

How Fast Fashion Adds to the Global Waste Problem

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Fast fashion is a major contributor to the global waste problem, as clothing is the fastest growing category of waste. An estimated 85% of donated clothes end up in landfills
- › Many textiles don't biodegrade well due to the synthetic fibers used. Chemicals and toxic dyes are also released, adding to our global water pollution problem
- › Several major fashion brands started take-back programs that promise to recycle your old duds. However, only 1% are actually made into new clothes
- › Take-back programs also promote buying more new stuff by offering discounts on new purchases. Critics say these programs are greenwashing as they do nothing to address the root causes of our growing textile waste problem
- › Fast fashion retailers make too many clothes and sell them too inexpensively. The poor quality makes the clothes disposable, and a little back-end recycling is circumventing rather than addressing these issues

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Shopping is often referred to as "retail therapy." Some suggest buying stuff, especially new clothes, can make you feel better. The problem is these positive emotions quickly vanish, while the excess clothes don't. In fact, fast fashion is a major contributor to the global waste problem, as clothing is now the fastest growing category of waste.¹

You may feel that you're doing your part by donating unwanted clothes to charity or dropping them off in a store take-back bin, but most of it ends up benefiting no one. The sad reality is that a large portion of these discarded clothes — an estimated 85%² — simply end up in a landfill somewhere, either locally or overseas.

In a 2018 CBC Marketplace report³ and video⁴ journalist Charlsie Agro investigated the claims made by retail take-back programs and took a Canadian family behind the scenes to show them what actually happens to the clothes donated at their local charity.

Charities, of course, promise to sell your secondhand clothes to people in need, while most store take-back programs promise your discards will be used to make new clothes. But how true are these claims?

What Actually Happens to Your Donated Clothing?

Agro visited one of nine Salvation Army warehouses in Toronto where leftover textiles end up — the clothes that didn't sell or were too worn to be sold. According to the head of donations for Salvation Army Canada, they had seen a 15% to 20% increase in the amount of clothing ending up at their centers in the two years prior to Agro's investigation.

Fast fashion, she says, is a major driver of this increase. In 2022, not only has nothing changed, but the problem has actually increased. In 2022 Canada is expecting a rebound in post-pandemic apparel sales of 14.8%, with annual year-over-year sales continuing to mount at 5%, 2.9%, 1.5% and 1.8% in 2023, 2024, 2025 and 2026.⁵

In the U.S., clothing manufacturers are seeing an increase of 10% in sales over 2021, which is the highest value they've seen since 2017.⁶ This is particularly remarkable when you consider that in 2014 Americans were buying 500% more clothes than they did in 1980.⁷

Overall, the fast fashion market is expected "to grow from \$91.23 billion in 2021 to \$99.23 billion in 2022 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.8% ... to \$133.43

billion in 2026 at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.7%," Cision PR Newswire reports.⁸

What's worse is that most of these clothes are transient in nature, in that Americans cast them off almost as fast as they buy them, with 11 million metric tons of textile waste in America ending up in landfills each year.⁹

And once they're there, many textiles don't biodegrade well, thanks to the synthetic fibers used. Chemicals and toxic dyes are also released from these textiles, adding to our global water pollution problem. The sheer amount of textile waste being generated each year makes fast fashion one of the top polluting industries in the world, Marketplace says.

Very Few Clothing Articles Can Be or Are Recycled

In an effort to cut down on this textile waste, several major fashion brands started take-back programs. Among them: Levis, Nike, H&M and Adidas. Stores were equipped with donation boxes, with marketing promises to recycle your old duds, thereby "closing the loop" and "making the old new."

The problem is, while take-back programs relieve shoppers of guilt, making them feel they're actually doing something good, they also promoted buying more new stuff, as many of the stores started offering a discount on a new purchase with each drop-off.

The question is: Do take-back programs actually address the problem, or simply perpetuate it under a fake veneer of "conscious consumerism"? According to environmentalist Elizabeth Cline, who is interviewed by Agros, less than 1% of clothing is actually recycled into new clothes.

I:Collect, a recycling company in charge of the donations made to several major retailers, including H&M, claims 35% of donated clothing is recycled into items such as carpet padding, painters' cloths and insulation — not clothing.

