



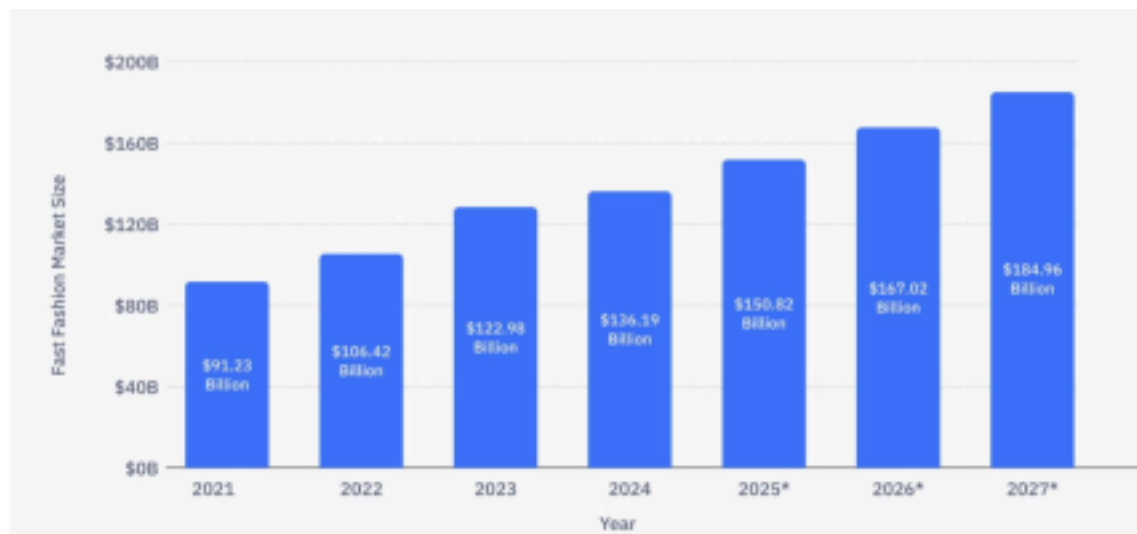
Navigating Change: Building Stability in an Unpredictable World

Human Rights Council: Topic 1

Human Rights Abuses in Fast Fashion (Tackling Child Labor and Exploitation)

Background:

Fast fashion is an industry famous for its ability to recreate trends seen on runways and social media. It's also known for the rapid production of clothing, usually sacrificing quality for quantity, and using low-cost materials¹. Fast fashion has made clothing accessible to millions of people worldwide.



Global fast fashion market size from 2021 to 2027 (in billions of USD).

However, it has also led to widespread exploitation of workers, particularly in developing countries where labor laws are extremely weak.¹ The low production costs that fast fashion relies on are often reached through hiring people to make goods from countries where wages are extremely low and labor protections are minimal,² instead of having the company's staff do it, which costs more.² Sweatshops, unsafe working conditions, and excessively long hours without breaks are common across these supply

¹ Ross, Emma. "Fast Fashion Getting Faster: A Look at the Unethical Labor Practices Sustaining a Growing Industry." International Law and Policy Brief. Accessed September 13, 2025.
<https://studentbriefs.law.gwu.edu/ilpb/2021/10/28/fast-fashion-getting-faster-a-look-at-the-unethical-labor-practices-sustaining-a-growing-industry/>.



² GIUNTA, SOFIA. "Women's Human Rights Violations in the 'Fast Fashion' Industry in Bangladesh. A New Venue towards Empowerment," February 25, 2025. <https://thesis.unipd.it/handle/20.500.12608/39594>.

chains.¹ Child labor, in particular, continues to be a remarkable concern, with companies occasionally discovering that children under the legal working age are employed in the production of garments.³

The case of Shein, a global fast fashion giant valued at \$66 billion,⁴ highlights these issues. In 2024, the company identified two cases of child labor within its supply chain,³ with suppliers who employed children under the age of sixteen. Although Shein suspended orders from these suppliers and revised its policies to prevent future issues, these incidents portray the constant risks of child labor within fast fashion's supply chains.³ Furthermore, reports display that many fast fashion brands continue to move production to countries where labor is cheapest,⁵ frequently resulting in the exploitation of an incredibly large number of workers. The chasing of profit and efficiency often comes with the price of fundamental and required labor rights, with workers not having the ability to demand fair treatment, particularly in countries with weak labor law enforcement.⁶

In addition to labor violations, the fast fashion industry encourages a disposable mentality among consumers by using plastic bags for shipping. Clothing and accessories are all made of plastic and low-quality materials.⁷ This contributes to environmental degradation and overconsumption. While these issues mostly affect workers in production countries, the impact is global, as overproduction leads to massive textile waste, often ending up in landfills, oceans, or being incinerated, increasing the social and ethical costs of the industry.⁷



Discarded clothing highlights the massive waste generated by the fast fashion industry

³ Butler, Sarah. "Fashion Retailer Shein Finds Child Labour in Its Supply Chain." *The Guardian*, August 23, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/aug/23/shein-fashion-retailer-child-labour-supply-chain>.

