

History

History of fast fashion

RecyCOOL Lessons

Disclaimer

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History of fast fashion

Description of the lesson

In this lesson we will explore the history of fast fashion, how it started, developed, and what its characteristics are today.

Objective

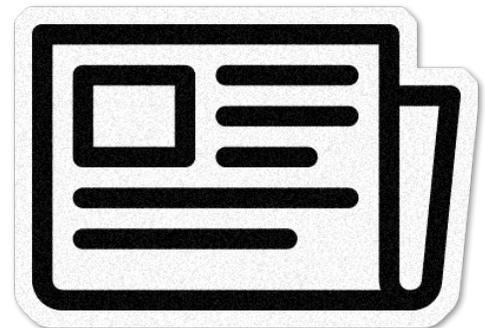
Objective of this lesson is to understand how fast fashion started and how it has developed over decades, until today.

After this lesson you will be able to

- explain how fast fashion started, how it spread globally and why it moved to developing countries
- see what impacts the fast fashion industry has on the garment workers

Tools and materials

pen/pencil, paper



FAST FASHION PRODUCTION:

Fast fashion garment production copies luxury, couture brands and uses low-quality materials in order to bring inexpensive styles to the end consumer, and encourage repurchasing.



Garment production has changed a lot since its beginning. Of course, civilization developed a lot, and processes needed to be adapted accordingly.

However, the whole fashion industry graduated into overproduction – meaning that lower quality products started to come out of factories making clothing. This resulted in vast amounts of waste, harmful effects on the environment, and an enormous gap between the rich and the poor.

Have you noticed the negative impacts of the acceleration?

In the early days of humankind, people wore clothes to merely protect themselves or signal their origin and identity. Let's think back to what cavemen wore as an example. We can also look at all ethnological backgrounds including the different customs and culture we all have.

As garment making evolved and became an industry, it influenced the kind of wardrobe we own nowadays. Accessibility to this clothing also changed – we can now get a new outfit from hundreds of shops – even with the option to have it delivered to our front door! But buying clothes wasn't always as easy as it is now – for many people, it was a privilege and was very expensive to dress well and fashionably. Tailors made good money if they were skilled, but less wealthy people wanted the opportunity too, and with the help of the industrial revolution, their dream came true.

Let's step back in time to understand industrialization more...

There was a man called Richard Arkwright who was using other people's ideas and improving them. Some examples are the spinning jenny, which made yarn by twisting the fibres, and the carding machine, which aligned the fibres preparing them for spinning. In 1771 he opened the world's first water-powered textile mill in Cromford, UK, using these advanced machines. This started the industrial revolution, which changed production from handmade to machine-made – the system we still rely on today.

Workers lived in the five-story factory building, where shifts were thirteen hours long with only two short breaks. He started with 200 workers, a decade later there were 1000. By 1778 wool production disappeared and by 1790, Arkwright had almost 200 mills throughout the country and Manchester had become the "Cottonopolis."

In 1810 tables turned for Arkwright, when the businessman Francis Cabot Lowell travelled to Europe to copy his idea. Three years later the Boston Manufacturing Company in the USA was established, which used raw material that was sourced from slave work.

As early as the 1830s, overproduction started and introduced a slow decline of the textile industry. Due to the highly efficient textile production, its value dropped and factory owners paid less to the workers, who reacted with unrest, protests and strikes. The factories started employing immigrants, who were mostly refugees, so they accepted all kinds of working conditions from longer working hours, to unhealthy and unsafe working environments, to underpayment. Even their children started working in the same factories to help families make ends meet.

Worker strikes were responded to with aggression and violence by mill owners. As a result of corporate greed, factories became a dehumanising and exploitative workplace.

At the same time, in the 1830s the invention of the “lockstitch machine” sped up the production of ready-made garments. In 1861, when the Civil War began in the United States, bigger demand grew quickly: standard size ready-to-wear uniforms were needed in large quantities.

After the war, people realised that having their own size readily available was convenient, so the demand in producing menswear and later womenswear became high, resulting in the American apparel industry.

