

Politics

Mass production of garments

RecyCOOL Lessons

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Mass production of garments

Description

First we are going to see the beginning of textile mass production

After that, we are going to learn about how fast fashion started.

Then we will see how garment workers are exploited for profit.

Later we will explore Fashion Revolution as an organisation, including its goals and values.

After that we will do some easy sewing exercises with buttons.

And finally we will get some tips on how we can change the politics in our environment.

Objective

Objective of this lesson is to understand how textile / garment mass production was invented, see how many clothes are made daily in the world and to get a view on how workers are affected in the mass production of garments.

After this lesson you will be able to

- explain how the mass production of textiles and clothes started and developed
- understand the reasons behind factories making a huge amount of new clothes
- see how garment workers suffer because of mass production
- list some ways on how we can make a change in the laws and regulations of the fashion industry

Tools and materials

one piece of fabric, two buttons (with two holes), scissors, needle, threads (any colour), timer or your mobile phone

MASS PRODUCTION:

Mass production is the production of large quantities of standardised products, often using assembly lines or automation technology. Mass production aims for efficient production of a large number of similar products.



Mass production is fast, affordable and getting to customers in record timing. Fast fashion companies focus on speed and maximum output. The profit of cheap fabrics in textile mass production is high, and the customers are happy as they can pay a lot less money for fashion and buy more than ever before.

It keeps the fashion factory owners and the consumers happy, but what about the garment workers? Who is thinking about whether they are happy? And what about the environment? What happens eventually to these huge amounts of clothes that are produced?

Every year the fashion industry produces an estimated 92 million tons of waste. It also consumes 79 trillion litres of water per year. This industry is responsible for between 2–4 percent of all man-made greenhouse gas emissions.

However, the true scale of waste is hard to calculate considering that in the 2022 Global Fashion Transparency Index, the findings showed that just **10% of 250** of the world's largest brands and retailers disclose their pre-production waste volumes and just **8%** disclose their post production waste volumes. The lack of transparency on the amount of waste brands produce means it is difficult to understand how much waste the industry actually produces annually.

What do you think could be done on a personal level to stop this kind of waste?

Do you know of any laws and regulations that tell factories how to treat employees and our environment?

In this lesson we will learn about some ways on how we can initiate changes in politics to help our environment and also the garment workers who make all those clothes daily.

Although it was the opposite in the past, nowadays it's quite unusual to buy clothes that are hand-made and not created by automated production. It would seem like a good thing that so many clothes can be created during such a short amount of time, but it is not as great as it seems. Mass production has a huge negative impact on our environment. The way factories dispose of waste damages nature, since a lot of materials that are thrown away simply don't decompose because the majority of clothing today contains synthetic fibres.

Synthetic fibres, because they are not natural, means they are made up of a cell structure not recognised by nature, which means it can often take hundreds of years to decompose. **People also tend to get rid of their clothes faster as they can always buy new ones incredibly quickly.**

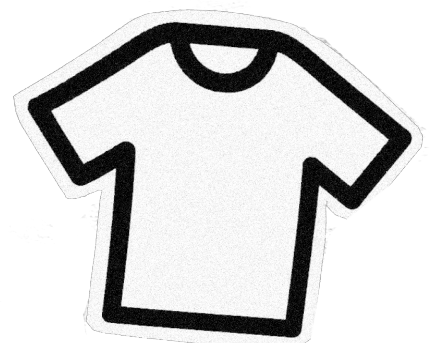
Photo credit: Asia Surveyors



Before the industrial revolution, most of the clothes were hand made. The invention of the sewing machine started before the 19th century, but the first practical sewing machine was introduced to the world in 1830 by Barthelemy Thimmonier in France. He opened a factory and started making uniforms for the army. It was demolished by tailors who feared their business. In England, women and children worked up to 20 hours per day in textile factories.

