encouraging international cooperation for sustainable fashion regulations.

#### A. Implementing extended producer responsibility (EPR) policies

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is a policy approach that assigns producers the responsibility for the post-consumer stage of their products, including collection, sorting, and recycling.<sup>51</sup> In the textile sector, EPR can provide the necessary funding and infrastructure to manage textile waste effectively.<sup>52</sup> According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), EPR programs in the garments sector have the potential to improve separate collection rates and reduce environmental impacts by altering economic incentives for producers and consumers.<sup>53</sup> The Ellen MacArthur Foundation emphasizes that well-designed EPR policies can drive circular economy outcomes by encouraging circular design, extending product use phases, and addressing pollution impacts.<sup>54</sup>

#### B. Strengthening labor protections and supply chain due diligence

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<sup>51</sup> Brown, A., & Börkey, P. (2024). Extended producer responsibility in the garments sector. OECD Environment Working Papers, No. 253. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/8ee5adb2-en>

<sup>52</sup> Id.

<sup>53</sup> Id.

<sup>54</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2024). The trends and trailblazers creating a circular economy for fashion. <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/articles/the-trends-and-trailblazers-creating-a-circular-economy-for-fashion>

Labor abuse remains prevalent in the global fashion supply chain. Recent research highlights ongoing labor violations in Bangladesh's garment sector, including underpayment and excessive working hours, particularly in subcontracting factories.<sup>55</sup> The European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive aims to hold large businesses accountable for human rights abuses in their supply chains.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the United States has implemented enforcement against forced labor with the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, banning imports of goods produced under forced labor conditions.<sup>57</sup>

### C. Promoting circular economy initiatives and sustainable fashion practices

Transitioning to a circular economy is important for reducing the fashion industries environmental footprint. This approach involves designing products for longevity, facilitating reusing and recycling, and minimizing waste.<sup>58</sup> The Ellen MacArthur Foundation advocates for a systemic redesign of the fashion industry to embed circular economy principles, highlighting emerging trends and innovators leading this transformation.<sup>59</sup> Implementing policies that support circular business models and sustainable fashion practices can significantly mitigate environmental impacts.<sup>60</sup>

### D. Consumer education and stricter labeling requirements

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<sup>55</sup> Financial Times. (2024). Abuses lurk deep in fashion supply chain.

<https://www.ft.com/content/3fb4043b-19af-4a28-bde6-78d1d7d120eb> <sup>56</sup> Id.

<sup>57</sup> Reuters. (2024). Labor rights seeing increased enforcement throughout global supply chains.

<https://www.reuters.com/legal/legalindustry/labor-rights-seeing-increased-enforcement-throughout-global-supply-chains-2024-09-18/>

<sup>58</sup> Id.

<sup>59</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2024). The trends and trailblazers creating a circular economy for fashion.

<https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/articles/the-trends-and-trailblazers-creating-a-circular-economy-for-fashion>

<sup>60</sup> Id.

Empowering consumers with accurate information is crucial for promoting sustainable consumption. Enhancing clothing labels to include details about environmental performance, material efficiency, and care instructions can guide consumers toward more sustainable choices.<sup>61</sup> A study published in the *Journal of Consumer Protection and Food Safety* suggests that improved labeling schemes can influence consumer behavior positively by providing clear information on a product's environmental impact.<sup>62</sup> Standardizing labeling requirements and ensuring transparency can reduce greenwashing and foster informed decision-making.<sup>63</sup> As more consumers express interest in eco-friendly products, the need for clear, accurate, and standardized information about clothing's environmental impact becomes ever more urgent. Current labeling systems often fail to provide consumers with enough relevant information, leading to confusion and, in some cases, misleading perceptions about the sustainability of products. While certain terms such as “eco-friendly” and “sustainable” are commonly used in marketing campaigns, these labels are often unregulated or insufficiently defined, which undermines their credibility.<sup>64</sup> Without a clear understanding of what these terms mean, consumers are more likely to be swayed by marketing claims that do not reflect the true environmental or social impact of a garment.

To address this gap, stricter and more standardized labeling requirements are essential. For instance, the European Union is working on introducing a EU Eco-Label that would provide consumers with standardized information about a product's environmental performance. This label would assess the entire lifecycle of a product, including materials sourcing, manufacturing, use,

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<sup>62</sup> Bauer, B., Watson, D., & Gylling, A. C. (2021). Clothing labels: Why are they important for sustainable consumer behaviour? *Journal of Consumer Protection and Food Safety*, 16(3), 237–247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00003-021-01319-z>

<sup>63</sup> Id.

