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Fast Fashion:  
The Hole in Humanity that Must be Fixed

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19 May 2022

### **Abstract**

Clothing has long since been an integral part of the human experience. On a basic level, clothes provide protection from the elements and the environment. However, as time has progressed, clothes have evolved from a simple necessity to symbols of culture, job status, sacred moments and artistic choice. More recently, with the rise of industrialization, has come a society less concerned with the necessity of clothes, and more enamored with their marketability and capitalist yield. With the birth of fast fashion came a linear business model focused on quick product turnover, and low quality garments in favor of maximizing profit. Although this model works well, in part, by advertising new and exciting trends towards women in the global north, it leeches off of the labor and energy of women in and/or from socio-economically disadvantaged regions. This paper aims to explore the implications of such processes on garment and second-hand trade working women from financially disadvantaged locations. In addition, I provide possible solutions for how business and governments can rectify their part in this corrupted system. Finally, I provide ways that individuals in the global north can do their part to elicit change.

**Keywords:** fashion, sustainability, textiles, clothes, garment workers, Bangladesh, second hand market, kayayei, Kantamanto, circular fashion model, solutions

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Humans have always been taught that our basic needs include food, water, shelter, sleep and clothing. You rarely have human history without finding some form of clothing attached to the individual in question. Clothes have protected us from the elements on the basic level, but inevitably have become so much more. Clothing allows one to express their individuality, and depending on the person, can even be a means of artistic freedom. Clothes are also used more practically. Different institutions have claimed different clothing designs to portray a certain image or convey a sense of unity. We dress ourselves to show status and class, but also to let others know where we come from. Furthermore, different events and environments require different outfits, and there are often designated times and places for different textiles.

It's no secret that clothes are a critical part of the human experience. However, what was once a means of survival has been contorted by major corporations and governments into a neo-liberal capitalist nightmare in the 21st Century. Not only have these major systems turned the textiles on our backs into a money grab for a few very wealthy and powerful individuals, but they are critically compromising the health and environmental stability of the planet and its inhabitants. Most recently, a study proclaimed that

The fashion industry is responsible each year for emitting 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gasses; releasing half a million tonnes of microplastics into the sea; using 132 million tonnes of coal, 9000 million cubic meters of water and a quarter of the world's toxic chemicals. It also creates billions of tonnes of non-recyclable textile waste (Mizrachi et al., 2022).

These statistics have catastrophic effects on our biosphere, including the Earth's functions, processes and animals. Despite these jarring numbers, corporations continue to abuse and exploit the supply chain for profit. They get away with this by pushing a pro-consumption narrative through media, advertising and social norms that encourage consumer ignorance. Furthermore,

governments have not collectively put regulations and laws in place to prohibit planned obsolescence, poor waste management and other wrongdoings by said corporations. What's more, because of these mishaps by those higher in power, this has generally left the average person completely unaware of how negatively impactful their clothing consumption practices are for themselves, other people and everything around them.

It's no doubt that contemporary capitalism thrives off of the ignorance of its consumers. Most people in developed economies have lost touch with their clothes - dissociating garments in their closet from the person that made them and the sources of the textile fibers. Somehow it is accepted to be meticulous about the process and perfection of a product, rather than the safety, compensation and health of those who have made it. Ultimately, the current fashion production model would not be possible without the blatant abuse and manipulation of exploited laborers (mostly women and girls), agricultural workers, undocumented immigrants, and nations in the Global South.

It is eye-opening to consider the "top down" chain of impact that is a result of these fast fashion schemes, to which garment and labor workers take the most devastating falls. Appallingly, brands mask their response to these mishaps as taking responsibility for their detriments. In reality, they are simply saving themselves as a last ditch effort. To make matters worse, they never compensate workers for their mishaps, turned off from the idea of authentic accountability and smaller profits. "Approximately 60 million people are employed in the fashion value chain, many of which are women who do not enjoy the prosperity of their employers, the world's most profitable fashion brands" (Blum 15).

