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Reducing the impact of the garment and textile
industry on the environment



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Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of countries are experiencing unprecedented economic growth. Naturally, this is followed by an incredible boom in consumption as consumers find themselves with more expendable income. However, with this increased buying of commodities, we are seeing significant impacts on the environment caused by the industries that produce these commodities.

One major industry which has rapidly increased in size due to economic prosperity is the garment and textile industry. The manufacturing of garments and textiles have a huge negative effect on the environment, therefore this growth is troubling for not only environmentalists, but also the people who are on the direct receiving end of this pollution and those who consume these products. Some environmental impacts that the textile and garment industry has is the releasing of dangerous chemicals into the environment, high energy consumption and air pollution. The fashion industry is the second biggest water polluter globally, behind the agriculture industry. As a response to these degrading environmental problems, there have been movements for cleaner production since the 1960s by environmental organizations and the general public. However, the current situation in the garment and textile is still dire and a thorough solution is needed to create permanent change in this dangerous industry.

Definition of Key Terms

Garment and Textiles

The garment and textile industry refers to every section of the clothing industry, from the raw materials, processing, production and transport. Textiles are widely used to describe types of cloth and woven fabrics, either of natural or synthetic fibers. Garments are any pieces of clothes, made of textiles.

Environmental Sustainability

Sustainability is crucial when considering this issue, it is the integration of sustainable practices which do minimal harm on the environment such as reuse and recycling.

Raw Materials

Raw materials are responsible for a significant amount of the environmental problems caused by the industry. These materials include cotton, polyester and manmade cellulose (MMCs) and are the main product used to create clothes.

Processing and Production

Processing and production refers to weaving raw materials into fabrics and giving them strength. This phase of the clothing industry is energy-intensive, and huge amounts of chemicals are used. According to the European Parliamentary Research Service, more than 1,900 chemicals are used in this process, 165 of these are labeled by the EU to be dangerous to the environment or health.

Slow/Fast Fashion

Fast fashion is the modern practice of mass-producing cheap clothes that were previously seen on catwalks. This is an unsustainable practice fueled by easier means of consumption such as online shopping. Slow fashion, on the other hand, is a movement which supports buying less clothes of better quality, and supports small-scale production. This does come at higher prices.

Clean Production

Clean production was defined by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) as “continuous application of an ... environmental strategy towards... products, and services in order to increase overall efficiency and reduce damage and risks for humans and the environment”. This term is essential when considering how to make the industry more sustainable.

Laissez-Faire Economics:

An economic system in which transactions and business between companies, corporations and individuals are conducted with little to no economic interference or interventionism such as taxes, regulations or subsidies.

The Invisible Hand of the Market:

The market, driven by consumers will regulate itself, as consumers will chose which businesses survive and which do not according to their needs, interests and demands. As such if the public demands less polluting products, companies that do not adapt will go out of business whereas companies, which enforce environmental standards, will not.

General Overview

After the liberalization of textile quotas and restrictions on imports, most textile production in developed countries was outsourced to lesser economically developed countries due to less regulation on labour and environmental standards, which would allow greater profitability. In Europe, from 2004 to 2012 the percentage of textiles consumed that were imported rose from 33% to 87%. Likewise, in the United States, that percentage went from a 5% in the 1950's to 95% in 2015. As such, the environmental impact of the garment and textile industry on the environment is a relatively recent issue, due to the ending of WHO quotas on textiles and garment from 1990 to 2005 as part of a wider liberalization of the industry.

The environmental impact of the garment and textile industry reaches far beyond its production, and into much different areas and sectors, which are equally important when addressing the environmental impact of the industry. Many countries will have to take into account the pollution caused by the transportation and discharge of raw materials used for production, or the transportation of clothing newly established production centers to Europe and North America. Furthermore, the recyclability and reusability of clothing creating by the garment and textile industry must also be considered.

Due to the large complexities and interconnectedness of the recent trend of global capitalism, any large or meaningful changes to the garment industry will need to take into account many more complex issues and industries such as transportation or the harvesting of raw materials, both of which present problems of their own.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)

The UNEP is a global leader in climate and environment policy, and it is responsible for guiding developing countries towards an environmentally sound future. It will be a vital party in the issue of the textile and garment industry, as almost all countries which produce garments are LEDCs.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh's economic growth is primarily based on the textile and garment industry. In 2016-2017 it accounted for 80.7% of total export earnings. Most of the industry in Bangladesh is based on contracts with European and American fashion brands. In 2016 Bangladesh was the second biggest garment producer behind China. Even though many argue that the garment industry is more viable than foreign aid to assist Bangladesh towards economic growth, in recent years there have been many cases of bad working conditions in the industry with building collapses and fires causing the death of many workers. A notable case is that of Primark with the Rana Plaza- a garment factory- collapse in 2013.