Massachusetts and Pennsylvania were the producing centres for these clothes and undergarments, and later for fashion items.

- Similarly to Britain's Manchester, other places also had large factories that characterised them, like cities along the Rhine in Germany and famously, Łódź – a city of the industrial revolution in Poland.

Some time later New York became the capital of fashion, where high quality garments were made from European wool and silk, and by the hands of numerous Jewish immigrants from Hungary, Russia and Poland who were skilled in sewing. They copied the couture fashion seen in Paris.

An unfortunate event happened in March 1911 in New York city, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory company burned down resulting in the death of 146 workers. Most of the victims died because safety features were neglected in the factory. After this a series of laws and regulations were developed to better protect workers' safety.

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the largest workers' union in the United States with primarily female workers (founded in 1900) also stepped up and played a major role in labour history in the 1920s and 1930s.

Meanwhile, business was growing, so by 1931, Manhattan had more factories than any cities in the world. The need for uniforms with the break-out of WWI contributed to this. Then, WWII increased the production even further. The garment district in NY alone had 200k women's wear workers, and they produced 66% of US clothing, hence the name Fashionopolis. In the 50s, people from Manhattan were migrating to the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Rochester and Chicago. (domestic version of off-shoring).

In the 1960s, young people wanted cheap clothing to follow the new trends and reject the traditions of older generations. Fashion brands had to find ways to keep up with this increasing demand. Massive textile mills were opening across the developing world, resulting in savings for European and US companies by outsourcing their labour.



Throughout the decades of the 80s, 90s, 00s and in the 2010s, the making of garments became even faster: while a 3-week production time was considered a radical change in the 90s by fast fashion brands, at the turn of the century, 1 week was enough to finish up new styles, and with this, ultra-fast fashion emerged from online-only brands.

However, nowadays, we have arrived at real-time retail, which gives stores new merchandise in 3 days. They also make these clothes for insanely cheap prices.

It also migrates from cheap work force to even cheaper, moving from country to country, like from China to India, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Turkey. These countries do not have the modern manufacturing infrastructure of China, but they are cheaper for production.

From the 2000s, China, India, Bangladesh and also Sri Lanka started outsourcing production to Africa; they are now the middlemen in the fashion business line. They have found countries where tax and wages are low, and they moved their production to these countries, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. Since 2014, Ethiopia has opened four industrial parks and had plans for eight more. China is making Ethiopia a giant fast fashion factory.

We've recently had to live through a worldwide crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic has left a huge impact on the fashion industry. Retail shops had to close and online sales were slow, since the global economy was in decline. But it was the garment workers that were mostly hit by it. More than USD\$40 billion of goods from factories and suppliers were cancelled by brands. As a result, they had difficulties paying for materials and for their workers' salaries.

Fast fashion could actually be so cheap because workers didn't get their due salary for it, so much so that they were paid far below the living wage. The global pandemic just worsened the situation, because workers were denied about 5 months' worth of money.

During the coronavirus crisis it became clear how the fashion system relies on exploitation among the developing countries, and how brands do not have the intention of showing any solidarity and partnership to suppliers and their own workforce.

Some brands did pay what they were due eventually, though only after public pressure was put on them (by the Fashion Revolution community and Clean Clothes Campaign's #PayUp), but some refused to pay even after this. **Only in Bangladesh, more than 1,000 factories were impacted by order cancellations. With wages barely enough for living, these workers had no savings to deal with such a crisis. Their lives became endangered, as they were unable to pay for bills, rent and food.**

It is always those that are at the bottom of the hierarchy, at the end of the supply chain that feel the consequences of an irresponsible action.



Task

Imagine you are a textile/ garment worker

- in 1790 in UK
- in 1911 in USA
- in 2020 in Ethiopia

Write a short list for each of the roles, what the needs of these workers could be. You may consider a time when you were working (at home helping your parents, for example).

What were the circumstances?

Then compare them.

Are the needs of these workers throughout history different?

These questions might help you imagine the situation:

How do you imagine a normal working day?

