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Fast Fashion and Sustainability: The Effects of Low Price

Fast fashion has taken the world by storm. People everywhere run to stores like Target, H&M, and Forever 21 to buy cute, trendy clothes for an affordable price. But, despite the low cost of outfits, the manufacturing of them comes with a price that consumers themselves do not face, instead detrimentally affecting the workers who produce these items. In Dana Thomas's *Fashionopolis: Why What We Wear Matters*, Stacy Flynn stated after visiting a subcontractor in China, "A guy was smoking right in front of it, where it says, 'Flammable' … It was grim- the land of the living dead. All the rules were being broken. It opened my eyes to what low price does" (189). Because of the quick and cheap production of clothing, workers face low wages, unsafe working conditions, injury, and even death. To improve the conditions of workers and make consumers less reliant on the mistreatment of workers for trendy clothing, people can buy from slow fashion and rightshoring brands, as well as support legislation to protect workers' rights.

When considering fast fashion, which is the production of trendy, inexpensive garments at quick speeds, it's also important to consider offshoring, rightshoring, and slow fashion. To decrease labor costs and boost revenue, companies turned to offshoring and began to move parts of their business overseas to countries with cheap labor (Thomas 4). Rightshoring, on the other hand, is the return of domestic manufacturing that is more environmental, ethical, and transparent (Thomas 117). Rightshoring is often seen in conjunction with slow fashion, focusing more on inherent value, customer experience, and reducing environmental impacts in response to fast fashion and globalization (Thomas 93). Being aware of these terms and how they function

within the fashion industry is important to recognize the concerns of fast fashion and what can be done to improve conditions.

The first concern when considering the conditions and treatment of fast-fashion factory workers is their wage. When consumers partake in fast fashion, they encourage cycles in the exploitation of workers, which in this case, is seen in the low wages workers receive regardless of material price, market price, and their base-line cost of living. Elizabeth Brotherton-Bunch from the Alliance for American Manufacturing (AAM), a non-profit, non-partisan partnership, reveals details from an undercover reporter working at two Shein factories featured in the Channel 4 documentary "Untold: Inside the Shein Machine". She discloses, "A new documentary investigation from Britain's the i newspaper and Channel 4 found that factory workers making clothing for SHEIN in China regularly work 18-hour days, earning just 2 cents per item they produce." At one of the factories, workers are making about 4,000 yuan per month, or $556, to produce a minimum of 500 garments. Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz, senior writer for the Cut, also reveals that "Workers in both factories were…given only one day off a month. In one factory… workers were penalized two-thirds of their daily wage if they made a mistake on a clothing item." These incredibly low wages are a cause for concern considering both health and the cost of living. Not only do workers have incredibly long days where they're required to produce clothing at an increased speed, they're also expected to do it properly or their pay will be docked. Workers are also forced to work these long hours to afford living expenses because of how low wages are and the demanding requirements they must meet will not allow for anything but 18-hour days, 7 days a week.

Along with Shein, H&M is another fast fashion brand known for utilizing sweatshops and low wages in China, Myanmar, India, and more. Dana Thomas, in *Fashionopolis: Why What We*

Wear Matters, reveals connections between H&M and factories in Bangladesh. In 2018, 4.5 million of Bangladesh's workers produced more than $30 billion worth of "ready-made garments", yet one-fourth of the population still lived below the poverty line (Thomas 52). The monumental amount of clothing, and thus the revenue, that companies procure from producing fashion in countries with no laws protecting wages caused me to consider the general wage of fast-fashion workers versus the price at which the clothing is sold. Evidently, there is a gap. While observing clothing at Ms Preppypants, a local Downtown Deland consignment shop, I paid close attention to the prices. What caught my attention most was a cream-colored sweater by H&M that was marked as $19.99. I did some research online looking for similar sweaters at H&M, discovering that most were listed from $25.99 to $49.99. The market value of these garments reveals the disparity between the profit of companies, like H&M, and how much they pay their workers. While one could argue that companies pay so little due to lost revenue from material cost and shipping costs, and to some extent that happens, fast-fashion companies notoriously choose the cheapest materials and shipping options. The whole goal of fast fashion is to minimize production costs through cheap materials, transportation, and low salaries, which they achieve through the exploitation of lacking wage protection laws. While this is just one effect of what low price does, it needs to be addressed so workers everywhere can earn a salary that can support the cost of their homes, their food, and their medical expenses.

Another major concern is the physical working conditions present in most fast-fashion factories. In an article for Sixth Tone, an online magazine focused on China, writer Wu Peiyue reports that the infrastructure and conditions of workshops in Guangdong, South China are cramped, dingy, sweltering in temperature with workers "hunch(ed) over sewing machines under the greenish glow of fluorescent strip lights." She also states, "These workshops frequently flout

Chinese labor laws and are considered a fire risk, local factory owners and labor experts told Sixth Tone." These conditions are comparable to many fast-fashion factories, like those seen in Bangladesh and Myanmar, and exist because of the low-cost manufacturing and labor that fast fashion companies practice. They pose a major threat to the safety of the workers and can cause injury, permanent disability, and in some cases, death.

