

Clothing Industry-How We Can Make It Eco-Friendly

Clothing is something that is required by all human beings. It is one of the most fundamental requirements needed to survive. When we think of clothes, what immediately comes to our mind is shopping and all the latest styles that are out in the market. The ugly truth about clothing production, however, is hidden from us, or at times we just don't want to acknowledge the harmful side of something so pleasant and fundamental. I chose this topic because it interests me a lot. I feel that there are several issues relating to human rights and the environment that are associated with this topic and worthy of our attention. We know that clothes are made in factories and that there are various materials that are used in this process. We also know that there are people involved in this industry. But there is more to it. Even though we think that we know everything, there are innumerable issues with material and people that we have no knowledge of. The real debate is how clothes can be produced without exploiting the environment and the workers. The growing global movements to improve the environment while fulfilling all our needs also covers the apparel industry. In this research paper I want to dive deep into the real process of how clothes are produced and the effects of this process on the environment, the workers and the consumers who buy these clothes.

The making of clothing, a part of the textile industry, is known as the apparel industry. Most of the clothes we wear are produced from two main sources. Clothes can either be produced from natural fibers such as wool, silk, cotton, hemp and linen, or from man made fibers such as synthetic fibers. Textile mills take the natural and synthetic raw materials and turn the raw material into fiber, yarn and thread. The mills then produce fabrics from these yarns, threads and fibers, by means of various machines and workers. Once the fabrics are produced, they are sent to the apparel manufacturing industry for clothes to be produced. The fabrics

are then turned into clothes by machines. However, the process of producing clothes is highly labor intensive. This means that a lot of labor is required to produce clothes. The workers sort the clothes, the different materials that are used in the process of making clothes and clean the final products. They make sure that the clothes are lint free and no fibers are sticking out of the clothing materials. Most of these workers work in assembly lines in groups. With globalization being the trend these days, most of the clothes available in the United States are produced in the underdeveloped countries like China, India, Mexico etc. After the production process is complete, the clothes are given a final touch and then shipped to stores in various locations throughout the world.

Clothing has a lot of chemicals that a normal consumer may never know about in his lifetime. On an average, six hundred dyes and chemicals are used, the most common being, aldrin, benzo and chlorolane. (Cantoria, 2010) These chemicals can have from minor effects on the consumer's body, such as rashes and allergies, to major skin problems and other lung and kidney problems. Chemicals in clothes can also cause prostate, pancreas, liver and bladder cancer.(Cantoira, 2010). But, most of these diseases are contracted by workers who work in factories. The paradox here is that we cannot keep buying clothes that are so harmful to us and yet we cannot make clothes without them.

Even though clothes have many chemicals in them, they can also be produced without the overwhelming use of chemicals. Clothes can be produced by using crops that are grown organically. Such clothing is known as "organic clothing." In organic clothing, the crops that are used as raw materials are grown without the use of pesticides. When fibers are derived from such crops, they go through the regular process of producing clothes; however there is one major difference. These clothes are woven, spun, sized, de-sized, scoured and finished without the use

of chemicals and do not have finishing coats applied. If there are any dyes used in the process, they are derived from environmentally friendly products such as flower pigments. Another aspect of eco-friendly clothing is using clothes made out of jute and hemp because these are plants that do not absorb a lot of chemicals.

Organic clothing is a concept that is becoming popular. Because people are aware of the fact that organic clothing is better for the skin and environment, as less chemicals are used, they are trying to make a shift to such clothing. Despite the growing campaign to support organic clothing, it can still not be bought by the regular working class because of the high prices. But organic clothing has given farmers and factory workers a chance to redeem themselves as some clothing companies that produce clothes from organic materials also believe in fair trade. One such example is "Clothes for a Change" ("Clothes for a,")- a campaign that stands for banning genetically engineered cotton and using organic and transitioning organic cotton to produce clothes. The campaign also advocates for fair trade and anti-sweatshop conditions for the laborers. Most of the farmers get fair prices for the raw materials that they provide and the factory workers are also treated well. But since organic clothing is still a growing industry, the factories are on a small scale.

