

ASIA

# Fast-Fashion Castoffs Fuel Global Recycling Network

Deluge of secondhand clothes from rich countries is processed, resold in the developing world



Workers picking through tons of used clothing at a factory in Kandla, India, at the start of a processing operation designed to wring every penny from the garments.  
ALLISON JOYCE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**VIEW INTERACTIVE**

*By Eric Bellman*

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KANDLA, India—As heaps of castoff clothes from the U.S. cascade down a conveyor belt, rows of sari-clad women frantically sort the garments by type—T-shirts in one barrel, women’s jeans in another. They pluck out sweatpants, underwear, sweaters, coats, and even furs.

The jumble is part of the thousands of tons of used clothing that arrive each month in this western Indian port, a hub in the vast global network that purchases secondhand clothes in rich countries and resells them throughout the developing world.

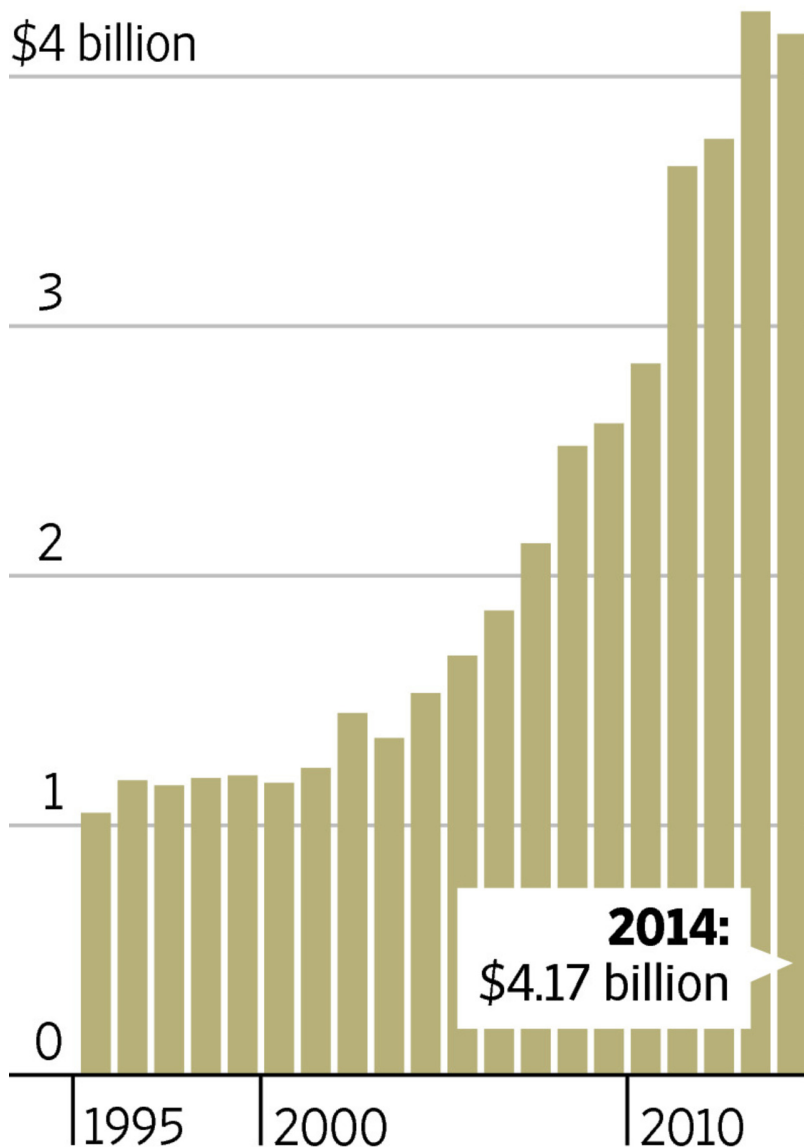
“I don’t understand why people throw away all these clothes,” says one of the sorters, as she sits on a warehouse floor during a break. “Maybe they don’t have time to wash them.”

In fact, the glut springs from the rise of fast fashion, which has flooded the world with inexpensive clothing, often produced in some of the same low-wage countries where it later ends up sold in market stalls or reprocessed into goods like blankets or pillow stuffing.

To some, this a virtuous circle, minimizing waste while providing jobs and a source of low-cost clothes for the poor. Even retailers such as Hennes & Mauritz AB and others have gotten into the act, collecting worn apparel to recycle. Since it began collecting used clothing at its stores in 2013, H&M has recycled more than 20,000 tons of it.

