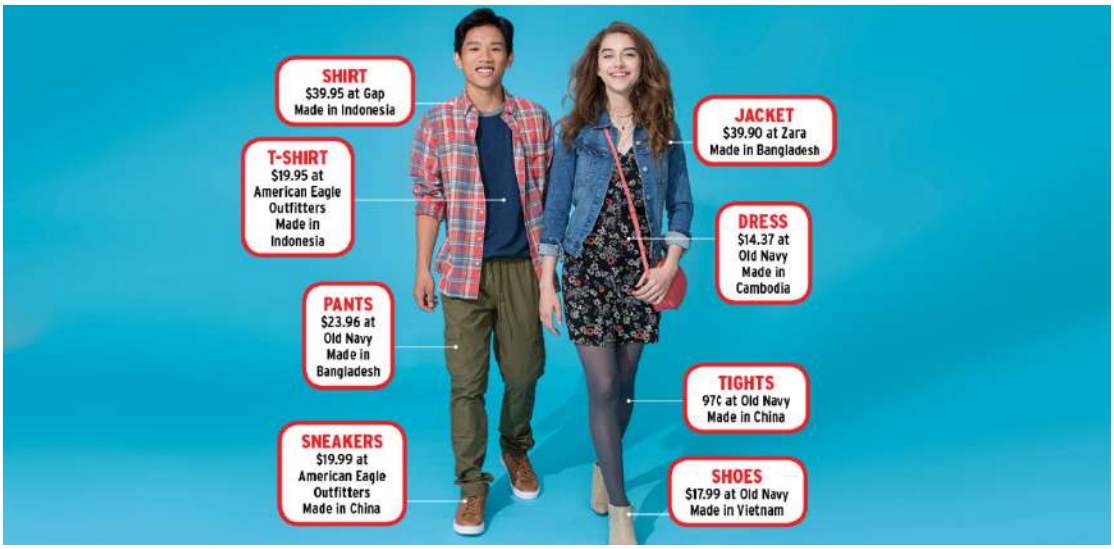

The Real Cost of Cheap Fashion

Many of our trendy, inexpensive clothes are made in places like Bangladesh, where workers—including children—toil under conditions that may shock you

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By Laura Anastasia

Young women hunch over sewing machines in a windowless workroom in Bangladesh. Elbow to elbow in the stifling heat, they assemble jackets. Together, the women must sew hundreds of jackets an hour, more than 1,000 a day. Their daily wage is less than $3.

Just a week or two later, these same jackets will be labeled fall's hottest back-to-school item, selling to teens for $14.99 each at malls across the United States.

The jackets are just one example of what is known as fast fashion: trendy clothes designed, created, and sold to consumers as quickly as possible at extremely low prices. New looks arrive in stores weekly or even daily, and they cost so little that many people can afford to fill their closets with new outfits multiple times each year—then toss them the minute they go out of style.

Chains such as H&M and Zara first popularized fast fashion in the early 2000s. It has since spread throughout the entire clothing industry. As a result, global clothing production has more than tripled since 2000. The industry now churns out more than 150 billion garments annually.

Fast fashion items may not cost you much at the cash register, but they come with a serious price: Tens of millions of people in developing countries, some just children, work long hours in dangerous conditions to make them, in the kinds of factories often labeled sweatshops. Most garment workers are paid barely enough to survive.

Fast fashion also hurts the environment. Garments are manufactured using toxic chemicals and then transported around the globe, making the fashion industry the world's second-largest polluter, after the oil industry. And millions of tons of discarded clothing piles up in landfills each year.

"A lot of what we're throwing away hasn't even been worn that many times," says Elizabeth Cline, author of *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. "Clothing has become a cheap form of entertainment."

Until the 1970s, most apparel worn by Americans was made in the United States. Then clothing production, like a lot of manufacturing, began moving overseas, where labor costs were lower. As recently as 1990, half the clothes sold in the U.S. were made in the U.S. Today, it's just 2 percent.

Most American clothing companies now manufacture their merchandise in developing countries in Asia *(see map, below)*. Workers there earn a fraction of what U.S. workers make—and have fewer protections. The lower labor costs translate to lower prices for shoppers (who then buy more clothing) and higher profits for retailers. That's helped make fashion a $3 trillion global industry.

Today, many of the world's 75 million garment workers live in China and Bangladesh, the top-two clothing producers. Workers often earn just a few dollars a day. Many are women in their teens.