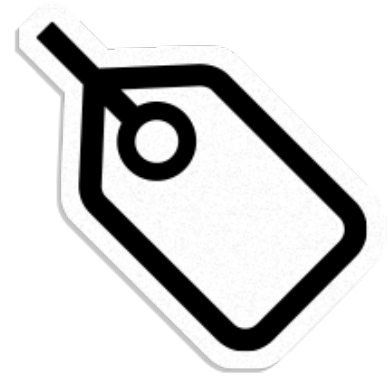
In the US, mass production of clothes started in the 19th century. Mostly undershirts and trousers were made first, then corsets for ladies. The first step was to transition from manual to machine labour. To promote this, there was an advertisement by Singer saying: Sewing by machinery. The Singer company specialised first in making clothes for enslaved people in the USA. After the civil war, the clothing factories started to make men's suits and ladies' coats and jackets.

The early days of mass production promised elite fashion available for those people who couldn't afford it. The number of ready to wear garments doubled between 1880 and 1889. The majority of this industry was based in New York. Soon manufacturers realised that styles needing less fabric were cheaper to produce, thus making more profit for them. So the clothes became lighter. Fast forward to the 1990s, most US clothing production moved overseas. Generally around 100 billion items of clothing are produced each year.



Reasons why mass production evolved:

- **cheaper inputs/resources**
- **automation of production**
- **free trade**
- **higher incomes/increased buying power**
- **transportation development**
- **mass consumerism**



Every year the fashion industry produces an estimated 92 million tons of waste. It also consumes 79 trillion litres of water per year. This industry is responsible for one-tenth of all carbon emission in the world.

- These figures are only estimates - because of the lack of transparency and lack of data on waste produced/ water consumed etc. It's hard to make these statements. Whilst it is true the industry is extremely resource intensive and polluting, it needs to come with the caveat that there is a huge lack of transparency. So, it could likely be even more than this!



Photo credit: [Solidarity Center/Sifat Sharmin Amita](#)

Many women and children are exploited by fast fashion. Factories employ young workers for long shifts and they are not paid fairly. They work in an unhealthy environment. **We have heard of disasters, such as Rana Plaza, in 2013 where more than 1000 people died.** In many cases, garment workers are not even employed, don't have contracts, earn low wages and suffer from poor working conditions (heat, dust, chemicals, no breaks, etc.).

So you see, the cheap price of fast fashion comes with a high cost for our planet and the lives of garment workers. Often money talks in politics too, so if the profit is big enough and the decision makers get a part of it, then they are not motivated to end the suffering of garment workers.

Advantages and disadvantages of mass production

Advantages +

- accessibility of the same goods worldwide**
- producing a high level of precision**
- lower costs from automation and fewer workers**
- higher levels of efficiency**

Disadvantages –

- environmental harm**
- innovation-associated job losses/no need for creativity**
- exploitative labour practices**
- globalisation (loss of cultural diversity)**



There is an activist movement for ending the exploitation of humans and the environment in the fashion industry, for safe working conditions with normal wages, transparency in the chain, ending the throwaway culture and for the craftsmanship to be valued. **Fashion Revolution, a campaigning not-for-profit organisation, was born in 2013 after the Rana Plaza disaster.**

The organisation's priorities are mobilising citizens, brands and policymakers through research and education, to put an end to exploitation and promote transparency in the fashion industry.

Photo credit: [Brown Brainy Beautiful](#)



Fashion Revolution would like to alter the policy around garment workers, and in order to do that, they asked the people most impacted what they would change if they had the power to do so. Find out their answers by watching this [video](#).

There is an index for fashion brands issued by Fashion Revolution, to rank them according to how much information they disclose about their business practices, including their policies on human rights and environmental issues. It is called the [Fashion Transparency Index](#), a large document issued yearly since 2017.

Brands are only assessed based on the information they disclose about the company's environmental and social policies, practices and impacts publicly – it does not verify brands' sustainability claims. [The focus is on transparency because their theory of change is that transparency is a necessary first step toward a fairer fashion industry.](#) If brands are transparent about their practices, they can be held accountable through public scrutiny.

Transparency can also be thought of as the anecdote to ['greenwashing'](#); when you have access to information, you can question the validity of brands' claims. This curiosity forms the basis for change.

Make sure to check it out on the [website](#).

It can be used for policy making to shape the fashion industry. Those who are involved in making new laws can benefit from such deep studies and analyses, using the information to write bills and make it obligatory for brands and factory owners to respect certain rules, and this way make them responsible for their practices.

