

Economics

Sustainable fashion production

RecyCOOL Lessons

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Sustainable fashion production

Description:of the lesson

First, we are going to look at some of the wages of garment workers and tailors across the globe, and then we will compare them. After that, we are going to learn about the minimum wages in this industry and look at how prices of T-shirts can vary. We will explore the ethical fashion industry versus the sustainable one. After that we will do a little calculation of a hypothetical, small tailors business. And finally, we will go through some tips on how to be more sustainable with our own clothes and fashion habits.

Objective

Objective of this lesson is to understand what ethical fashion is. Get to know what sustainability in fashion means and why this transformation is needed in the fashion industry. And to see how pricing is calculated and processed in fashion industry.

After this lesson you will be able to

- tell the differences and similarities between eco, ethical and sustainable fashion
- understand the prices of a garment
- understand how to price garments in order to produce profit

Tools and materials:

paper, pen/pencil, calculator

SUSTAINABLE FASHION PRODUCTION:

The production of fashion items in a way that takes into account the well-being of its workers and the environment.

SUSTAINABLE:

Able to be maintained at a certain rate or level, able to be upheld or defended.

TAILORING:

The activity or trade of a tailor, the making and altering of clothes to measure, also the style or cut of a garment or garments.

LIVING WAGE:

The minimum wage income necessary for workers to meet their basic needs and live a decent life. It's different from the legal minimum wage which is usually significantly below the living wage.

ETHICAL:

Morally right, it focuses on the social aspects mostly, but also on the fair treatment of animals and environment.

Can you recall where the clothes you're wearing right now are from? Was it sold by a big fast fashion chain or a small-scale tailoring business? How much did it cost? Compare it with other classmates!

If it is from a fast fashion store, do you know how it was made? Was it sustainable production or not? Most fast fashion brands are not sustainable unfortunately, and the need for more ethical brands has risen higher recently.

In this lesson we will get a view on how the sustainable clothing industry works, especially small tailorings, and what the major differences are compared to the mass production factories.

Fair wages

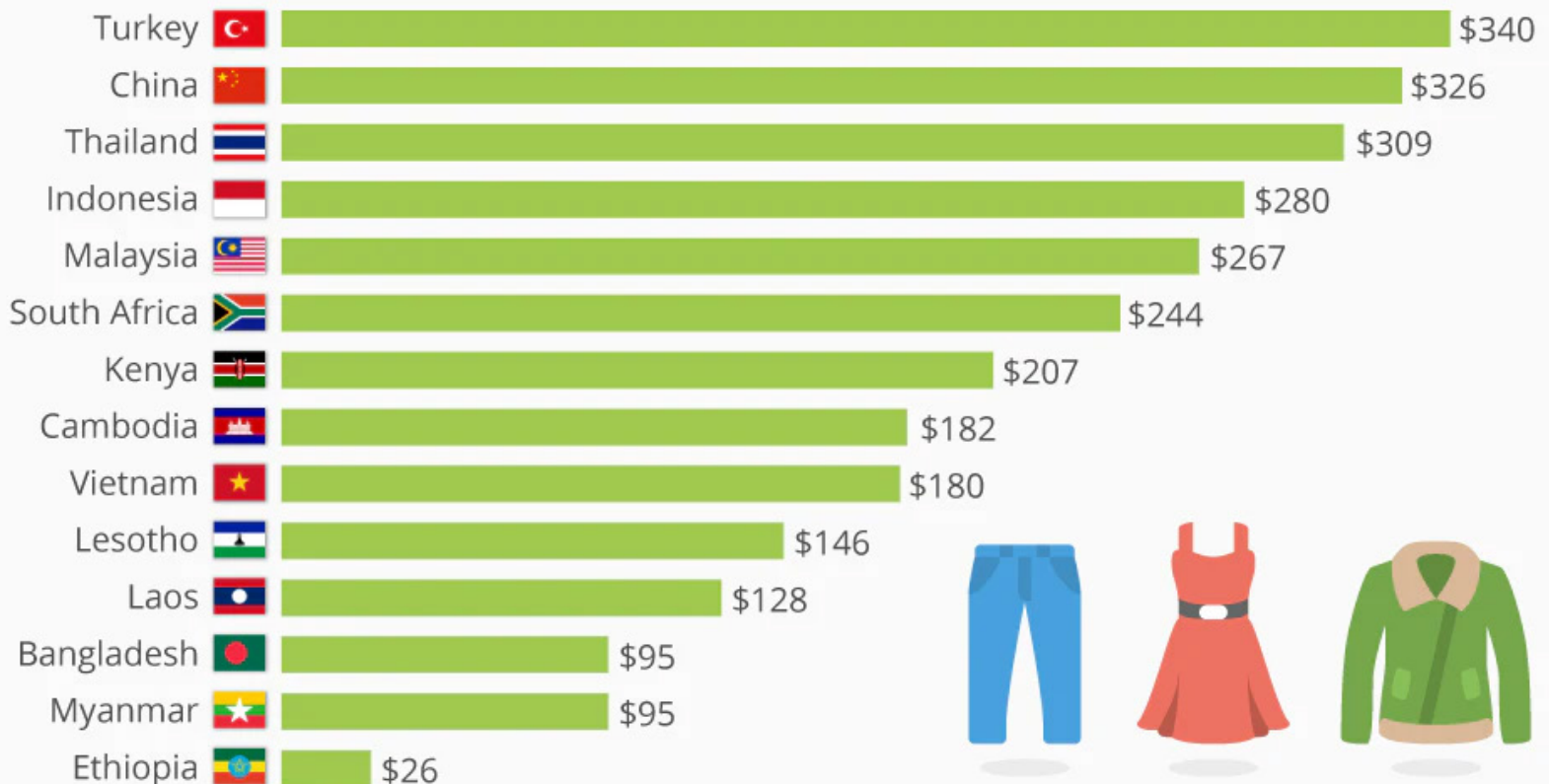
Look up on the internet how much a textile worker's monthly income is! (approx. in Hungary: 500–600 USD; approx in India: 101 USD)