Ironically fashion is often marketed under the guise of empowering women to express their individuality, whilst also keeping female garment workers at the bottom of the

socioeconomic ladder. The garment industry maintains the power and status of huge corporations and governments, which are largely composed of men. Out of the 10 highest ranked fashion industry players in 2022, none of them are women. Their yearly earnings range from \$11 billion to \$180 billion (Warren and Hadden 2020). What's more, these men all hold positions of power, whether it's in the form of haute couture or fast fashion retail CEOs, designers and/or heirs.

On the contrary, “one in six individuals who are employed work in the fashion industry, and 80 percent of garment workers are female. On the consumer side, millennial women spend 226 percent more on clothing per year than their male counterparts” (Oakes 2020). Even worse, the vast majority of these women do not even scrape the surface of what their wealthy male counterparts in the industry have accrued. Therefore, the industry that is made out to benefit women, economically and socially. Exploring the harmful effects of an industry that figuratively and literally is carried on the backs of women is the first step towards eliciting change.

### **The Gore of Garment Work**

At first glance, fast fashion may seem like a good thing. Although the quality of clothing is cheaper and less durable, it is also more financially attainable to the masses, and allows them to participate in style and beauty trends, just as any celebrity would. Clothing is also easily attainable in this ready-to-wear model because it is manufactured and shipped to the customer much quicker than made-to-fit pieces would be. So, it seems like a win-win situation; consumers get to keep up with the latest trends and brands get their money. However, this ideology leaves out the “middle men,” or rather, women, that help make this a possibility. These key players are female garment workers from and/or living in economically disadvantaged countries who are

abused by the system that so desperately needs them. For these women, it is rarely a matter of winning, but more so one of losing.

Perhaps one of the most harrowing examples of labor manipulation in the garment industry is that of Bangladesh. The country is one of the primary fashion offshoring sites, globally. Female garment workers come to work in factory hubs such as the capital, Dhaka, because of their low economic status. Many of these women are a part of the rural middle class, but in actuality, just barely hover over extreme poverty. Middle class families usually manage sharecroppers, those of peasant class that farm plots of land in exchange for a share of those crops. Because of societal classist beliefs, and fear of increased economic hardship, those within the middle class feel pressured to stay within it.

The women... have less control over the finances (particularly if they are younger). Despite their lack of cash, social convention prevents them from seeking work as sharecroppers. It is not surprising, therefore, that these women are recruited as garment factory workers by industrialists, who have created "socially acceptable" work for them (Ahmed 2004).

Bangladeshi women have historically been designated to domestic and more "feminine" labor practices that can be harnessed into garment making power. Oftentimes, this does not fare well for these women because garment shop managers enforce these social gender norms to promote complacency. Additionally, because most of the women there are in this same condition, factory managers see them as easily replaceable. This, combined with the financial stress of their daily lives, often leaves women walking a fine line between factory abuse and unemployment. So, in order to avoid going completely hungry, losing one's home and not being able to provide for one's family, these women put up with a myriad of issues in the workplace.

The physical nature of factories in Bangladesh tends to be negative. Many of the buildings are constructed quickly, and without the proper infrastructure to support large scale

textile operations. The Rana Plaza disaster is one of the most harrowing examples of this. Occurring on April 24th, 2013 in Dhaka, the disaster had a known mortality count of 1,132 and some 2,500 injured workers (“The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath”). Many of the dead were lost in the rubble of the disaster, and many victims still suffer from long term effects of the tragedy, such as PTSD. Although the building was not in good condition to support the weight and technology that it housed, there was no governmental or union based pushback to fix the issue. In addition, despite an explosion cracking the building the day before it collapsed, work continued the next day (Thomas 5).

Another one of the major issues in Bangladesh garment manufacturing are the abysmal worker’s wages. While the cheap labor costs are economically beneficial from the viewpoint of fashion brands, their laborers have the opposite sentiment. At that time that Rana Plaza came crashing down, “Bangladesh’s minimum wage was \$38 a month... or one third of a living wage,” and so missing work was out of the question for most, if not all, of the employees (Thomas 57). Although the pushback from the event was globally massive, wages have increased, but not by much. In 2021, it was reported that workers were paid a meager \$95 a month, and the figure likely has not changed significantly since then (Ganbold 2021). On the contrary, another report found that the gross living wage in Dhaka is 21,648Tk (\$255) (“Living Wage Update: March 2021”), which shows how stark the gap between justified and normalized wages for these women continues to be.