China

China is the largest textile and clothes producer and exporter in the world, although since 2014 their power has been decreasing over the past years due to more competition from developing countries and a gradual inflation of labor costs. However, they do have a lot of expertise with years of building infrastructure and production lines for garments, and therefore should still be considered a leader in the industry.

United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

This UN organization aims to “eradicate poverty through inclusive and sustainable industrial development” (UNIDO). The UNIDO is already heavily involved in creating a more sustainable textile and garment industry, such as in poverty -stricken areas in which they share manuals which safely train sewing-machine operators.

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)

The OECD is composed of 37 countries created to boost economic growth and international trade. The OECD has implemented many programs, which have supported sustainable production, such as the Technology and Environment Program in 1990 which raised awareness of clean technologies.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, March, 2019
- American tariffs on manufacturing and textiles, 2016-2020
- European Union motion on Fast Fashion and its environmental impact, March 2017,
- Ending of WTO textile quotas, 1990-2004

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The European Union has previously attempted to solve the issue by passing resolutions restricting and imposing tariffs on textiles and garments that are not produced with environmental and labor standards multiple times. However, due to the diverse and differing interests of European countries and the time that is needed for such a motion to be discussed, passed and implemented such action has not been undertaken as of July 2020.

Many individual companies such as LL Bean and Patagonia have introduced strict environmental and labor standards with many more companies following suit and implementing such measures in hopes to cater to consumers that value such standards. However, the typically higher price of these brands combined with less consumer knowledge about the environmental impact of textile industry have made this solution a limited success.

While not with the express intention of addressing the environmental impact of the textile industry, American President Donald Trump has pursued a policy of tax cuts and tariffs which would incentive not only textile but also the larger manufacturing industry to return to the United States and as such be subject to its strict and robust labor and environmental regulations, solving large segments of the pollution caused by the textile industry in less developed countries. Due to the recent implementation of these measures, the results are yet to be seen.

In many less economically developed countries, small activist movements and groups have achieved limited success in dealing with the environmental pollution caused by the textile and garment industry however due to a lack of funding and support have not been able to make a large impact.

Possible Solutions

Many possible solutions are available to resolving the environmental impact of the garment and textile industry ranging from relocating the industry back to developed countries, increasing or decreasing regulation or more unorthodox solutions like reducing consumption or even government control of the industry. While all previously mentioned solutions have been tried, none have been used with the principle purpose of reducing the environmental impact of the garment industry.

One such solution as mentioned would be to relocate industry back to more economically developed countries, where robust environmental and labor regulations are strictly enforced and monitored which would prevent the pollution occurring in less economically developed countries due to the textile industry. In addition to reduced pollution, the relocation of textile industries would have the benefit of increasing employment and revitalizing old industrial sectors, which have disappeared in many developed countries, with the United States being the most noticeable example. With the recent additions of tariffs and tax cuts in the United States, the revitalization of such an industry may be possible

Another such solution would be to more strictly enforce and implement regulations over the environmental pollution caused by the textile industry, however this is not without significant challenges. Many lesser developed countries in which the textile industry is located lack the political willpower to implement such reforms and regulations, and in those in which a will to implement more strict reforms, the issue of widespread corruption would still need to be addressed, both of which will prove great challenges that will need to be addressed as well. Furthermore, one must take into account that due to increased regulation, foreign companies who set up garment and textiles factories may wish to move them elsewhere due to a loss of profitability, something that would greatly affect local workers.

On the other hand, another solution can be found in Laissez-Faire economics and the invisible hand of the market, in which consumers and the market will regulate itself and as such consumers will choose to not shop at companies which are actively polluting the environment, thus adding an incentive for companies to introduce environmental and even labor standards into the production of textiles. Unfortunately, due to a lack of consumer awareness, the market has so far failed to regulate itself for the most part, however in our free market economy and society, informing consumers about the pollution caused can play a large role in addressing the environmental impact of the garment industry.

While there is no clear solution or path to solving the environmental pollution and impact of the textile industry, a combination of previously attempted and suggested solutions

along with some new ones could be what is needed to make progress or even dealing with the deep social and economics problems that would allow such an industry to take hold in underdeveloped countries to begin with.

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Appendix or Appendices