Garment workers are treated unfairly throughout the world. One example is the garment worker community of Los Angeles, which is mostly made up of Latin American and Chinese immigrants. Approximately 85% of them earn less than the minimum wage. They work 60–70 hours per week, and get paid around \$300. They are not paid for overtime and have to work in unsafe, dirty, and smelly factories.

Photo credit: [Statista](#)

Where Pay Is Lowest For Cheap Clothing Production

Monthly minimum wage in the global garment industry in 2018 (selected countries)



The prices for a T-shirt made in a fast fashion factory vary from 1–5 USD. While tailor-made T-shirts are sold for 20–60 USD.

What do you think causes the big difference in prices?

Ethical vs sustainable fashion

Compared to fast fashion, sustainable fashion is designed, manufactured, distributed, and used in ways that are environmentally friendly. Ethical fashion, a related term that is also used, refers to clothing made in ways that put social welfare and worker rights up front.

Its overall aim is to make communities thrive in the present and the future, so besides environmental health, social equity and economic vitality are also implied. Ethical fashion, a related term that is also often being used, refers to clothing made in ways that put social welfare and worker rights up front.

And since it is about choices based on their values, brands might just as well put an ethical handling of animals and planet into the foreground. So, you see these terms overlap and there is no one without the other, or rather there shouldn't be.

But unfortunately there are many brands that make sustainability claims based on their material choices, however they may not be adhering to social compliance or know what factories are making their products, so their sustainability is disputable.

There was a study that showed that **97% of materials for making clothes were new resources**, (like raw/virgin materials, unprocessed) not reused. **It added up to 98 million tons of resources input, that includes oil and chemicals needed.** Recycled fibres reduce the usage of new materials and can even lower the huge amount of textile waste.

Additionally, the fashion industry emits a lot of greenhouse gases per year, as most of our clothes are made from synthetic materials that are derived from fossil fuels, like polyester.

These materials in most cases need more energy to be produced than the sustainable alternatives, like recycled fibres. **Importantly, it's not only the fabric that needs to be considered but the manufacturing processes, too, like dyeing as well as what happens with the finished product when it is exported; transportation has a carbon impact too.**



Photo credit: Nomad

Sustainable fashion brands use a lot less or even no chemical treatment, little water, less energy and no fertilisers or pesticides to grow. The natural fabrics, like linen, hemp and cotton are even biodegradable. **They are amazing sustainable alternatives and they are also healthier to be worn on our bodies, especially if they are organic.**

Ethical brands support good working conditions, health care and fair wages for their workers. **It is said that approx 170 million children are working in the textile industry.** It resembles modern day slavery just to meet the fashion demands of the western world. It is simply unacceptable. **Sustainable brands and ethical brands do not employ children.**

- Importantly, bans on child labour and removing them does not necessarily automatically mean they then go back to school. With bans on child labour, there must be effective monitoring in place to surface any risks and instances of child labour where the brand is then held accountable to fix the issue.