⁴ StatsUp. "Discover Latest Shein Statistics (2025)." Accessed September 13, 2025. <https://analyzify.com/statsup/shein>.

⁵ Crasnitchi, Emma. "The Economic Implications of Fast Fashion for the Developed and Developing World." *Modern Diplomacy*, January 26, 2024. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/01/26/the-economic-implications-of-fast-fashion-for-the-developed-and-developing-world/>.

⁶ Burtless, Gary. "Workers' Rights: Labor Standards and Global Trade." *Brookings*, September 1, 2001. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/workers-rights-labor-standards-and-global-trade/>.

⁷ Directory, Sustainability. "How Does Fast Fashion Influence Consumer Disposal Behavior? → Question." *Fashion → Sustainability Directory*, May 15, 2025. <https://fashion.sustainability-directory.com/question/how-does-fast-fashion-influence-consumer-disposal-behavior/>.



Current Situation:

As of 2025, the fast fashion industry remains one of the most problematic sectors regarding labor rights, child labor, and worker exploitation.¹ Despite the increased awareness regarding this topic among consumers, governments, and international organizations, these issues are still present and strong across global supply chains. Millions of workers, including children, are employed under unsafe conditions, with little access to fair wages, social protection, or legal options.⁸ According to the International Labour Organization and other human rights groups, roughly 138 million children are engaged in child labor worldwide, with over 54 million involved in hazardous work that directly threatens their health, safety, and moral development.⁸ A numerous portion of these children work in garment production and cotton farming,⁹ both key elements of the fast fashion supply chain, highlighting the persistent human cost of inexpensive clothing.⁶

The case of Shein illustrates these risks vividly. In 2024, the company discovered two instances of child labor at its suppliers in China, involving minors aged under sixteen.³ Orders from these suppliers were immediately suspended, and Shein revised its policies to prevent further violations. Even though the company claims to have resolved these issues, they still portray the ongoing vulnerability of children and young workers in an industry where the need for rapid production and low costs often outweighs ethics. Fast fashion brands frequently shift production to countries with cheaper labor, resulting in thousands of workers being exploited, often without sufficient oversight or accountability. This dynamic reinforces a global hierarchy where workers in low-income countries bear the human cost of consumer demand in wealthier nations.

Adult workers also face extreme exploitation. Reports indicate that many garment workers endure unsafe conditions, wage theft, excessive working hours, and gender-based harassment. In Vietnam, for example, workers report exposure to harmful chemicals, limited breaks, and strict penalties for mistakes, all of which contribute to chronic physical and psychological harm. A 2024 report from EarthDay.org found that fewer than 2% of the 75 million garment workers worldwide earn a living wage¹⁰, highlighting the scale and depth of exploitation within the industry. Women, who create the majority of garment workers, are particularly vulnerable, often earning lower wages than men while performing identical work.²

⁸International Labour Organization. "Despite Progress, Child Labour Still Affects 138 Million Children Globally," June 4, 2025. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/despite-progress-child-labour-still-affects-138-million-children-globally>.

⁹International Partnerships. "Are the Clothes You Are Wearing Free from Child Labour?" Accessed September 13, 2025. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/are-clothes-you-are-wearing-free-child-labour_en.

¹⁰ Helm, Mykhail. "Beneath the Seams: The Human Toll of Fast Fashion." Earth Day, September 12, 2025. <https://www.earthday.org/beneath-the-seams-the-human-toll-of-fast-fashion/>.



Governments and international organizations have tried to address these issues through legislation, advocacy, and voluntary initiatives.¹¹ The European Union has supported programs to eliminate child labor and forced labor in textile and garment supply chains, while organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Anti-Slavery International continue to monitor violations and advocate for workers' rights. However, many reforms remain voluntary, with enforcement mechanisms limited or non-existent. Without legal accountability and stronger international cooperation, supply chain transparency is difficult to achieve, leaving workers unprotected and perpetuating cycles of abuse.