Although a small number of businesses are making the change to eco-friendly clothing, most of the large businesses are not yet ready since it is a very expensive change to make. All the machinery needs to be equipped enough so that it can process raw fiber that has not been tampered with. The factory has to look for other alternatives instead of using chemicals in clothes. Even buying organic products costs a lot of money. It requires the whole factory to change its method of production, which is expensive.

Most of us do not realize that we produce an excessive amount of clothing garbage that

goes unaddressed. Due to the ever changing fashion, old clothes are being replaced by new clothes at an all time high. Most of the old clothes are thrown away. Some people donate old clothes but for the most part, the clothes are discarded. However, there are many ways these old clothes can be used. The old clothes can be recycled and turned into new clothes. They can be given to the textile banks where they can be made into rugs and other sheets and linoleum. ("How to recycle,") They can also be turned into bags and shoes. Some clothes are bio-degradable and so they can be broken down and used as fertilizers. A very common trend these days is to turn old clothes, especially jeans into bags. To people its just a fashion trend but it helps make a massive change in the environment.

With this growing awareness about recycling and re-using clothes, many local shops in San Francisco are adopting these ideas. For many shops like Chloe's Closet, San Francisco, buying old clothes and re-selling them is their way of contributing to the wave of recycling that has hit San Francisco. By selling old clothes, owners not only make a profit, but they also keep the environment clean. When asked why she ventured into this business, Ms. Mellissa, the owner of Chloe's Closet, says that she wanted to do something for the environment. The owner also states that such clothing shops are quite popular among people because they get good quality clothes and the clothes are affordable. This shows that more and more consumers are becoming aware of the fact that they can use these sustainable practices to save money and at the same time contribute to keeping the environment clean. Although, the problem that we still face is that even though we have numerous ways to recycle and re-use old clothes, the processes are not economically viable as the economy is at a low point right now. Due to economical reasons, the government and private corporations are not ready to divert funds towards the process of degrading clothes and recycling them to make new clothes.

There are several effects of the clothing industry on the environment. Clothing factories produce smoke and sulphur that is released into the atmosphere.(West) When this smoke rises into the atmosphere, it destroys the ozone layer. It also exposes us to the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun that are known to cause various cancers and skin diseases. The smoke that looms over the industrial areas where the factories are located is another problem associated with factories. Smoke reacts with the fog particles and results in photochemical smog. Not only this, but the air pollution also causes lung diseases such as asthma. The air pollutants also interact with the moisture in the air and leads to acid rain that has the power to destroy almost anything that is situated or growing on land. The pollution in the air is also one of the major causes of global warming. The atmosphere is not the only aspect of the environment that is destroyed in the process of producing clothes. The factories release hot water into streams that causes weeds to grow. The chemical run off from the industries causes eutrophication, a process that causes excessive algae bloom(Roger, 2010). A lot of pollution is also caused in the course of transporting raw materials to the factories and then moving the final products to the market. The pollution is not limited to land, the air and the sea are also polluted. With increasing globalization, the pollution is also increasing as the finished products have to be made available in various international markets.

Apart from the industrial waste that is dumped into the environment, the crops that are used as raw materials also have pesticides in them. The pesticides destroy the quality of the raw materials and in the process, destroy the soil and other micro organisms such as caterpillars and bees. Aside from the pollution that factories cause, there are many other ways that the environment is being negatively impacted. Tropical rain forests are destroyed to establish clothing industries and in the process the wildlife is disrupted along with it. Most of the forest

land is removed to plant textile crops such as cotton, jute and other plants. This results in the destruction of the soil and causes stress on the environment. The native species of plants and animals dies out in this process and eventually become extinct.

Another threat that the clothing industry poses to the wildlife is the killing of exotic animals for fur and skin. There is heavy demand for such products. Today this high demand for animal skin and fur products is the reason for the increase in exotic animal poaching. Leopard, tiger, bear, chinchilla fur and elephant tusks for ivory are just some of the products that are in demand in the clothing sector. (Challa) Even though the fur trade is at an all time high, we need to understand that it ultimately will lead to utter destruction of the wildlife and environment around us.

