

SUSTAINABLE FASHION - TEACHERS' GUIDE

Introduction

21st century fashion is accessible and marketed to all, including children, on an unprecedented scale. A combination of persuasive advertising, easy availability and extremely low prices makes buying new outfits on a regular basis both irresistible and an everyday part of modern life. In November 2020 critics criticised the online retailer Pretty Little Thing for offering [a dress for sale for only 8p](#).

This is part of the 'fast fashion' phenomenon. Fast fashion has been defined as '[cheap, trendy clothing, that samples ideas from the catwalk or celebrity culture and turns them into garments in high street stores at breakneck speed](#).' Some elements of this highly profitable business, such as the democratisation of socially exclusive and extremely expensive high fashion, may appear desirable. However fast fashion comes with a high price in environmental damage and human exploitation.

This resource explores the history and impacts of the global cotton garment industry, proposes alternatives to fast fashion and suggests campaigning young people could do in school or college. However, the resource recognises the strong appeal of fast fashion and, whilst asking young people to become better informed and explore wider choices as conscious consumers, it does not suggest that followers of fast fashion are 'wrong'.



A garment factory in Vietnam
Photo: Eleanor Farmer/Oxfam, 2016.

The impacts of fast fashion

There are five areas where fast fashion – in which clothing becomes a quick turnover disposable product – is having serious detrimental impacts on the environment and human rights.

1. Growing cotton requires large amounts of water, pesticides and fertiliser. This diverts scarce water resources from other uses and seriously degrades the environment.
2. Labour rights in cotton farming and manufacturing cotton clothing are frequently poorly regulated and low. Modern slavery, child labour, forced overtime and a lack of health and safety are frequent, despite the efforts of many retailers to enforce regulation. Set against this, factory work has lifted millions of people out of absolute poverty around the world – particularly in China – and the clothing retail sector provides many jobs in post-industrial economies.
3. Manufacturing garments frequently involves high carbon emissions, especially in countries which still rely on coal-fired energy. Some stages of the manufacturing process, for example dyeing, bleaching and the artificial ageing or ‘stonewashing’ of fabrics such as denim, have high environmental impacts, for example wastewater.
4. Transporting garments from factory to store is a massive global logistical operation with significant carbon emissions.
5. Disposing of unwanted garments, frequently in landfill or by incineration, generates further emissions and environmental damage.



Oxfam promotes sustainable fashion at the Glastonbury Festival, 2019
Photo: Sam Baggette/Oxfam

However, it's unimaginable to live in a world without clothing, and fashion provides work, pleasure and a sense of identity to millions of people. Cotton is a highly flexible and adaptable fabric, suitable for a wide

range of uses and easily manufactured. But, as with many other areas of the modern economy, the benefits of the 'take – make – dispose' linear model of fashion production should be weighed up against the damage it causes. As more and more garments are produced and sold, they are worn less frequently and thrown away more quickly. [This is unsustainable in a world experiencing climate breakdown](#) (see pg. 18).

In 2018 UN Climate Change (the UNFCCC) calculated that total greenhouse gas emissions from textiles production, 1.2 billion tonnes annually, were more than those of all international flights and maritime shipping combined. By some estimates, textile sector emissions are expected to rise by [more than a further 60 percent before 2030](#).

In the UK it is estimated that consumers send 11 million items of clothing to landfill every week, adding up to 300,000 tonnes of waste clothing every year. The average lifetime of an item of clothing in the UK is estimated at 2.2 years, with many fast fashion 'party' garments having much shorter lifetimes. The value of unused items of clothing in UK wardrobes is estimated at [£30 billion](#). Fashion is not unique in this regard. 'Take – make – dispose' is an economic model used in many other sectors of modern manufacturing (eg: electrical goods and toys). Instead of repairing a broken item as before, we frequently throw it away and buy a replacement with all the associated environmental impacts.

Oxfam, sustainability and Secondhand September

Since the first Oxfam shop opened in 1948, Oxfam has raised funds for its work by recycling and re-selling pre-loved clothing. Oxfam's Wastesaver facility in Batley ensures that no clothing donations to Oxfam ever go to landfill.

Many sustainable fashion school actions will work even better in partnership with the local Oxfam shop. You can find the address and contact details of your closest shop [here](#). Alternatively contact John McLaverty at jmclaverty@oxfam.org.uk for more information about local opportunities.



Sienna Miller promotes Secondhand September for Oxfam, September 2021
Photo: Oxfam GB

Every **September** Oxfam asks the public to pledge not to buy new clothes for one month and only buy pre-loved garments. This is **Secondhand September**. Find out more about Secondhand September [here](#) and pledging to go secondhand will also work equally well at any other time of the year.

The Resources

This pack contains the following resources

1. This **Teachers Guide** providing background information and links to additional materials.
2. The **PowerPoint** presentation outlines the history and impacts of cotton production. The script may be adapted so young people present it in their own voice. Additional slides may be added at the end to introduce a school action.
3. The **Life of a T-Shirt** workshop activity explores the different stages of producing, selling and disposing of a cotton t-shirt, asks young people to rank the environmental impacts of each of these stages and then draw conclusions.
4. The **Action Guide** suggests campaign actions
5. A collection of **Infographics** to be printed and used in displays, posters, worksheets and social media.
6. A collection of **Pledge cards** to be printed and used in school campaign actions



An Anthony Burrill screenprint for Oxfam
Photo: Dunja Opalko/Oxfam

School campaigning during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented restrictions on the everyday life of schools and the campaign activities young people undertake. However, we believe that campaigning and civic engagement during the pandemic are good for young people's (and adults') wellbeing and sense of empowerment. Campaigning should always be **safe** and **carried out according to the COVID-19 regulations and advice in place at the time**. Therefore,

- The materials in this pack are suitable for classroom use, blended learning or home learning with minimal adaptation.
- The activities may be completed face-to-face in school or online and returned to school
- Where it's possible we encourage young people to meet their MPs and other decision makers. These meetings are an important element of civic education and youth empowerment. However face-to-face meetings with MPs and public visits to Parliament **have not been possible** during the pandemic. Therefore, as an alternative, we suggest writing and, where possible, arranging online meetings. Most MPs websites include information about arranging an online meeting.

MORE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Waste Resources Action - www.wrap.org.uk

Labour Behind the Label - <https://labourbehindthelabel.org/>

Environmental Audit Select Committee (2019) – 'Fixing Fashion: Clothing Consumption and Sustainability' - <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/1952/1952.pdf>

Quantis (2018) – 'Measuring Fashion: Insights from the Environmental Impact of the Global Apparel and Footwear Industries' - <https://quantis-intl.com/report/measuring-fashion-report/>

UN Environment Program (2018) – 'Putting the Brakes on Fast Fashion' - www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/putting-brakes-fast-fashion

Ellen Macarthur Foundation – Schools and college resources (age 12-19)
www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/resources/learn/schools-colleges-resources

Ellen Macarthur Foundation (2017) – 'A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future'
<https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/publications/A-New-Textiles-Economy-Full-Report-Updated-1-12-17.pdf>

United Nations Climate Change (2018) – 'Fashion Industry, UN Pursue Climate Action for Sustainable Development' <https://unfccc.int/news/fashion-industry-un-pursue-climate-action-for-sustainable-development>

Fashion Revolution (2019) – 'How to Be A Fashion Revolutionary' - <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/how-to-be-a-fashion-revolutionary/>

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