Have you ever worked at home?

Do you think a garment worker has the same rights as you?

Do they have the right for clean water and proper nutrition?

How many hours do they have to work and in what conditions?

Can they take breaks?

What do you think a factory should provide the workers in order to make sure that the workplace is safe for everyone?

You can write about working hours, over-hours, taking breaks, wages, health and safety conditions, and so on.

- Movements aiming to solve the situation

Certain designers and fashion brands do not only think in terms of profitability as their primary business model, but they are also concerned with the environment, with their workers' health and wellbeing and rights. They have a holistic view and aim to produce quality clothes while taking into consideration all aspects of the supply chain.

Their goals are to respect people, the environment, and animals. This slow fashion is about quality instead of quantity, with the aim to produce garments that can last years or even a lifetime. If these brands think in terms of circular economy, it is even better.

For instance, products can be designed for longevity, biodegradability, recyclability, sourced and produced without toxicity and with renewables, and brands could provide services to support longer life. Look at this image here to get an idea about circularity.

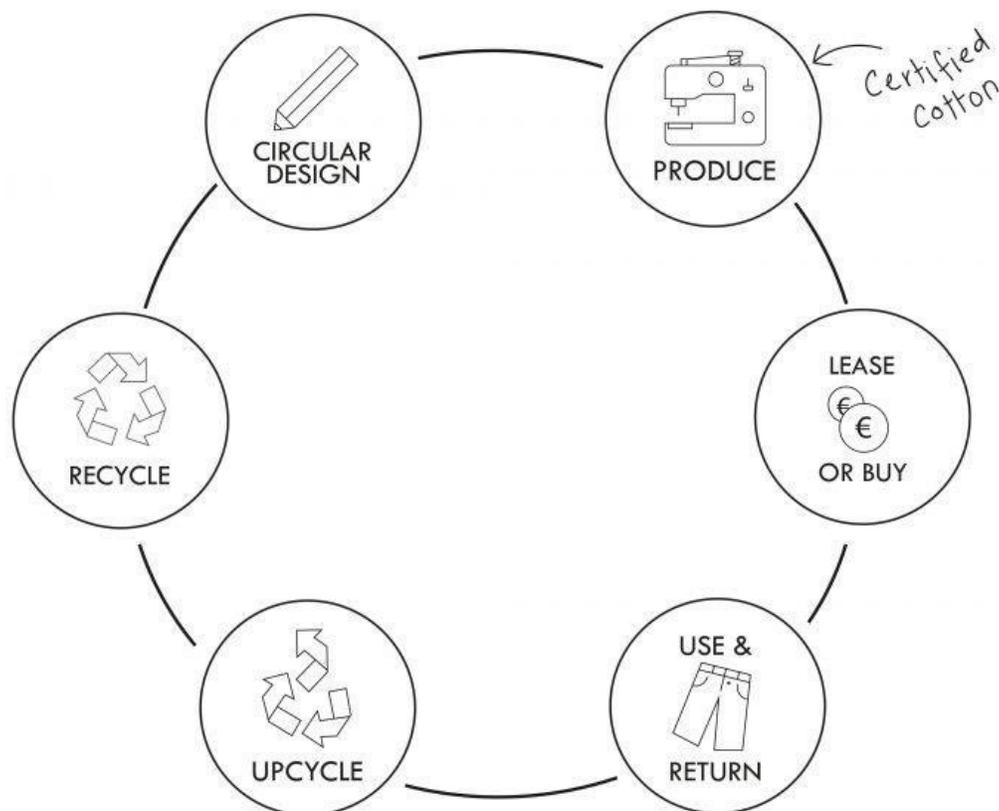


Photo credit: Circle economy

The [Fashion Revolution](#) movement is fighting against all the bad aspects of the fashion industry. If you have time, watch [this documentary](#) to learn about the issue.

“We aim to show that change is possible and encourage those who are on a journey to create a more ethical, sustainable and transparent future for fashion.”