The workers who work in the factories are also exploited. Most of these workers are illegal immigrants from underdeveloped countries who are not even paid the minimum wage. Not only this, the workers are also exposed to hazardous and toxic chemicals. The workers work in unsanitary and inhuman conditions. They are generally poor and therefore do not complain about the working conditions. Over and above, their human rights are being constantly violated. Big clothing corporations do not generally provide health insurance or other such benefits to their factory workers. All such violations of human rights go unaddressed as the worker unions are not given much power to organize and spur a change due to the risk of the workers losing their jobs. The factory workers of underdeveloped countries suffer the most. Jasmine, a 17 year old girl who works in a jeans factory in China, lives with 12 other girls in one room and works from 8:00 am to 2:00 am. Yet, she makes just 6 cents an hour. She is one of the many girls who work in the factory. According to the owner of the jean factory Mr. Lam, he pays all his workers only a dollar a day and needs them to work round the clock so that he can make profits and ship

the consignments to countries like the United States and Britain. (*Independent lens:n.d.*) Even then, most factory workers are not able to afford a basic life style and so, they have to put in excessive hours in the factories. There is a serious lack of freedom that the workers at factories experience. But, this is not just limited to factory workers as the textile farmers who supply the raw materials are also subjected to the same violation of rights. The farmers are bound by contracts that only render them at a loss. They are paid less money for the raw materials that they supply. The suppliers also face a threat because they cannot contact any authorities to take any action against these corporations as their livelihood depends on the work.

But, the big clothing corporations cover up over these inhuman practices since they have the power to manipulate the authorities. One such big clothing and pharmacy company that has been the center of this controversial subject is Wal-Mart, which has been known to underpay their factory and store workers and make them work for long hours.(Armour, 2003)But, with the growing globalization, many large clothing companies have shifted their production to underdeveloped countries such as India, Pakistan, Africa, Bangladesh, etc., where the cost of production and raw materials is cheap. Due to this overseas expansion, the clothing industry is cutting off many jobs which is leading to a growing rate of unemployment. Since national statistics and poll studies conducted show that that approximately 730000 U.S citizens are employed in the clothing industry and this is the count only for the factory workers .(Nelson, 2007).The government also plays a major role in the clothing industry.("Codes of conduct,") ,(Childress) The government establishes trade with other countries around the world. It regulates the business trade. Its duty is to make sure that the clothing industry complies with the rules of fair trade and at the same time provides employment opportunities to people. In the United States, the clothing industry is one of the largest industries and the government

receives a major share of money as revenue each year. But, the government sometimes turns a blind eye when it does the regular checks and inspections. This is due to the power that these corporations have on the local and government authorities. Another reason for the government being inactive is that the clothing industry helps increase the growth rate of the economy. However, the government is trying everything in its reach to promote eco-friendly clothing these days. The government is trying to help eco-friendly clothing businesses by giving them tax concessions so as to promote this green clothing business.

Despite the government's efforts to promote the change, the large clothing corporations are not ready to make the transition right now. But on the bright side, there are a lot of local businesses that are making the switch to green clothing and are gaining popularity among the local populations. The future of eco-friendly clothing is very bright and is slowly catching popularity. Many major fashion lines are coming out with eco-friendly clothing. The cause of the environment and wildlife is also becoming addressed as people are becoming more aware and educated on this subject. Many people today are trying to practice sustainable clothing, the most popular being re-using, recycling and trying to switch to organic clothing which is also known as eco-friendly clothing. There is also action being taken by the government to promote this shifting into the new realm of eco-friendly clothing. There also needs to be a massive shift in the buying habits of the consumers. The consumers need to make the change of buying more of the eco-friendly clothing and for this to happen the price of organic clothing also needs to decrease. This is one of the many ways that consumers will be encouraged to buy more of the eco-friendly clothing. The government needs to make a change in the way that it functions so that there can be a change in the clothing industry. It needs to support the cause of the environment and help make the switch to eco-friendly clothing. However, this change is going to be a slow

process due to all the hurdles that lie in the way. This is mostly due to our increasing dependency on unsustainable clothing practices and the great authority that the clothing industry has over the government and the consumers. It is important for us to realize the importance of this change that needs to be made so that we all can have a healthy environment and also have the clothes that we need.