# Cast Away

## Global used clothing trade



Source: UN Comtrade

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“The U.S. doesn’t need all this filling up its landfill when there is a better use for it,” said Jaideep Sajdeh, managing director of Texool, a garment-processing company in Kandla.

But some clothing makers in emerging markets say the seemingly endless supply of used apparel stifles the growth of local textile industries. India allows the processing and re-export of used clothes, but bans their sale locally, as do many other countries worried about the impact of the surging used-clothing trade.

Such bans, combined with an economic slowdown in parts of Africa, have dented demand. But the clothes keep coming. Most of the items are deposited in donation bins in the West, and then sold to middlemen by charities.

Thousands of people work in Kandla's special economic zone untangling massive, 800-pound bales of everything from sheets and socks to baseball caps and at the start of a processing operation that seeks to wring every penny possible from the flow of fabric.

"We are conserving each and every part of the clothing," says Guvinder Toor, managing director of U.S. Clothing (India) Pvt. Ltd. "Nothing is wasted."



Trucks piled with clothes idle on the road in Kandla, India. The country allows the processing and re-export of used clothes but bans their sale locally. PHOTO: ALLISON JOYCE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

First, entrepreneurs pay the processing companies for the right to rummage through the piles for coins, watches and other valuables. One searcher once discovered a pistol, sorters say.

The sorters, who earn around \$5 a day—an above-average wage in India—separate the stuff into 200 different categories for resale. Some companies have teams scanning the streams of clothes for haute couture—with the aid of posters to help them recognize Giorgio Armani, Hermès and Prada labels.

Ajay Tiwari —a soft-spoken trainer at Om Siddh Vinayak Impex, another of Kandla's largest sorting facilities—teaches workers how to spot valuable vintage items, like Levis from the 1950s and hot high-end brands like Miu Miu and Alexander McQueen

Mr. Tiwari says he suspects all the fashion dross he surveys reflects the fickleness, and wealth, of Western consumers. "They use it one or two times and get bored," he said. "They are turning to new fashion trends every day."

Other workers voice a farther-fetched theory: that a lack of water in the West makes it cheaper to buy new clothes than to clean and reuse them. Some guess the castoffs were owned by people who died.



A girl sorts through sheets at the Texool factory in Kandla, India. PHOTO: ALLISON JOYCE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The sorting process has several steps. Teams of employees weed out clothes that are stained, ripped, or—as is often the case with shipments from the U. S.—simply too big to resell. Workers use notches carved into sorting tables to quickly measure waist sizes. Men’s pants with a waist exceeding 40 inches are sold for scrap. For women’s pants the cut off is 32 inches

“The American sizes are so big that no one else can wear them,” said Bhavesh Mishra, a manager at U.S. Clothing. “Ninety percent of what we export is for Africa, and they don’t order such sizes.”

Only about 30% of the garments that come in are suitable for resale, industry executives say. The rest are sliced up. Buttons, zippers and snaps are salvaged. Then the fabric is cut into rags for factories and garages by women who run piles of clothes through standing circular saws.

Pieces that can’t even be used as rags are dumped into giant machines that grind them down into fibers, which are treated and respun into yarn. The yarn is used to make insulation and cheap blankets often for aid organizations to warm people left homeless by natural disasters and wars.

The coarse textiles made from these fibers are known as “shoddy,”— the origin of the word that has now come to mean low quality.

There are signs that this global recycling system is starting to have trouble keeping up with the relentless march of new production. Lower oil prices and cooling demand in China have made blankets made of brand-new acrylic cheaper than those made from the recycled materials.

The cost of used clothing has fallen 30% to 50% over the past year, says Texool’s Mr. Sajdeh. Inventories are piling up from Kandla to Canada, and some recyclers have gone out of business in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, says Alan Wheeler, director of the Textile Recycling Association of the U.K.





A worker shreds clothes at the Texool factory in Kandla, India. PHOTO: ALLISON JOYCE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“There is an obvious need for

new markets for recycling growth,” he says.

Some fast-fashion companies are becoming more proactive in trying to help control the growing mountain of used garments. Swedish multinational H&M offers customers discounts on new products if they return used clothes. Some are recycled in-house to make new garments but most of them are sold in the international market.

“Long term, we want to find a solution for reusing and recycling all textile fiber we now use,” said Cecilia Brannsten, a sustainability expert at H&M.

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