<sup>64</sup> Furlow, B. (2010). Greenwashing in the fashion industry: Implications for consumers and firms. *Fashion Theory*, 14(3), 305–324. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174110X12759942040257>





and disposal, giving consumers a more holistic view of the environmental impact of their purchases.<sup>65</sup> Such labels could include data on carbon footprints, water usage, and the extent to which the garment is made from renewable or recycled materials. By establishing clear criteria, these labels can help consumers make more informed purchasing decisions while discouraging brands from making vague or exaggerated sustainability claims. Scholars emphasize that such eco-labeling can not only inform consumers but also influence market behavior and create incentives for companies to adopt more sustainable practices.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to the adoption of more a rigorous labeling systems, consumer education must focus on a deeper understanding of circular economy principles and how these can be applied to fashion. Circular economy models promote designing clothing for longevity, repairability, and recyclability, thereby reducing waste and minimizing resource extraction.<sup>67</sup> Educating consumers on these principles could empower them to choose products that are not only labeled as sustainable but are also designed to contribute to a more sustainable and circular fashion ecosystem. For example, educational campaigns that inform consumers about the environmental benefits of buying second-hand clothing or supporting brands that offer take-back programs for recycling old garments can help shift consumer behavior toward more sustainable choices.<sup>68</sup>

A successful labeling and education initiative most likely requires collaboration between governments, regulatory bodies, and fashion brands. Governments should set clear standards for sustainable fashion labeling and enforce these regulations, ensuring that labels provide truthful and

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<sup>65</sup> European Commission. (2020). Circular economy action plan: For a cleaner and more competitive Europe. European Union.

<sup>66</sup> Hartmann, M., Böhm, G., & Rauter, R. (2019). Sustainability reporting in the fashion industry: A critical review of the literature. *Journal of Business Research*, 101, 450-461. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.04.036>

<sup>67</sup> Id.

<sup>68</sup> Ellen MacArthur Foundation. (2020). A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future.

transparent information.<sup>69</sup> Fashion brands must take responsibility for the accuracy of their sustainability claims and support educational efforts that highlight the environmental costs of overconsumption and unsustainable production practices. Retailers can also play a key role in raising awareness by displaying sustainable options more prominently and offering consumers educational materials that explain the significance of the sustainability labels on the products they sell.<sup>70</sup>

Ultimately, increasing consumer awareness and promoting stricter labeling requirements can create a more transparent market that holds fashion brands accountable. As consumers become more educated about the environmental and social implications of their purchasing decisions, their demand for genuinely sustainable products is hopefully going to increase. In turn, this can lead to more significant changes in the industry, with brands responding to consumer pressure and boycotts by improving their practices and adopting more sustainable business models. However, this shift will require sustained efforts from all, including lawmakers, brands, and consumers, to ensure that fashion industry regulations keep pace with growing demand for sustainability.<sup>71</sup>

#### E. International cooperation for sustainable fashion regulations

Given the global nature of the fashion industry, international collaboration is essential to establish cohesive and effective regulations. Disparities in legal standards and enforcement across countries allow corporations to exploit regulatory gaps.<sup>72</sup> Harmonizing sustainability regulations,

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<sup>69</sup> Niinimäki, K., Hassi, L., & Rissanen, T. (2020). The role of circular fashion in mitigating climate change: A case study of Finland. *Journal of Fashion Technology & Textile Engineering*, 8(4), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2329-9568.1000356>

<sup>70</sup> Beard, N. (2020). *Sustainability in fashion: A global perspective*. Springer.

<sup>71</sup> Joy, A., Sherry, J. F., Venkatesh, A., Wang, J., & Chan, R. (2012). Fast fashion, sustainability, and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. *Fashion Theory*, 16(3), 273-295. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174112X13340742922942>

<sup>72</sup> Id.

such as EPR schemes and labor protections, can prevent regulatory arbitrage and promote uniform standards.<sup>73</sup> The OECD highlights the importance of aligning EPR policies across jurisdictions to maximize effectiveness and efficiency in managing textile waste.<sup>74</sup> International cooperation can facilitate the sharing of best practices and the development of comprehensive frameworks to address the challenges among the fashion industry.

Thus, addressing the environmental and social harms of the fast fashion industry requires urgent and comprehensive legal reforms. Implementing EPR policies, strengthening labor protections, promoting circular economy initiatives, enhancing consumer education, and encouraging international cooperation are critical steps toward creating a sustainable and ethical fashion industry.

## VII. Conclusion

This paper has examined the fast fashion industry's detrimental environmental and social impacts, including excessive textile waste, significant carbon emissions, water pollution, and widespread labor exploitation. It has also highlighted the inadequacy of current legal frameworks in curbing these harms, due to fragmented regulation, weak enforcement, and the globalized nature of fashion supply chains. Despite some progress, such as the eco-design mandates in the EU, fair wage laws in California, and anti-greenwashing guidelines, many of these initiatives remain

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<sup>73</sup> Id.

