



*Tackling
the use of
modern
slavery in
fast
fashion*

Research Report

Mellisha Tiwari

MAIN CHAIR UNHRC



Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the term modern slavery has come to describe a set of practices that, while less visible than historical forms of slavery, remain equally devastating in their impact on human lives. According to the Global Slavery Index (Walk Free Foundation, 2023), an estimated 50 million people are trapped in conditions of modern slavery worldwide, a figure that has risen by 10 million since 2016. These individuals are often forced to work under threat, deception, or coercion, unable to refuse or leave exploitative conditions. Despite the formal abolition of slavery in almost every nation, this hidden form persists in multiple sectors of the global economy, sustained by complex supply chains and a relentless pursuit of profit.

Among the most significant contributors to this crisis is the fast fashion industry, a sector defined by rapid production cycles, low prices, and constantly changing trends. Over the past three decades, fast fashion has revolutionised the global apparel market by allowing consumers in wealthy countries to purchase trendy clothing at unprecedented speed and affordability. However, behind this apparent convenience lies a system heavily dependent on the exploitation of cheap labour in developing countries. Garment workers in nations such as Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, and Cambodia often endure inhumane conditions, excessive working hours, and wages far below living standards. Many are subject to forced labour, debt bondage, and physical or psychological abuse.

The origins of modern slavery in fashion are rooted in globalisation and deregulated labour markets. As multinational brands outsourced production to countries with

lower manufacturing costs, they created vast, opaque supply networks. Within these networks, subcontracting became a common practice, enabling companies to meet high demand quickly, but also to distance themselves from responsibility for the workers welfare. This lack of transparency allows exploitation to flourish largely unchecked. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that forced labour generates over USD 236 billion in illegal profits each year, with the private sector, including textile manufacturing, accounting for a significant share of that figure.

Modern slavery in the fast fashion industry does not manifest solely through forced labour in factories. It also includes the coercion of migrant workers, the exploitation of child labour, and the use of informal or home-based work that escapes legal regulation. Many workers are lured by deceptive recruitment practices, trapped by illegal fees or withheld wages, and left without access to justice. For instance, investigations following the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, which killed more than 1,100 garment workers, revealed systemic negligence and labour exploitation throughout the global supply chain. Despite widespread outrage and promises of reform, numerous reports suggest that unsafe working conditions and abusive practices remain prevalent a decade later.

The persistence of modern slavery in fashion is sustained by both corporate and consumer behaviour. Major brands, seeking to maintain low production costs, continue to pressure suppliers for cheaper and faster output. Consumers, meanwhile, are often unaware of the human cost embedded in the clothes they buy or feel powerless to act differently. As Fashion Revolution (2023) notes, the average consumer today purchases 60% more garments than two decades ago, while each item is kept for only half as long. This overconsumption fuels demand for cheap labour and accelerates cycles of exploitation.

In essence, the issue of modern slavery in fast fashion exposes the darker side of global capitalism, where profit and convenience outweigh ethical responsibility. It is an issue that transcends borders and challenges both producers and consumers to reconsider the human impact of their choices. Addressing it requires not only stronger laws and corporate accountability but also a profound cultural shift toward transparency, sustainability, and respect for human dignity.

Definitions of Key Terms

Modern slavery:

Modern slavery refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, or abuse of power. It includes practices such as forced labour, human trafficking, debt bondage, and forced marriage.

Forced Labour:

Forced labour is work or service that people are compelled to do against their will, often under threat of punishment or harm.

Fast Fashion:

Fast fashion describes a business model based on rapid production of inexpensive clothing to meet ever-changing consumer trends. It relies on globalised supply chains and low-cost labour, often at the expense of ethical working conditions.

Supply Chain:

A supply chain is the network of individuals, organisations, and activities involved in producing and delivering a product to the consumer. In fast fashion, supply chains often span multiple countries and involve subcontractors, which can obscure responsibility for labour exploitation.

Ethical Consumption:

Ethical consumption refers to the practice of purchasing products that are produced in a socially and environmentally responsible way. In the context of fashion, it means choosing clothing that does not contribute to exploitation, forced labour, or environmental harm.

General overview

Modern slavery in the fast fashion industry represents one of the most urgent and complex human rights challenges in the global economy. It involves the systematic exploitation of vulnerable workers, often in developing countries, to sustain the constant demand for cheap, trendy clothing in wealthier markets. Modern slavery is not always visible, it manifests through forced labour, debt bondage, excessive working hours, unsafe conditions, and unpaid wages. These exploitative practices are embedded deep within the global textile and garment supply chains that produce much of the world's clothing.