"They're sometimes the first one in their families to have a real job, so the family is eager to get them into the factories as quickly as they can," says Michael Posner of New York University's Stern Center for Business and Human Rights. "It's a very tough existence."

Indeed, garment workers often toil in windowless rooms thick with fumes from the chemicals used to manufacture and dye clothes. If they dare miss a day because they're sick, they risk being fired.

For Taslima Aktar, that wasn't an option. The 23-year-old couldn't afford to lose her job at the Windy Apparels factory in Bangladesh, so when her manager refused last year to give her time off to see a doctor about a persistent fever she accepted it.

Weeks later, Aktar passed out at work. After she was revived, her boss sent her back to her sewing machine. Shortly after, her heart stopped and she died.

"We know the same thing can happen any day, to any of us," says one of Aktar's co-workers, who told her story to *Slate*.

A 13-year-old in a textile factory in Bangladesh; the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory *(right)* in Bangladesh in 2013 killed more than 1,100 people.

A Deadly Accident

Many people didn't give much thought to how their clothing was made until April 24, 2013, when the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh collapsed. The deadliest accident in the history of the garment industry, it killed more than 1,100 workers and injured 2,500 others. The factory, overloaded with too many floors, workers, and equipment, had been making clothing for global brands such as Benetton, Joe Fresh, and Mango.

After the accident, many big brands pledged to improve garment factory conditions. About 200 major clothing companies partnered to create factory oversight programs in Bangladesh. In recent years, these programs have trained about 2 million workers in safety procedures. The companies have also hired independent engineers to inspect their factories.

In southern China, too, many factories now offer safer conditions and better wages than they did a decade ago. In some areas, the minimum wage for garment workers reached $312 a month last year—42 percent more than the previous year.

Better working conditions and wages come at a price, however. Some factories in Bangladesh have had to reduce their production capacity to afford higher employee pay and building repairs. That means the factories are less able to fill massive orders from big brands. As a result, big clothing companies may eventually shift their business to even poorer countries with fewer regulations, experts say.

Other factories can't afford to make the major structural upgrades that are needed for them to be safe. (Of the 2,000 Bangladeshi factories that have been inspected so far, only 79 had passed final inspection as of March 2017.)

That's one reason unsafe working conditions persist. Last year, a garment factory fire in India killed 13 people. Another fire this past June injured more than 20 knitwear factory workers in Bangladesh. Some jumped out of third-story windows to escape the flames.

Environmental Toll

Fast fashion also takes a heavy toll on the environment. The industry consumes enormous amounts of water and other natural resources. Producing enough cotton for one pair of jeans takes about 1,800 gallons of water —the equivalent of about 105 showers.

Manufacturing polyester, which is made from petroleum, releases dangerous gases into the air. And farming cotton accounts for a quarter of all pesticides used in the United States. (The U.S. sends about 70 percent of the cotton it grows overseas, where it's turned into clothing.) Some of those pesticides can cause asthma and other health problems, and the chemicals pollute fresh water.

The damage doesn't end once clothing is made. Americans on average trash more than 70 pounds of clothes and shoes a year. Most are burned or piled in landfills, where synthetic fibers can take hundreds of years to break down.

"A lot of the problems in the fashion industry are things that are happening in other places: air and water pollution in China, poverty and low wages in Bangladesh," says Cline. "The waste is happening in our own backyard."

Many big brands pledged to improve factory conditions.

As more people have become aware of the ugly side of fast fashion, the push for ethically made clothing has grown. In the U.S., hundreds of start-ups are creating clothes out of recycled or organic fabrics. These companies use materials from U.S. factories, where they can better monitor working conditions. Big brands are trying to be more eco-conscious, as well. H&M, for example, offers customers store credit to recycle clothes at its retail locations.

"I think we're going to see big fashion brands become leaders in sustainable clothes and make them accessible and more affordable," Cline predicts.

But experts agree it will take more than just efforts by clothing companies to remedy the problems of fast fashion. Local factory owners, global retailers, and consumers must all play a role.

If teenage shoppers, to whom much of fast fashion is marketed, educate themselves about how their clothes are made and think carefully about what they buy, it can make a real difference, experts say.

"It's everybody's problem," says Posner, "and it's everybody's responsibility to come together and solve it."

Where Your Clothes Were Made

In 2016, the U.S. imported almost 27 billion articles of clothing. Here are the top 10 countries those clothes came from.