

How fast fashion hurts environment, workers, society

10 January 2019, by Neil Schoenherr



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The overabundance of fast fashion—readily available, inexpensively made clothing—has created an environmental and social justice crisis, claims a new paper from an expert on environmental health at Washington University in St. Louis.

"From the growth of water-intensive cotton, to the release of untreated dyes into local water sources, to worker's low wages and poor working conditions, the environmental and [social costs](#) involved in textile manufacturing are widespread," said Christine Ekenga, assistant professor at the Brown School and co-author of the paper "The Global Environmental Injustice of Fast Fashion," published in the journal *Environmental Health*.

"This is a massive problem," Ekenga said. "The disproportionate environmental and social impacts of [fast fashion](#) warrant its classification as an issue of global environmental injustice."

In the paper, Ekenga and her co-authors—Rachel Bick, MPH '18, and Erika Halsey, MPH '18—assert that negative consequences at each step of the

fast-fashion supply chain have created a global environmental justice dilemma.

"While fast fashion offers consumers an opportunity to buy more clothes for less, those who work in or live near textile manufacturing facilities bear a disproportionate burden of [environmental health](#) hazards," the authors wrote.

"Furthermore, increased consumption patterns have created millions of tons of textile waste in landfills and unregulated settings. This is particularly applicable to low- and [middle-income countries](#) (LMICs) as much of this waste ends up in second-hand clothing markets. These LMICs often lack the supports and resources necessary to develop and enforce environmental and occupational safeguards to protect human health."

In the paper, the researchers discuss the environmental and occupational hazards during textile production, particularly for those in LMICs, and the issue of [textile](#) waste.

They also address a number of potential solutions, including sustainable fibers, corporate sustainability, trade policy and the role of the consumer.

Globally, 80 billion pieces of new clothing are purchased each year, translating to \$1.2 trillion annually for the global [fashion](#) industry. The majority of these products are assembled in China and Bangladesh, while the United States consumes more clothing and textiles than any other nation in the world.

Approximately 85 percent of the [clothing](#) Americans consume, nearly 3.8 billion pounds annually, is sent to landfills as solid waste, amounting to nearly 80 pounds per American per year.

More information: Rachel Bick et al. The global environmental injustice of fast fashion,

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