The disregard of proper working conditions in fast-fashion factories can have grave consequences when things go wrong. But often, it takes some time for things to go wrong, and thus for people to care. Bangladesh, one of the biggest fashion manufacturers in the world, is an example of this. Due to the low cost of manufacturing in Bangladesh, many huge companies subcontract sweatshops there, producing millions of garments. They have very few labor laws and do not have regulations or enforcers to ensure that building conditions are safe. So, companies produce there, and consumers turn a blind eye to the flawed working conditions until someone gets hurt. In 2010, a That's It Sportwear garment factory in Bangladesh caught fire. The building had locked exits, leading to workers jumping out the windows, resulting in the death of 29 and injury of 100 (Thomas 54). To protect future workers from this outcome, some non-profit groups and worker unions proposed the Bangladesh Fire and Safety Agreement, but it failed to go into effect due to a lack of support from companies. Then in 2012, the Tazreen Fashion factory caught fire and due to blocked exits, run down fire escapes, and people jumping, 117 people died and 200 more were injured (Thomas 55). But still, the agreement sat unsigned. In 2013, the Rana Plaza garment factory split and was recommended for condemnation. Supervisors instructed employees to return to work the following day and the building collapsed. The negligence from Rana Plaza garment factory supervisors and the improperly constructed building killed 1,134 and injured 2,500 (Thomas 58). Finally, companies signed the agreement

following outrage from media and the public. Today the Bangladesh Fire and Safety Agreement and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, a similar but not legally binding agreement, has helped reform safety violations in thousands of factories, but more needs to be done to ensure the protection of labor and wage rights for workers.

One way to help ensure that workers are being paid properly and produce clothing in safe working conditions is by supporting and buying from slow fashion and rightshoring brands. One brand that sustainably sources materials and focuses on the fair treatment and pay of its workers is Alabama Chanin. Run by the southern designer Chanin and her team of 30, Alabama Chanin focuses on attention to detail and high quality while practicing ethical choices. *Fashionopolis: Why What We Wear Matters* reports, "They [Chanin's workers] are all independent contractors, free to decide when, where, and for whom to work, and they build extra costs, such as supplies, utilities, healthcare, and other benefits, into their bid" (Thomas 98). Chanin's clothing are sold for as much as $4,000 due to how she prioritizes the value of her workers, stating that her clothing is expensive because she pays her people right (Thomas 99). Chanin's practices showcase values in the material, the skill, and the time put into producing clothing. Buying from slow fashion rightshoring brands like Chanin can help lessen the effects of fast fashion by emphasizing the importance of proper wages and working conditions and consequently relying less on fast-fashion and offshoring for fast gratification.

For other consumers who wish to improve conditions but cannot afford slow fashion prices like Chanin's, the company Reformation aims to be a "sustainable fast fashion brand," appealing to those who look for fast fulfillment while also assuring that workers are treated correctly (Thomas 126). Yael Aflalo, former model and founder of Reformation, develops sustainable fast fashion practices through rightshoring, reducing product transportation costs and

ensuring proper labor laws. She also rents cheap factories, sources deadstock material, and creates small selections with frequent drops of trendy pieces. Thomas shares that Aflalo is "paying her plant workers above minimum wage and offering healthcare benefits, free massages on-site, and classes in career counseling, English language, and a path to citizenship" (129-130). Aflalo's cheap production choices, while not necessarily creating high quality garments, allows her to both pay her workers properly and provide them with extra benefits, maintain a profit, and advertise trendy clothing to consumers. Reformation, and companies similar, are a great solution to decrease the need for sweatshops while keeping up with the fast-paced fashion cycle.

But shopping at slow fashion and rightshoring brands does not fix the issues in overseas sweatshops, it simply lessens the demands and promotes values in sustainability and the ethical treatment of workers. Caleigh Harris, blog editor of Cincinnati University Law review, says, "Although international law falls outside of U.S. jurisdiction, legislators can still act to protect international human rights of workers and the global environment." Essentially, to help improve and solve the issue, consumers can support legislation and be an active participant in protecting the rights of works around the world. Consumers can support legislation such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act from 2021, which ensured no American dollars went to the funding of forced labor in the ethnic minorities in China's Uyghur Autonomous Region. Also, the Fashion Accountability and Building Real Institutional Change Act ("FABRIC Act") was proposed in 2022 by United States Senator Kirsten Gillibrand. FABRIC Act includes, as Harris states, "(1) the establishment of a nationwide garment industry registry through the Department of Labor; (2) implementing new requirements for fashion brands and retailers *along with* manufacturing partners to be jointly accountable for workplace wage violations; and (3) eliminating piece rate pay for garment workers in the United States." It also has a $40 million

domestic support program and thirty percent reshoring tax credit for garment manufacturers that relocate to the United States, promoting rightshoring practices. Many countries are now also requiring mandatory human rights due diligence ("MHRDD"), establishing legal accountability for companies operating under its jurisdiction to take responsibility for any human rights violations. Supporting laws and policies such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, the FABRIC Act, and MHRDD helps protect workers, ensuring that companies have an obligation to maintain practices that are ethical and safe.

Fast fashion has so many issues, like insufficient wages and unsafe working conditions, but these issues can be improved when consumers are educated on the labor practices of companies. Being educated on what companies are doing and how they are treating their workers ensures that consumers can make the right choice to combat the exploitation of international workers. Whether consumers do it through supporting slow fashion and rightshoring brands like Chanin Alabama and Reformation, or supporting local, state, and federal legislation, it all helps lessen the demand for low price production and regulate safe working conditions.

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