Research Paper Interview

For my research paper I interviewed Ms. Mellissa, who is the owner of Chloe's Closet in San Francisco. Chloe's Closet is a shop which sells recycled women's and children's clothes. For my interview I asked her the why she ventured into the business of buying and selling used clothes. Ms. Mellissa said that there were a couple of reasons she opened such a shop in San Francisco. First, she said that as a young girl she often went to such stores to buy clothes for herself. Then she said that the most important reason for her opening such a shop was that she could sell recycled and re-used clothes as they are more affordable and they don't get wasted as they would in a dumpster. According to Ms. Mellissa, the store is quite popular in San Francisco and they make quite a profit every day, however, it is not much when compared to big shopping malls. I asked her why that was and she said that people always prefer to buy brand new clothes instead of recycled and already used clothes. Then I asked Ms. Mellissa about the kind of clothes she buys from sellers and if there are any ethics that she follows while making purchases. To answer this question, Mellissa said that she looks for clothes that show no signs of wear and tear and the brand that they belong to. She said that branded clothes can be recycled better and can be sold at a higher price. She also said that those were her ethics for business. Before I could ask any further questions, Mellissa said that she wanted to let me know that she is still in this business because she cares about the environment too. I then asked her if she believes that stores like her's can make a change in this world and she said that her store is just one of the stores in San Francisco that contribute to making this city a better place for recycling different products but she says that she cannot say anything about other cities. At the end of this interview, Mellissa said that her clothes are quite popular and that she hopes that such shops will gain popularity in the future because of its economic viability and contribution to keeping the environment clean.

I was lucky enough to get another interview with the Manager of Sprout San Francisco, a clothing store located in Union Square that sells only organic baby products, mostly clothes. So my first question for the manager was about why the owner chose to start this business and she replied that the owner wanted to change things a little. She said that the owner has kids and as a parent wanted to make clothes that are not damaging to the environment and his children. She said that organic clothes ensure that the babies are not coming in direct contact with harmful chemicals used in clothes. My second question was about the products used in their clothes. She said that the company uses local and environmental friendly materials like jute, cotton etc. that are grown organically. I asked her if her company uses any chemicals during the production of clothes and she replied that they try to use minimal chemicals but, they have to use some in order to keep the fabric of the clothes suitable. Then I asked her if she has any ideas about the workers that produce the clothes but, the manager did not know any details. It was a busy day so I could not ask her any more questions. But, from both my interviews it was clear that such local shops are making a difference in the clothing industry and the environment in and around San Francisco.

Bibliography

- Armour, S. (2003, February 10). *Wal-mart takes hits on worker treatment*. Retrieved from http://www.usatoday.com/money/workplace/2003-02-09-wal-mart-cov2_x.htm
- Cantoria, C.S. (2010, October 20). *Hazardous chemicals in clothing and fabric*. Retrieved from <http://www.brighthub.com/environment/green-living/articles/91967.aspx#ixzz1BzU>
- Challa, L. (n.d.). *How do factories pollute the air?*. Retrieved from <http://www.fibre2fashion.com/industry-article/textile-industry-articles/impact-of-textiles-and-clothing-industry-on-environment/impact-of-textiles-and-clothing-industry-on-environment1.asp>
- Childress, B. (n.d.). *Sweatshops*. Retrieved from <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/management/Str-Ti/Sweatshops.html>
- Clothes for change*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.organicconsumers.org/clothes/index.cfm>
- Codes of conduct in the u.s apparel industry*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://actrav.italo.org/actrav-english/telearn/global/ilo/code/apparel.htm#II>. Codes of Conduct in the U.S. Apparel Industry
- How to recycle clothes*. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.recyclenow.com/what_can_i_do_today/can_it_be_recycled/textiles/recycling_clothes.html
- Independent lens: china blue*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/chinablue/film.html>
- Nelson, C. (2007, February 6). *Textile/fiber coalition wins victory on china safeguards*. Retrieved from <http://www.cotton.org/news/releases/2003/coalition-safeguard-announcement.cfm>
- Roger, C.D. (2010, July 18). *How do factories pollute the air?*. Retrieved from <http://www.livestrong.com/article/177248-how-do-factories-pollute-the-air/>
- West, L. (n.d.). *What is the green house effect?*. Retrieved from <http://environment.about.com/od/globalwarming/a/greenhouse.html>