### **The Donation Dilemma**

As a society, we have been taught to donate our unwanted/ unused clothing to charities and thrift stores. There are two categories that fit into this activity- those that donate with intention/care and those that do not. In either scenario, once the clothing items are out of sight,

they're also out of mind. Most of the time, those that partake in giving clothing away, assume that everything lended will end up being useful to someone. However, many people subconsciously do not think about what they're donating, where it ends up, or what condition it is in, just as long as it is gone. This can have catastrophic consequences on those on the receiving end.

While giving clothes away was not always a major issue, with the ever growing over consumption of poor quality clothing, this is no longer the case. "Across the United States, 23.8 billion pounds of clothes and shoes are thrown into the garbage each year, about 73 pounds per person" (Cline 24). Despite these staggering numbers, many may at least find comfort in the amount of clothes that are donated and end up in the closet of another well-deserved owner, Right? Wrong- as it turns out "...charities sell only 20 to 25 percent on average of what we donate through their thrift shops" (Cline 24, 25). It would simply be too much inventory for second hand shops to sell every item that they get. What's more, not everything donated to these thrift stores is of re-selling quality. This leaves the question of where those residual donations end up, and how they affect their recipients. The rest of the clothing is destined for different fates, but this all depends on the quality, condition and cleanliness of the items.

Kantamanto is a grave example of the detrimental destiny of many of those unsold donations. The largest second hand clothing market in West Africa, it is divided into stalls that harbor clothes for sale and tens of thousands of worker-led operations. Donated/unwanted clothes from other countries are cycled in through an import section and then re-sold in the export area to visiting consumers. The Ghana based market was once a prime representation of sustainability. However, the core values of the market and its people have since been blemished, not by the Ghanians themselves, but the disregard for moderation in the global north.

One hindrance on workers in Kantamanto falls on the clothing resellers. Many of them are women who accept imports in the form of large bales. The packaged clothing cubes always contain an unknown quantity and assortment of items that resellers must sift through in hopes that profit awaits them. Resellers in Kantamanto put an investment down on a bale, but risk losing money based on what they receive.

Of course, resellers don't go in completely blind with their purchases. They will often try to "hack the system" by using tried and true methods for successful profit turnover. Before fast fashion became such a powerhouse, this risk was much lower because the overall quality of clothing was much better, and imports to Kantamanto were less frequent. However, this has since changed for the worse.

Retailers can choose what type of item they want and what country the bale is from ... but there is no peeking inside until they have purchased the bale... Some bales might have enough first selection pieces to cover the price of another bale -- to stay in the game -- and go home with money to spend. Some bales might cost retailers everything (Skinner 2019).

Therefore, with the increasingly heightened pace of purchases and lower quality of clothes, more of them end up being carelessly donated to second hand markets like Kantamanto. What's more, because people view clothes as disposable, they become increasingly more apathetic to what they donate and who will receive it. Clothing may arrive torn, stained/soiled with fluids (many times bodily) and/or out of style. Of course, if those in the global north do not want these items, neither do those in Ghana, no matter their economic status (Press and Ricketts 42:29)

Therefore, clothing is sorted based on the selectability by a consumer and relies heavily on the style and physical condition of the item. Garments are separated into 3 categories labeled first, second and third selection. In 2019, first and third selection clothes, on average, were priced at GHC20 (US\$4), and GHC3, respectively (Skinner 2019). Therefore, a reseller would make the

bulk of her earnings from higher quality clothes. The less high quality clothes there are circulating through the market, the harder it is for a reseller to have a good turnover for the next week.

Another one of the major issues surrounding Kantamanto is its use of kayayei. Kayayei is a term for female head porters that perform hours of long, back breaking work to earn a meager wage. Although males can be porters too, due to specified gender roles “No transport is used because, in the eyes of the public, the use of trucks is too laborious and masculine for women” (Opare 2004). This leaves kayayei to carry heavy loads on their heads, multiple times a day. To top it all off, wages are incredibly meager. Female porters typically earn a wage of anywhere from 27 cents to 66 cents per trip, and travel anywhere from 500-1000 meters per trip (Skinner 2019).