Some fixes could look like: brands financially supporting families to send their children back to school, pay towards the costs of lost income and guaranteeing a job when a child is of age to work. It is important to remember as well that one of the leading causes of child labour is not paying their parents living wages. If you want to read more about monitoring supply chains for child labour, check out [this article](#). All in all, Ethical fashion brands conduct due diligence on issues like child labour, to prevent it but also to identify it where it exists to remediate it.

Sustainable & ethical brands provide details on the factory, working conditions and manufacturing process so we can read and understand why they are better and more expensive.

These garments have labels with the following: Fair Wear Foundation, Fair Trade Certified, Ethical Trading Initiative, Certified B Corporation.

As human beings we tend to pay a lot of attention to the food that we put into our bodies – whether it has a certification, what it is really made of, if it is considered healthy for us – and rightly so. But we should also take the same amount of care of the clothing we are putting on our bodies. Actually, a supporter of a fair and sustainable food chain, Anna Lappe once said: “Every time you spend money, you cast a vote for the kind of world you want.”

Even if she was talking about the food industry in the first place, it can be applied to all industries we interact with as consumers. Once you are aware of the downsides of an industry, you start to become a more conscious consumer.

Watch this video, it conveys the message of the power of the consumer’s choice:

Find some examples of sustainable brands that exist or are emerging nowadays here or you can search through lists of sustainable fashion bloggers. If any of these are available in your area, maybe go and see those stores or their online webshops to get a feel of sustainable fashion!



Task

Imagine you are the owner of a small tailoring company. Your task is to calculate the price of a tailored shirt considering all your costs.

You rent the office monthly for 300 USD.

You pay utility bills (gas, electricity, water, etc.) 300 USD monthly. You rent your machines for 150 USD per month. You buy materials needed for production for 600 USD per month. You pay general taxes, monthly 100 USD. You have 2 employees to pay monthly with 500 USD per person.

You want to sell 500 shirts monthly. You want to make a profit. How would you price your items? You have to pay taxes after your income, it is 25 % of your total income. That is also an expense.

If you want to keep the prices down, what cost can you lower easily? Rent is fixed, machine rent is fixed, tax is fixed. What is left? The utility bills, materials and wages.

What would happen, if you lowered the wages to half, like 250 USD? And if you could buy materials for only 300 USD? And if you used half of your energy (water, gas, electricity, etc)?

Would you make more profit? What would happen to the quality of garments? And to your employees?



Solution

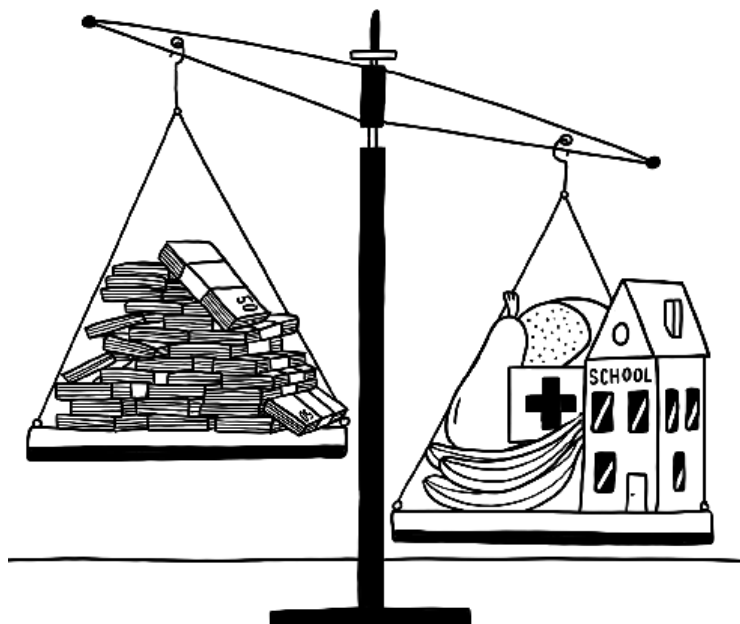
You add up all the expenses, rent 300 USD + bills 300 USD + machines 150 USD + materials 600 USD + tax 100 USD + wages 1000 USD = 2450 USD without the profit tax

Then multiply 500 T-shirts with your price, let's say 10 USD/T-shirt.