Fast fashion operates on a simple but harmful formula: low production cost, rapid turnaround, and high consumer demand. To keep prices low and profits high, many major clothing brands outsource production to suppliers in countries where labour laws are weak, enforcement is poor, and poverty leaves workers with few alternatives. The result is a system that prioritizes speed and profit over human rights and dignity.

According to the Walk Free Foundation (2023), approximately 50 million people worldwide are trapped in conditions that qualify as modern slavery, with an estimated 27.6 million in forced labour. The garment and textile industries are among the sectors most frequently linked to such exploitation.

The roots of modern slavery in fashion trace back to the industrial revolution and the global expansion of textile production. During the 19th century, Western industrial economies began outsourcing parts of their textile manufacturing to colonies and developing regions, where raw materials like cotton were produced under exploitative systems. Although traditional slavery was formally abolished in most countries by the late 1800s, exploitative

labour conditions continued in new forms, particularly in colonial and postcolonial economies.

The rise of globalization in the late 20th century intensified these trends. As international trade barriers fell and production costs became a driving force in business strategy, multinational companies sought cheaper manufacturing bases overseas. The emergence of “fast fashion” in the 1990s, spearheaded by brands like Zara, H&M, and later Shein, revolutionised the industry by drastically shortening production cycles. New collections could be designed, manufactured, and delivered to stores within weeks, forcing suppliers to operate at extreme speed and minimal cost.

This shift gave rise to vast, decentralised supply chains stretching across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many of these factories subcontracted production to smaller workshops or home-based workers, creating layers of anonymity that made monitoring and accountability nearly impossible. It was within these hidden layers that modern slavery found fertile ground.

The Current Situation

Modern slavery remains deeply embedded in the fashion supply chain. A 2022 International Labour Organization (ILO) report estimates that forced labour in the private economy generates over USD 236 billion in illegal profits annually, a 37% increase since 2014. Textile and garment manufacturing contribute significantly to this figure.

Countries such as Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China are central to garment production. In Bangladesh alone, the garment sector employs over 4 million workers, 85% of whom are women. Many earn wages far below living standards and work in unsafe buildings, sometimes under coercive conditions. The Clean Clothes Campaign (2023) notes that some workers earn as little as \$75 per month, despite international pressure for reform.

Has the Situation Improved?

While awareness and advocacy have increased, progress has been uneven. Following tragedies like the Rana Plaza factory collapse (2013), which killed more than 1,100 workers, international initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh brought temporary improvements in safety inspections and transparency. However, as production shifted to other countries with fewer regulations (e.g., Ethiopia, Myanmar), exploitative practices persisted.

In some regions, the situation has worsened. The rise of ultra-fast fashion companies (e.g., Shein, Boohoo, Fashion Nova) has accelerated demand for cheap clothing even further, pressuring suppliers to cut costs at the expense of workers' rights. A 2022 Channel 4 investigation revealed that workers in Leicester, UK, supplying Boohoo, were paid less than half the minimum wage, showing that modern slavery is not limited to developing nations.

Regional Variations

South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan): Persistent issues with forced overtime, low wages, and unsafe conditions. Child labour remains a risk in cotton supply chains.

East and Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, China): High dependency on migrant labour. Reports of coercive recruitment and restrictions on movement, especially among factory

migrants.

Africa (Ethiopia, Lesotho): New garment hubs emerging with weak regulation. Workers often lack union representation and live in poverty.

Western countries (UK, USA): Cases of hidden exploitation in local textile factories and migrant labour markets show that modern slavery is global, not confined to poorer regions.

Corporate and Consumer Response

Some brands have introduced transparency initiatives, publishing supplier lists and joining multi-stakeholder programs such as the Ethical Trading Initiative and the Fashion Transparency Index. However, progress remains limited, as many of these measures are voluntary and lack enforcement.

Consumers are increasingly aware of ethical fashion and sustainability, but overconsumption continues to drive exploitation. The Fashion Revolution (2023) report highlights that global clothing production has doubled since 2000, while the average number of times an item is worn has decreased by 36%. This cycle fuels the demand for low-cost, high-turnover garments, perpetuating the very conditions that enable modern slavery.