Clean Clothes Campaign is a network of organisations and trade unions working for the improvement of workers’ situations globally. They put together a very moving [video](#) of why this is of crucial importance.

Much work has been done in the human rights area, and there are some successes, but it isn’t enough – people are still suffering in one way or another, and there have been only minor changes, or even increases in human rights violations, as this [article](#) explains.

An example of some good news – a petition called [#PayUp](#) was initiated to solve the underpayment problem. **It resulted in an incredible \$22 billion for garment workers to pay their bills for orders cancelled as a result of Covid-19.** This way it saved the lives of millions of women.



The newest initiative to improve the situation of garment workers is the [Good Clothes, Fair Pay campaign of the Fashion Revolution movement.](#)

It demands a living wage legislation in the whole fashion industry, garment, textile and footwear sector, because even if some of the brands promised to do the right thing, they haven't moved into that direction. So holding brands accountable is possible through regulation.

There is still work to do, you can join many organisations if you want to help:

[Usas](#)

[Workers rights](#)

[Remake world](#)

[Pay your workers](#)

[Pay up](#)

[Clean clothes campaign](#)



Reflection

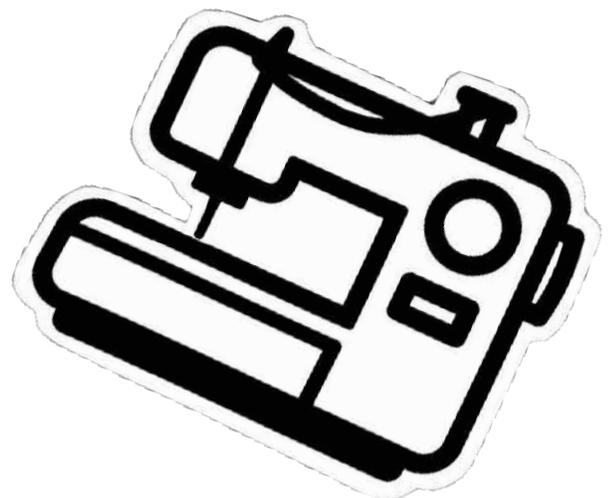
In this lesson we discovered the birth of the textile industry and also the history of fast fashion. Now we understand the impact of fast fashion not only on our environment, but also on those people who work in these factories.

The exploitation of workers is not a new problem. If we count everything in, it has been going on for about 190 years now. At the end garment workers just want a decent, safe and properly paid job like everyone else, no matter what century they live in.

You might think that the salary and circumstances of some far away factory workers do not depend on you, but here are some things that normal people like us, the customers, can do.

Choosing to wear clothes from brands that do not exploit their workers. There are a lot of sustainable brands that are transparent about their practices (for example [Good on you](#))

Talk to others about the negative effects of fast fashion
Take part in activism for the well-being of the garment workers (we included some options in the attachment).



Resources

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Attachments

[The True Cost documentary](#)

[The Economist: The true cost of fast fashion](#)

[A Garment Worker's tale](#)

[Fashion Revolution](#)

[United students against sweatshops](#)

[Worker's rights](#)

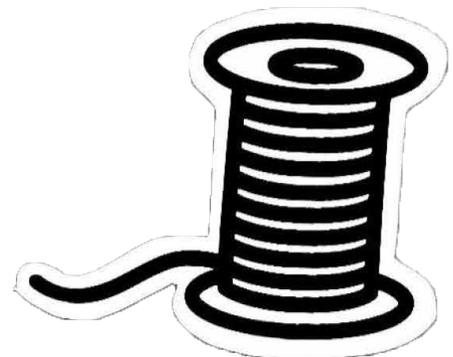
[Remake world](#)

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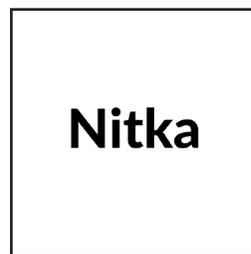
[Good on you](#)



Authors

Gabriella Suba, Fashion Revolution Hungary
Reka Gyurkovics, Fashion Revolution Hungary

Partners



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