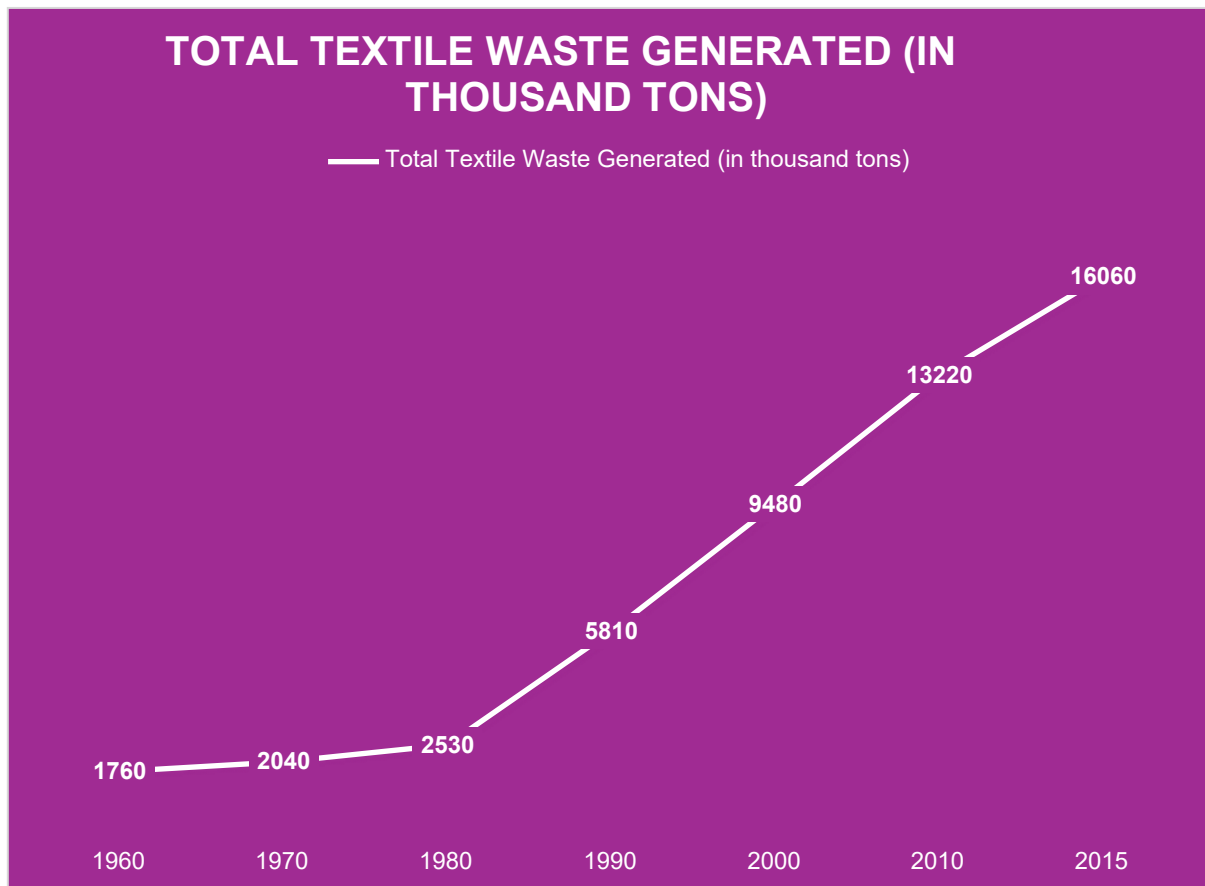
<sup>74</sup> Brown, A., & Börkey, P. (2024). Extended producer responsibility in the garments sector. OECD Environment Working Papers, No. 253. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/8ee5adb2-en>



limited in scope and effectiveness. While legal intervention plays a critical role in transforming the fast fashion industry toward sustainability and ethical accountability, effective regulation can incentivize circular business models, mandate corporate transparency, and protect workers from exploitation. Laws that hold brands accountable for their environmental impact and labor practices are essential to counterbalance the unchecked market forces driving overproduction and overconsumption. Here I related how policymakers must adopt comprehensive legislation that includes extended producer responsibility (EPR), mandatory supply chain due diligence, and standardized environmental labeling. Governments should also work together to harmonize sustainability standards and close legal loopholes that allow corporations to escape accountability. There is a place for true corporate responsibility to move beyond performative sustainability and embedding environmental and social ethics into their core operations through fair wages, responsible sourcing, and long-term investment in sustainable materials. There is a place for consumers to play a role by supporting transparent and ethical brands, demanding greater accountability, and resisting the pressure of disposable fashion cycles, they can help shift industry norms and expectations.

Looking to the future, the future of sustainable fashion lies in coordinated international regulations being implemented. Global legal frameworks must evolve to address new challenges posed by ultra-fast fashion and emerging technologies, including AI-driven trend forecasting and automated production. Regulatory innovation should also anticipate the growing market for secondhand, rental, and recycled clothing models, encouraging circularity at scale.





Source: <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/textiles-material-specific-data>

Chart generated by Chat GPT.