One of the primary reasons so little of our textile waste is recycled is because most clothes are made with blended fibers that are difficult to separate and reuse. Cline also pointed out that even full-fiber items such as pure cotton or wool are difficult to reuse as the recycling process diminishes the quality of the new item. "It weakens the cotton and wool strands," she said, "giving you a lesser product."

"The bottom line is, the technology just isn't there yet," Marketplace concluded. "It's way too expensive and time-consuming to make new clothes from old ones." Cline also believes that take-back programs are an "easy environmental win" for these companies.

It gives them an aura of sustainability while allowing them to continue business as usual, and not having to make any significant changes to their manufacturing and business model. In reality, the recycling programs have little impact on the root cause of the problem. "It doesn't make fast fashion any more sustainable," Cline says.

How Fast Does Fashion Need to Change?

As noted by Marketplace, the fashion industry used to have four seasons: Winter, summer, spring and fall. Today, collections are updated on a weekly, if not near-daily, basis! You can enter an H&M store on a Monday and Wednesday in the same week and find a new assortment of items.

Like Cline, Claudia Marsales, senior manager of waste and environmental management for Markham, Ontario, was also unimpressed by retailers' effort to recycle. Marsales told Marketplace that at the current volume of sales, it would take fast fashion outlets 12 years to recycle what they sell in 48 hours.

In her view, take-back programs are a losing proposition and nothing more than a form of greenwashing. It does nothing to address "the broken business model of fast fashion." Fast fashion retailers make too many clothes and sell them too inexpensively. The poor quality makes the clothes disposable, and a little back-end recycling is really just circumventing rather than addressing the real problems.

In short, the industry business model is the root issue, and recycling programs are a simple way to make the industry appear more responsible without actually altering the way they do business.

Donations Are Not Given to the Needy

Many are under the mistaken impression that their donations will be distributed to those in need, either locally or elsewhere. This, however, is not the case. According to a 2006 report by ABC News,¹⁰ upward of 90% of clothing donations to charitable organizations were ending up with textile recyclers.

Only 10% are offered for sale to struggling Americans looking for a bargain. Even when items are shipped overseas to areas such as Africa, they are sold, from one middleman to the next, not donated. Across the board, throughout the distribution chain, whatever cannot be sold always ends up in a landfill.

According to Marketplace, Nairobi, in 2014 Kenya, was the No. 1 buyer of Western discards. It was buying \$22 million of discarded clothing from Canada alone each year. East Africa as a whole imported a whopping \$151 billion worth of used clothing from the West in 2015.¹¹

In 2022, 84% of castoff clothes in the U.S. ultimately end up in landfills and incinerators.¹² So, many of the near-unused clothes you give away for free are ultimately sold for profit at used clothes markets in Kenya and other less affluent nations or are in landfills. When it comes to donations to developing countries, low quality is a problem, though, as it makes the clothes hard to sell.

Kenyans simply don't want to spend their hard-earned money for something that will break or turn ragged within a few washes, and whatever doesn't sell at these local markets is again simply dumped in the trash or burned.

Africa Doesn't Want Your Discards

Imports of second-hand clothing into the African continent have actually become a serious waste problem. Several years ago it was also threatening locals' ability to make a living. Used clothes sell for less than 10% of the cost of a locally made garment, making the local garment industry incapable of competing.¹³

The problem finally became so great that in March 2016, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda proposed a ban on all imports of used clothing by 2019 in order to boost local textile and clothing industries.¹⁴

In August 2016, Tanzania's minister of state also announced the implementation of a tailor training program aimed at educating a new generation in the art of textile making and sewing.¹⁵

A February 2018 report¹⁶ by Aljazeera noted that Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda agreed to implement the ban, but faced "threats of trade sanctions from the U.S. which says the ban violates free-trade agreements." Kenya stated it could not adhere to the proposed 2019 ban deadline as the domestic textile production was still unable to meet local demands.¹⁷

How Can You Be Part of the Solution?

At the end, Marketplace addressed the question that's bound to be on your mind at this point: What do you do with the clothes you no longer want? The primary solution should be obvious: Buy less. Buying only what you actually need will allow you to spend more on high-quality items that last. A well-made piece of clothing could easily remain usable for years, if not decades.

If an item is still in good condition but for whatever reason doesn't fit your body or lifestyle anymore, ask around to see if anyone wants or needs it first. Some people have started doing clothing swap meets, which is a great way to minimize waste and help each other out financially.

