

## Sustainable Fashion - Teachers Guide

### Introduction

21<sup>st</sup> 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 to many and an everyday part of modern life. In November 2020 the online retailer Pretty Little Thing was criticised 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 clothing industry, proposes alternatives to fast fashion and suggests campaigning young people could do in school or college to raise awareness. 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’.



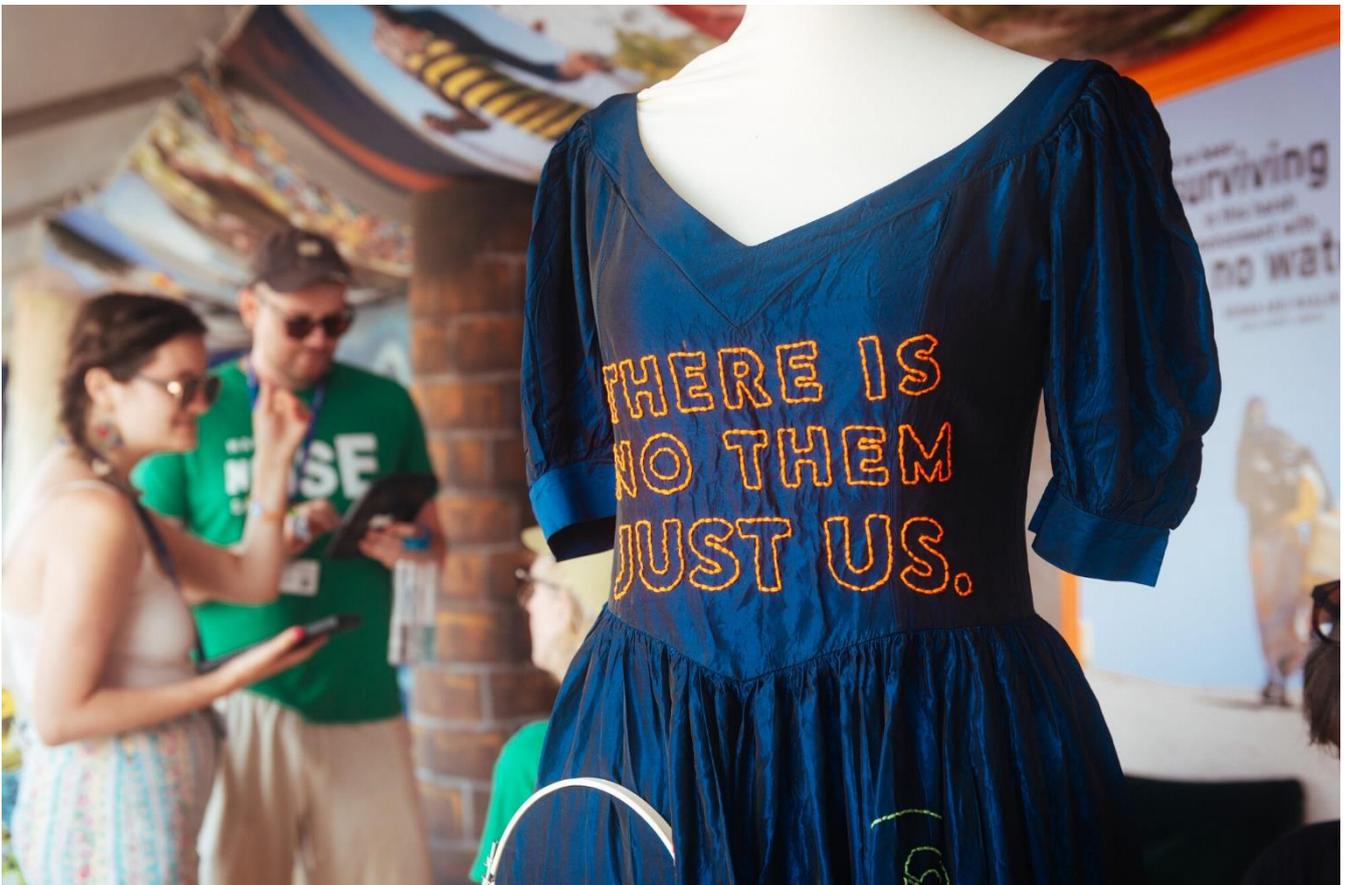
Textile workers at work in a garment factory in Savar, Bangladesh. Oxfam’s What She Makes campaign demands big clothing brands pay the women who make our clothes a living wage.

*Photo: Fabeha Monir/Oxfam. March 2023.*

## 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 and wages in cotton farming and manufacturing are frequently poorly regulated and low. Many workers are poorly paid women. 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 jobs in many countries around the world.
3. Manufacturing clothing 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 such as wastewater.
4. Transporting clothing from factory to store is a massive global logistical operation with significant carbon emissions.
5. Disposing of unwanted clothing, frequently in landfill or by incineration and increasingly often overseas, generates further emissions and environmental damage.



A pre-loved dress on display at the Glastonbury Festival 2023. Members of the public were invited to embroider climate-themed patterns and messages onto the dress.

*Photo: Sam Baggette/Oxfam. June 2023*

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 clothing is produced and sold, items 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 Second Hand 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 means that almost no donations to Oxfam are incinerated. The exceptions are items which are too soiled to be handled.

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](mailto:jmclaverty@oxfam.org.uk) for more information about local opportunities.

Every **September** Oxfam asks the public to pledge not to buy new clothes for one month and only buy pre-loved garments. This is **Second Hand September**. Find out more about Second Hand September [here](#). And going second hand will work equally well at any time of the year.



Oxfam promotional posters for Second Hand September 2023

Photo: Oxfam GB

## 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. It 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



A School visit to the Oxfam Superstore, Cowley, Oxford.

Photo: Andy Aitchison/Oxfam

## Additional information and resources

Oxfam (2022) – ‘Sustainable Fashion – A Guide for Teachers’ -

<https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/classroom-resources/sustainable-fashion-a-guide-for-teachers/>

Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) - [www.wrap.org.uk](http://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](http://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/putting-brakes-fast-fashion)

Ellen Macarthur Foundation – Teaching Resources (School, College & Higher Education)

<https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/resources/education-and-learning/teaching-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](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 & British Council (2019) – ‘How to be a Fashion Revolutionary’ -

<https://www.fashionrevolution.org/how-to-be-a-fashion-revolutionary/>

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