Task

Get a fabric you do not need any more and cut it into 2 pieces. Get your 2 buttons out, thread your needle and set your timer. First you have 30 seconds for the button to be sewn onto the fabric. Then for the second piece of textile you set the timer to 2 minutes and get the button done.

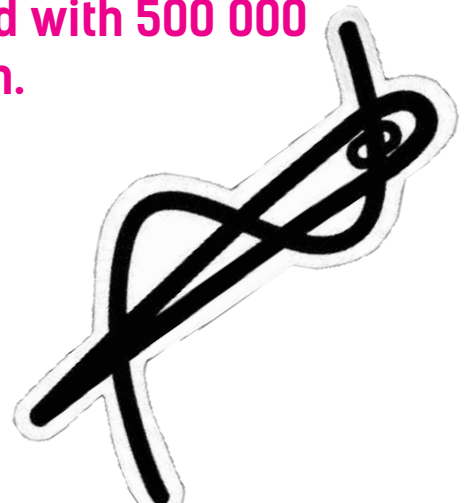
Now compare the two buttons and study their differences, and also how it was for you!

What do you think happens more often in mass production?

If you need it, watch this video on [how to sew on a button](#):

As we experienced from the task, sewing for a longer time produces higher quality than sewing for just 30 seconds. But if we make 10x more products within less time, then the acceleration coming from a profit-oriented attitude would induce lower quality. Also if we had to do the button-sewing all day, we would expect a good salary, at least more than a meal, but that is not the case in many factories.

California has importantly adopted a garment workers law in 2022 (Garment Worker Protection Act), which enforces that workers get paid by the hour and not by the piece, and holds fashion brands accountable for unpaid wages. And what about other countries in the world? Especially developing countries, like in India, over 1200 factories can be found with 500 000 workers. They earn around 60 USD per month.



Local labour unions have filed legal complaints against fast fashion brands across Asia.

In the EU there are also a set of policies to make the garment sector safer and more reliable with wages. Organisations like the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) and projects like Ethical Fashion Initiative help to reach these goals.

Changes are actually possible by signing petitions, this can be confirmed by several positive examples from the past. The next success story might be Good Clothes, Fair Pay, the campaign by Fashion Revolution.

You can also be part of it. The simple act of changing the way you shop and use your clothes counts a lot, so imagine how long it can take us if you get involved with one of the campaigns of these movements! We may not directly be able to write a new policy, but activists can let the voice of the voiceless be heard and help it get to the lawmakers.



Reflection

In the lesson we have learned about mass production, how it affects the apparel industry and what we can do to support garment workers.

We have seen advantages and disadvantages of mass production and now we understand the background of it. Based on the information gathered from this lesson, how do you view it? You can research your favourite brand and see if they support garment workers.

Here is a question for you to consider: If we keep on sewing on buttons for the sake of having more buttons and not to fulfil needs or a function, where do we end up?

What this lesson aims at is that you see what is behind the face value of things, so that we all may start questioning what businesses are offering us through marketing and good looking fashion models, and begin to look for better solutions. Of course, complex problems need solutions on more levels, and they also need actors in the different sectors.

An alternative for consumers may be searching for a tailor or small sustainable fashion business in one's own area.

Is there one in yours?

How popular is it and how high are the prices?

Will you consider buying clothes there in the future?

What can we do?

- raise public awareness
- educate people (like right now) about the fashion industry
- mobilise communities
- collaborate with activists
- create tools for people to use their voice and make changes in their personal lives and work
- inspire people to buy less, value quality over quantity and to take care of their clothes
- advocate for policy changes
- influence governments to play an active role in making laws and regulations in the textile industry

Some additional tips for you:

- take care of your garments
- repair your clothes (now you know how to sew on a button)
- avoid shopping mass-produced garments
- try swapping clothes with your classmates/ friends instead of buying new ones

Resources

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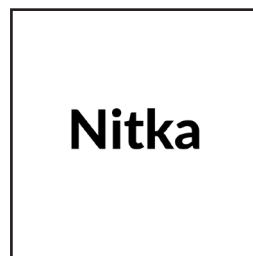
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