Local women's shelters and crisis centers may also accept your donations. As a last-ditch resort, donate clothing that is still in good condition to a reputable charity that

serves the needs of your local community. Your local church charity, for example, may distribute them to the needy within your community. Upcycling is another option. See if there are any local quilters in your area, for example, and donate suitable fabrics to them. Reader's Digest offers these other solutions:¹⁸

- Find ways to repair and reuse your clothing in creative ways
- Upcycle with ideas from Pinterest or other craft websites
- Sell or swap them online
- Use them for rags around the house (you won't have to buy cleaning cloths if you do this)
- Change your mindset: Don't justify a purchase because you think it'll have a robust second life once you're through with it

At the end of the day, though, the true answer lies in reducing your total consumption. A topic not discussed by Marketplace, but which goes hand in hand with disposable fashion is the harsh reality of sweatshop workers who suffer to produce the goods we buy on the cheap and discard with nary a thought of what it took to make it.

Think about it: How would a retailer be able to sell a T-shirt for \$5 unless they paid next to nothing for the labor to make it? Equally concerning is the environmental pollution caused by the textile industry.

Textile Industry Is a Major Source of Other Pollution

More than 60 different chemical classes are used in the production of yarn, fabric pretreatments and finishing.¹⁹ When fabrics are manufactured, between 10% and 100% of the weight of the fabric is added in chemicals.²⁰ Even fabrics made from 100% nonorganic cotton are coated with 27% of its weight in chemicals.^{21,22}

Not only can these chemicals affect human health when worn, but they also end up in our environment — both during the initial processing and once the clothing is discarded

in a landfill. As noted in the book "Environmental Deterioration and Human Health," in the chapter dedicated to the health effects of textile industry wastewater:²³

"Textile effluent is a cause of significant amount of environmental degradation and human illnesses. About 40% of globally used colorants contain organically bound chlorine, a known carcinogen. Chemicals evaporate into the air we breathe or are absorbed through our skin; they show up as allergic reactions and may cause harm to children even before birth.

Due to this chemical pollution, the normal functioning of cells is disturbed and this, in turn, may cause alteration in the physiology and biochemical mechanisms of animals resulting in impairment of important functions like respiration, osmoregulation, reproduction, and even mortality.

Heavy metals, present in textile industry effluent, are not biodegradable; hence, they accumulate in primary organs in the body and over time begin to fester, leading to various symptoms of diseases.

Thus, untreated or incompletely treated textile effluent can be harmful to both aquatic and terrestrial life by adversely affecting the natural ecosystem and causing long-term health effects."

Conscious Consumer Considerations

In the past, I had not really given much thought to the clothes I wear, and was shocked to learn about the environmental damage occurring as a result of today's fast and cheap fashion. Now I typically acquire five new pieces of clothing a year and this is usually replacement underwear.

I've since dedicated myself to wearing sustainably produced organic clothing and supporting "Care What You Wear" movement through Regeneration International.²⁴ I also added a line of organic clothing grown and sewn in the USA to my webstore, and we support the SITO brand — a GOTS-certified organic clothing brand by the biodynamic certification agency Demeter.

The Mercola-RESET Biodynamic Organic Project is also helping 55 certified organic farmers in India convert to biodynamic production of cotton on 110 acres of land. Biodynamic farming is organic by nature, but it goes even further, operating on the premise that the farm be regenerative and entirely self-sustaining.

Biodynamic farming brings animals and plants together to form a living web of life, a self-sustaining ecosystem that benefits the surrounding community. RESET (Regenerate, Environment, Society, Economy, Textiles) will pay all organic biodynamic farmers in our project a 25% premium over conventional cotton prices, which will be paid directly to the farmers.

So, going forward, do give some serious thought to cleaning up and "greening" your wardrobe. Remember, being a conscious consumer does not stop at food and household products. Your clothing can be a source of hazardous chemicals, and cheaply made fast fashion items take a tremendous toll on the environment and the people working in the industry.

As a consumer, your choices will help guide the fashion industry toward more humane and environmentally sane manufacturing processes, and not just stopping short at a façade of sustainability through take-back recycling programs that do very little to curtail our global textile waste and environmental pollution problems.

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