That is altogether 5000 USD. That is your income.

You take off the expenses, 2450 USD plus the profit tax 25 %, that is 1250 USD. So you are left with 5000 USD - 2450 USD - 1250 USD = **1300 USD as your monthly salary/ net profit.**

If you lower the price of your products, you have to lower the expenses, as well, so you still earn enough money for running the business. That means making sales affects everything, so you better be aware of the consequences. You are responsible for the people who work for you, they have families, and you try to make business work because of you and your family, too.



Scenario 2:

What happens if you lower the wages by 30%?

Wages are 700 USD, the profit is 1600 USD, so you earn 300 USD more. A sustainable business focuses on quality and the people in the production. So it has higher prices not just because of the materials, but because it pays attention to the well-being of the environment and also its garment workers, by giving them a decent and fair pay.

This calculation task used a simplified example to make it easier to calculate, but in the next picture you can take a look at how many different things a business owner needs to take into consideration. And we did not even include marketing and a lot of other business-related expenses.

Actually the difference between an ethical and an unethical brand or business is whether they take the responsibility for the costs they should be paying and where and how much they are trying to save to create more profit.

If some clothes are strikingly cheap, you can almost be sure they are cutting down on the expenses of the workers' salary and/ or their fair working circumstances, or the materials. These irresponsible decisions result in poorer quality and less healthy environment, as well as poorer workers and social environment altogether.

Let us introduce a notion that should be mentioned at this point, as it is related to the poor quality and the throw-away attitude that fast fashion companies have. There is a so-called planned obsolescence, which is defined by Fashion Revolution as "a business, design and economic strategy where products are intentionally planned to fall apart or become unfashionable quickly, pushing the consumer to buy more."

Reflection

Would you have thought of all these expenses of a fashion business owner? What is your experience with the calculation task? What do you think of the differences in the prices of clothes and the wages? It is not easy to be sustainable and profitable at the same time, this means you won't earn that large amount of money as a fast fashion store/ brand owner.

But on the positive side, you can go to sleep peacefully, as you paid your workers well and you made quality garments while not being harsh to the environment. Who knows if you will become a business owner some day, but it is certain that you will remain a fashion consumer as long as you buy clothes to dress yourself.

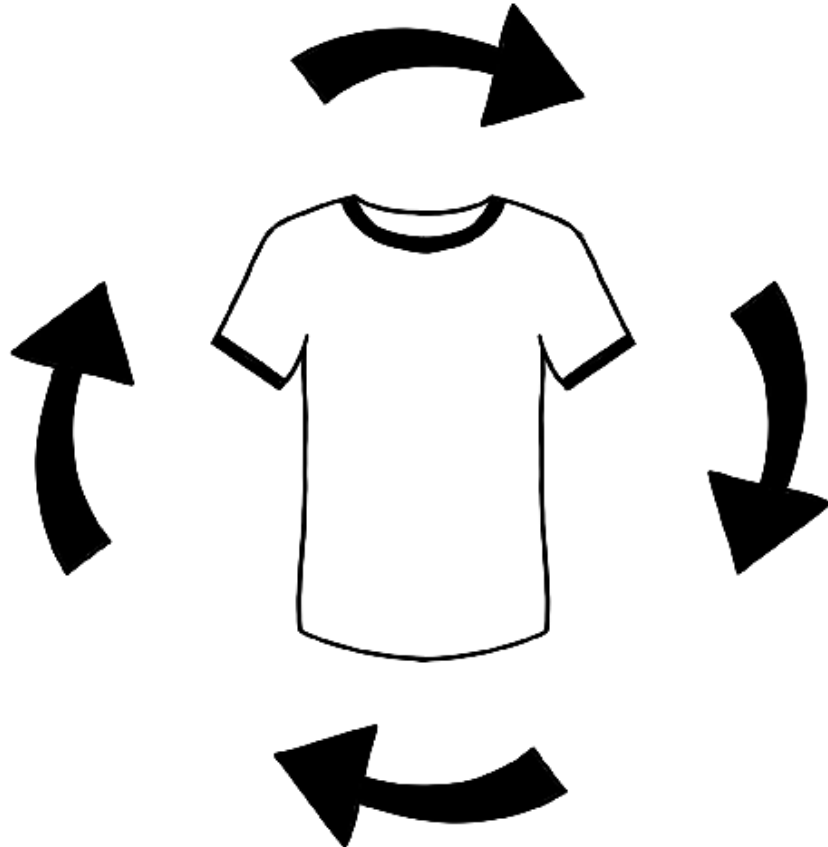
Fast fashion leaves no space to consider important aspects of choosing a garment, they lead your buying habits by the actual trends. But to get somewhat closer to slow fashion, we invite you to observe yourself as for the relationship with your clothes and your habits around them, and ask yourself some questions.