Modern slavery in fast fashion - <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/commission-general/information-commission-suppliers-modern-slavery-and-human-rights>



Child labour - <https://wol.iza.org/news/50-million-people-trapped-in-modern-slavery>

Major parties involved

1. Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the world's largest exporters of ready-made garments and therefore plays a central role in discussions on labour exploitation in fast fashion. The country's garment sector employs over four million people, the majority being women from low-income backgrounds.

Bangladesh's position has historically prioritised economic growth and job creation, often at the expense of labour protections. Although its government has introduced labour reforms, enforcement remains weak due to corruption, lack of inspectors, and political pressure from factory owners.

Measures taken: Bangladesh joined the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, strengthened building inspections, and raised the minimum wage. However, critics argue that wages remain far below a living wage and that exploitative factory practices persist.

2. H&M (Hennes & Mauritz)

H&M is one of the largest fast-fashion companies globally and has significant influence over labour standards due to its large supplier network.

The company's stance is that H&M publicly acknowledges the risks of forced labour in its

supply chain and presents itself as a leader in sustainability and ethical sourcing.

Measures taken: 1. publishes a full list of suppliers 2. participates in the Fashion Transparency Index 3. has committed to paying living wages through the Fair Living Wage Strategy

However, critics argue that despite strong commitments, actual improvements for garment workers have been slow and inconsistent across regions.

3. International Labour Organization (ILO)

The ILO is the primary international body addressing labour standards and working conditions worldwide.

ILO's stance: It identifies forced labour as a severe global human rights violation and stresses the need for strong labour laws, enforcement mechanisms, and social protections.

Measures taken: 1. Adoption of ILO Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour 2. Publication of global estimates and monitoring tools 3. Technical support to countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Cambodia, the ILO also works with companies and labour unions to improve supply chain transparency.

Timeline of Key Events

1990s - Rise of Fast Fashion

Brands such as Zara and H&M pioneer the fast-fashion model, accelerating production cycles and increasing reliance on low-cost labour in developing countries.

2000 - UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons ("Palermo Protocol")

The UN adopts a key international treaty defining human trafficking and modern slavery, influencing labour regulations in global supply chains.

2013 - Rana Plaza Factory Collapse in Bangladesh

A garment factory building collapses, killing over 1,100 workers. This becomes the deadliest industrial disaster in modern garment history and exposes global supply-chain exploitation.

2013 - Creation of the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety

Following Rana Plaza, over 200 brands sign a legally binding agreement to improve factory safety and transparency in Bangladesh.

2015 - UK Modern Slavery Act Introduced

The UK becomes the first country to legally require large companies to report on steps taken to eliminate modern slavery from their supply chains.

2017 - Australia Passes Its Modern Slavery Act

Inspired by the UK legislation, Australia introduces strong reporting requirements for companies operating within or trading with the country.

2020 - Uyghur Forced Labour Concerns Intensify

Reports surface showing forced labour in Xinjiang cotton production. Several countries begin restricting imports linked to Uyghur exploitation.

2021 - U.S. Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA)

The United States bans imports of goods made in Xinjiang unless companies prove supply chains are free from forced labour.

2023 - Global Slavery Index Reports 50 Million People in Modern Slavery

The Walk Free Foundation releases data indicating a sharp rise in forced labour worldwide, with fashion identified as one of the highest-risk industries.

Previous attempts to solve the issue:

Historical abolition: The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is a key historical attempt, formally abolishing slavery and involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime, in 1865. Prior to this, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 had declared enslaved people in Confederate states to be free.

International legal frameworks: The ILO has developed several conventions to combat forced labor and its worst forms. The Forced Labour Convention (1930) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (1957) are foundational, while the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999) addresses specific child-related exploitation.

Modern legislation: The UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 is a significant modern attempt to address the issue. It consolidates previous offenses into a single piece of legislation and requires organizations to report on the steps they are taking to prevent modern slavery in their operations and supply chains.

Possible solutions

1. Strengthen Supply Chain Transparency

Brands should be legally required to map and publicly disclose all tiers of their supply chains. This reduces hidden subcontracting, makes labour violations easier to identify, and holds companies accountable for working conditions.

2. Enforce Binding Labour Regulations

Governments and international bodies should implement and enforce mandatory standards, such as living wages, safe working conditions, and bans on forced labour. Independent inspections and penalties for violations are essential for compliance.

3. Promote Ethical Purchasing and Fair Trade

Encouraging consumers to buy from ethical brands and supporting fair-trade certified products can reduce demand for exploitatively produced garments. Public awareness campaigns can shift consumer behaviour toward sustainability and human-rights-based choices.

Further Readings

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