

The High Price of Fashion

Everyone needs clothes. They shelter us from the elements and define our personal style. Unfortunately, the shirt on your back may be more expensive than you thought—both for the environment, and for the workers that made it. The conventional way of growing cotton, the most common fabric material, relies on heavy inputs of insecticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers, many of which are known or probable carcinogens. Dyes used in clothing can contain toxic chemicals, while permanent press treatment can release formaldehyde gas, also a likely carcinogen.



Most of the world's clothing is manufactured in sweatshops in poorer countries, where workers earn less than they need to live, face cramped or unsanitary conditions, and are often subjected to physical, sexual, and verbal abuse. First-hand accounts from factories producing for many designer companies report that people often work more than 100 hours a week, and unions are not permitted.

As global awareness of the real price of fashion grows, many consumers as well as some clothing manufacturers are leading the push for more eco- and worker-friendly apparel.

DID YOU KNOW...?

- * The number of garments bought by U.S. consumers increased 73 percent between 1996 and 2001, while apparel prices have fallen 10 percent over the past decade.
- * By 2001, the average U.S. consumer bought 48 new pieces of clothing a year. Rates of consumer discard, meanwhile, rose by 10 percent a year throughout the 1990s, according to Goodwill.
- * Sweatshop workers in Mexico earn 85 cents an hour for their labor, while in Indonesia the pay is only 15 cents an hour. Even in the United States, a worker may earn less than \$5 for making a garment that will sell for \$100.
- * A cotton T-shirt blended with polyester can release approximately one quarter of its weight in air pollutants and 10 times its weight in carbon dioxide.
- * Each 100-percent organic cotton T-shirt you buy eliminates the use of 150 grams of agricultural chemicals.
- * Hemp, which has been used to make clothing and other products for 12,000 years, contains some of the strongest, longest soft fibers in existence and can stand up to most weeds and bugs.

SUCCESS STORIES

- ❖ Organic cotton growing accounts for only 0.03 percent of the world's cotton, but is expanding. At one Egyptian farm, organic cultivation has boosted cotton yields by more than 30 percent, and the fiber is processed into textiles without any synthetic chemicals.
- ❖ In 2001, the sportswear manufacturer Nike helped launch Organic Exchange, a network of 55 businesses that aims to expand the use of organic cotton in manufacturing over the next 10 years. More than a third of the cotton clothes Nike produced in 2001 contained at least 3 percent certified organic fiber.
- ❖ Though it's illegal in the United States, hemp farming is permitted in much of Europe and Asia and was legalized in Canada in 1998. Organic wool and linen are also popular natural fiber alternatives.

❖ The growing global movement to end worker abuse in clothing manufacture has forced many sweatshop users out of hiding. In the United States, student activists have demanded that their schools contract only with "sweat-free" producers, and new companies like American Apparel and SweatX are pioneering the fair trade apparel market.



SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO:

- ✓ Avoid clothing brands that have been known to use sweatshops. In the United States, these include Wal-Mart, Gap (Old Navy, Banana Republic), and Target.
- ✓ Purchase at least some clothing items from up-and-coming fair trade brands and makers of organic cotton and natural fiber products.
- ✓ Donate your old clothes to thrift shops, or buy inexpensive "recycled" garments from these stores.
- ✓ Write to sweatshop-using companies to tell them you won't give them your business until they stop outsourcing to sweatshops.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF AND OTHERS:

Next time you shop for clothes, check labels before you buy. Educate yourself about how and where these items are manufactured. Buy fair trade and organic/natural fiber items, or shun the mall altogether and take your next shopping trip to a thrift store.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- ☛ **Global Exchange** (www.globalexchange.org) is an international human rights organization dedicated to promoting environmental, political, and social justice, including in the global garment industry.
- ☛ **BehindtheLabel.org** (www.behindthelabel.org) provides information on labor abuses in the clothing industry and offers a range of consumer tips for buying sweatshop-free apparel.
- ☛ **Sustainable Cotton Project** (www.sustainablecotton.org) works with farmers, manufacturers, and consumers to pioneer markets for certified organically grown cotton.
- ☛ **North American Industrial Hemp Council** (naihc.org) offers information on the hemp industry, with the goal of reestablishing and expanding the use of industrial hemp in North America.