First observe your style, do you have one or are you still looking for it? Do the garments you own reflect it? What are your shopping habits? Do you buy online, in stores, does anyone else buy clothes for you? How long are you keeping them? Are you wearing them regularly? How do you take care of them? Do you know how to wash them? Can you mend them if they have a fault or need repairs?

There are no good or bad answers. If you realise some of your answers and habits have negative consequences, you can start working on them.

Try to identify your style and collect clothes that fall into that category, that really express you. Wear them often – that’s how you establish your style! **Read the labels with the instructions and care for your clothes properly. Try and fix them if needed and maybe keep your clothes longer, because the most sustainable wardrobe is the one you already have.**

Also, if you have creativity wanting to burst out of you, you can try and redesign them or to revamp some old ones. However, if sewing and crafting is not for you, you can just sketch something or find some existing ideas, print out a picture and take your clothing or fabric to a tailoring shop, where they can help you realise it. **You can be sure it will be your size, your style, and you also support a local ethical business. It may cost more than the easy choices – but that is because it is worth more.**



Resources

Solene Rautunier. The Ultimate Sustainable and Ethical Fashion Glossary. Available at:

<https://www.solenerauturier.com/blog/the-ultimate-sustainable-and-ethical-fashion-glossary>

Fietesek.hu. Salaries in Hungary. Available at:

<https://www.fietesek.hu/en/salaries-in-country>

Paycheck.in. Minimum Wage – Textile Industry. Available at:

<https://paycheck.in/salary/minimumwages/21339-rajasthan/21592-textile-industry>

Garmentworkercenter.org. Get informed. Available at:

<https://garmentworkercenter.org/get-informed/#:~:text=Approximately%2085%25%20of%20garment%20workers,dirty%2C%20and%20poorly%20ventilated%20factories>

Son of a tailor. Cotton T-shirt. Available at:

https://www.sonofatailor.com/product/cotton-t-shirt?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6J-SBh-CrARIsAH0yMZjaDPLzoMfIGz5NhFlicLegMxFE8S2t6F5FvZKFKiZBhvXERcPvml-YaAmLGEALw_wcB

Candice Batista. What Is Sustainable and Ethical Fashion? 2022. Available at:

<https://theecohub.com/sustainable-and-ethical-fashion/>

Katrin Bielawski. 8 Reasons Why Sustainable Fashion Matters. Available at:

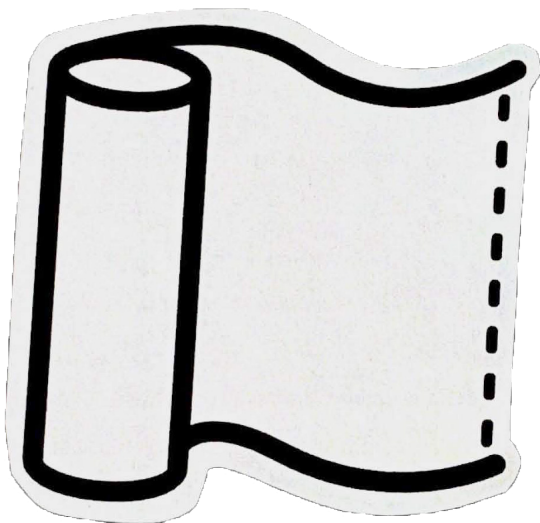
<https://www.narahsoleigh.com/blogs/blog/8-reasons-why-sustainable-fashion-matters>

Attachments

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZoiU8sprXpQ>

<https://goodonyou.eco/>

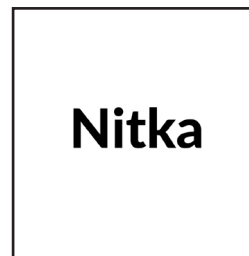
<https://justinekeptcalmandwentvegan.com/fair-fashion-guide-2/>



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