This is especially concerning considering the fact that many kayayei are little girls. A study done in the Accra-Tema metropolitan market area found that 45% of kayayei in their sample were between the ages of 16-30, and a shocking 7% of them were under the age of 15. The girls also had virtually little to no education. A whopping 67.3% completed no schooling, and 32.1% only finished primary school (Opare 2004).

Forced into the profession due to socioeconomic pressures and gender roles, these women and children often find themselves facing incredulous injury and bodily deterioration. Trips throughout the market are long and arduous; the kayayei must weave through crowded spaces and people, all whilst braving weather conditions, long hours, hunger and thirst. What’s more, these textile masses often surpass the weight of the carriers themselves. It is often in these cases that bales break the necks of workers, killing them on the spot (Skinner 2019). Additionally, kayayei are often mothers that must juggle their work with looking after their kids.

This responsibility often manifests in carrying their children on their backs, so if a kayayoo accidentally lets a bale fall backwards, the child dies (Press and Ricketts 22:35).

The common theme amongst all of these instances of abused female workers in the fashion industry is the search for opportunity in spaces where there are seemingly no other options. These women are coerced into their situations by racial, economic, classist and societal pressures. Despite these women and children being the backbone of the industry, they are relentlessly exploited to the benefit of white male executives, governmental officials, and lesser pawns in the system, such as factory managers. In order for change to come, accountability by those in power must be taken. The next couple sections will discuss ways that this can be accomplished.

### **Brand/Retailer and Government Solutions**

Fashion supply chains that birth the stories described in this paper are manifestations of the linear fashion model. This Industrial Revolution created system runs on the assumption that resources are unlimited, and is inherently “...hungry for resources and profits” (Blum 14). The BoF Sustainability Index rates many brands and retailers on their level of transparency in these supply chains, finding that most do poorly in it. Ultimately, “fashions global and extended supply chains are murky. Most brands don’t know where the raw materials they use are made. This allows human right’s abuses to go undetected...” (The Business of Fashion 0:41). In other words, the prioritization of ever increasing profitability combined with brand ignorance leaves women without power taking the largest falls.

Therefore, brands must take ownership of every step in the manufacturing process. A proposed method of doing this is the circular fashion model. This template is a means of taking “accountability, traceability and ownership of the entire life cycle of a product... along its supply

chain that is vital for all producers of fashion apparel and accessories” (Blum 20). Composed of five steps; “create,” “make,” “market,” “use/care” and “renew,” it covers the major components of producing a product. What’s more, all of these steps tie into each other by forming a never ending cycle through the consumer market. Since creation is the first step, brands should discover a proof of concept for their product that conceptualizes the best ways to compensate and treat their workers, long before the materials hit manufacturing floors.

Until the circular model can be universally employed, improvements to the linear model could be favorable instead. Firstly, ensuring living factory wages for garment workers can be established through a series of steps. One of the first methods that a brand should employ is determining the living wage in the country that they base their offshoring (Cline 288). This is because living wages are dependent on a variety of factors, with the most notable being the ability of a worker to provide for themselves and their family, comfortably. This can vary depending on the average expenses for goods and living arrangements at a specific location.

The next step would be to establish policies that contractually obligate brands and their partners to maintain increased wages. Governmental policies that create “national minimum wages that equate to living wages” could be made as well (“A living wage for workers”). This solution ensures that all employees, regardless of what brand they manufacture for, receive fair pay. The Alta Gracia factory, which manufactures collegiate clothing merchandise and sportswear, is a prime example of how garment workers can be treated humanely.. Surprisingly, the factory is a pioneer in being founded upon a union that ensures living wages for all who join the workforce (Cline 288). Another facet of this step would be for brands to create long lasting and genuine relationships with contractors, suppliers and other offshoring partners. This

formation of a communicative bond could facilitate respect and minimize the chances of worker exploitation unbeknownst to the brand.

Unions are also a major part of fair working conditions. In many instances of workplace abuse, societal norms and lack of education prevent women from creating these types of organizations. Although there is power in numbers, most of these women don't take advantage, for fear of unemployment and/or blacklisting. Brands must take accountability for their workers health and safety by requiring the acceptance of unions at their offshoring sites. These unions and policies should also be enforced by employing unbiased inspectors to verify that conditions have not reverted/ never changed to begin with.

### **What can you and I Do?**

While there is groundbreaking work being done on industrial and systemic levels, these innovations are not possible for the everyday individual. However, we all have the power and responsibility to make whatever contributions we can to improving the fashion industry. Fortunately, there are several ways that this can be done.

Firstly, understanding one's purchasing power is key to a better fashion industry since capitalism is fueled by supply, demand and money. Although brands, especially large ones, yield corporate power, they are still at the mercy of their customers in regards to profits. Ergo, a consumer's purchasing power can manifest in the form of what brands/designers consumers send their money to, where & when they retract their support, and what products they actually purchase. For example, pressuring brands to keep up with innovators by contacting them directly about products that you like, but do not live up to ethical standards is effective. If enough people do it, brands will change the outcome accordingly (Cline 199).

Purchasing power also comes in the form of shopping with intention, instead of trying to follow trends and feeding into quantity over quality. The normalized behavior of overconsumption in our society has burdened us. This is especially necessary because “Americans think they wear 43 of their wardrobes... [when] in fact we wear 18 percent,” so adding to the clutter in our wardrobes only hinders improvement (Cline 17). Consumers should stop to think if they really need an item of clothing before purchasing it. Inspecting a garment for manufacturing quality, such as stitching evenness, clipped threads, look and hand-feel of the fabric used, etc., are conscious ways to stop an impulse buy.

One could take their purchasing power to the next level by forming and/or joining a fashion activism group. Activism is a phenomenal way to elicit change because, through these groups, participants can peacefully protest, create campaigns, contact brands on behalf of a larger population, and more. The more widespread an activism group is, whether that be through the number of members and/or chapters, the more effective it can be. For example, before the Rana Plaza incident, only two fashion brands had signed the The Accord on Fire and Building Safety. The legally binding contract pushes brands to maintain/improve factory conditions for their workers in Bangladesh. Fascinatingly, after the building crumpled, global pressure prompted over 200 brands to sign, on top of the initial two (Press and Akter 33:22). Brands knew that if they did not show their support for improved working environments, that consumers would stop supporting them.

Arguably, one of the most sustainable and effective ways that individuals can help remedy the fashion industry is to learn to care for and to keep what they already have in their closet. Once again, fast fashion thrives off of a mentality that views clothing as easily disposable and replaceable. However, clothes are a basic human need, and they are meant to be worn.

Consequently, although most of us do not know who made our clothes or how, we should learn to cherish the process and the product anyway.

### **Things will Get Better**

Evidently, it is not innate, to use and abuse the resources and people of this planet. There was a time when the production of clothing was slow and intentional. People had a connection to those that made their garments, and clothes were passed down and recycled for generations. Nevertheless, like many detrimental practices that we have adopted as a species, fast fashion and overconsumption are learned behaviors. As Liz Ricketts points out, "...excess is not an indigenous concept, excess is something that has to be taught..." (Press and Ricketts 13:21). Yet, at the hands of greed, manipulation and ignorance, we partake in fashion gluttony without a moment's notice.

It's no secret that unlearning on an individual and global scale will be slow and painful. Therefore, in order to move past our linear habits and adopt circular ones, we must collectively and willingly make the effort towards redefining our relationship with clothes. This means embracing all of the aforementioned solutions into a three point endeavor that connects governmental, corporational and individual efforts. Without the cooperation of all three of these facets, a sustainable economy cannot establish and maintain its footing.

While the information presented in this thesis is heartbreaking and appalling, simply reading and feeling sad does not elicit change. It is important to take the knowledge presented here, and fight for progress. As a society, we can harness emotions of anger and frustration towards actively seeking change. Only then can we inhabit a world that celebrates the women working to grant us the clothes on our backs, instead of harming them.

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