The global economic pressures of 2025, including inflation and competition among fast fashion brands, further exacerbate exploitation. Companies frequently relocate orders to suppliers offering lower costs and weaker labor protections, displacing workers and destabilizing local communities. Consumer activism and ethical sourcing campaigns have gained traction, pressuring brands to implement fair labor policies. Nonetheless, the combination of complex supply chains, weak regulatory environments, and entrenched industry practices means that progress is slow, and human rights violations remain widespread. Achieving meaningful reform will require coordinated efforts among governments, international bodies, corporations, and civil society to ensure that labor rights are respected and that children and adults alike are protected from exploitation.

Important bloc positions:

Developing Countries (Garment-Producing /Supply-Chain Nations)

Developing nations such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, Ethiopia and Kenya heavily rely on garment exports which are finished clothing and accessories from raw materials for GDP, foreign exchange and large scale-employment in particular for women. These countries acknowledge the existence of child labour and poor working conditions but would most likely argue that strict international regulations would worsen production and could possibly lead to more severe poverty. Therefore these countries would most likely argue against overly strict regulations that increase cost and would reduce their competitiveness in the market, and would instead seek for investments in capacity buildings and technology to improve the situation along with more favorable trade agreements and assistance from other countries.

Developed Consumer Markets (High-Income Importing Nations)

Developed nations especially the United States, Germany, France and the United Kingdom are the countries that import the bulk of these fast fashion products and are facing strong pressure from consumers and NGOs to ensure supply chains are ethical and would therefore argue for strong regulatory frameworks. For example, diligence laws which would require organizations to investigate, identify, and address risks in their operations and supply chains and banning imports of goods made with child labour or poor working conditions. This would prevent consumers from unethical goods and uphold



¹¹ Nations, United. "Human Trafficking Is Organized Crime – Let's End the Exploitation." United Nations. Accessed September 13, 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/human-trafficking-organized-crime-%E2%80%93-let%E2%80%99s-end-exploitation>.

human rights and international labour standards. However, these countries would still emphasize corporate responsibility and transparency while supporting the development, aid and assistance to developing producer countries.

Emerging Economies (Both Producers & Consumers)

Emerging economies such as China, India, Brazil, Mexico and Turkey are both manufacturers for these goods but also growing consumer markets. They would therefore argue for somewhat of a mix of the previously mentioned bloc positions in which they highlight the importance of a nation's sovereignty and resist external interference in domestic industries while still recognizing the severe importance of child labour and poor working conditions balancing economic growing with gradual labour reform. Furthermore these countries would push for shared responsibility not laying the full responsibility on consumer markets and also seeking international recognition, aid and assistance of their development needs.

Possible solutions:

1. **Supply Chain Transparency Standards:** Create a framework that is backed by the United Nations which would require fashion brands to disclose their full supply chains including their subcontractors and raw material sources. Companies must publish annual reports with independent inspection and developing nations may receive funding from the United Nations and/or other sources to build digital tracking systems to help track and monitor their supply chains.
2. **Global Fund for Ethical Fashion Transition:** Establish a fund managed by the United Nations to help garment-producing developing nations to upgrade labour systems to try and eliminate child labour and poor working conditions without countries losing their competitiveness in the market to help their economy to keep going and grow. The money could come from contributions from developed nations and would also additionally provide labour inspection training, school for children leaving work and larger wages for workers. To motivate countries, they could possibly get preferable trade term is clear progression is shown on eliminating child labour.
3. **Trade and Import Regulation Mechanisms:** Encouraging countries to pass laws which would ban the import of goods made with child labour and poor working conditions while offering beneficial trade opportunities to encourage countries to change and also making it possible.



These import bans could be tied to credible evidence of abuses in production and could lower tariffs on goods that have been produced ethically without child labour or poor working conditions.

4. **Worker-Driven Monitoring and Grievance Systems:** Shift the oversight away from brands alone and give workers themselves the power to report violations through hotlines, unions and local monitoring funded by brands and governments, and these reports would feed into international NGOs to overview these situations. Workers would also receive protection from potential retaliation and harm through access to aid and assistance.

Further reading:

- <https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/research/commentary/explainer-what-fast-fashion-human-rights-environmental-impacts>
- <https://www.greenpeace.org/aotearoa/story/the-dark-side-of-fast-fashion/> - <https://www.unicef.org/media/70121/file/Childrens-rights-in-the-garment-and-footwear-supply-chain-2020.pdf>
- <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/13/business/shein-75-hour-weeks-investigation> - <https://www.ilo.org/topics-and-sectors/forced-labour-modern-slavery-and-trafficking-persons#approach>
- <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/sustainable-fashion/> - <https://www.un.org/en/human-trafficking-organized-crime---let's-end-exploitation> - <https://studentbriefs.law.gwu.edu/ilpb/2021/10/28/fast-fashion-getting-faster-a-look-at-the-unethical-labor-practices-sustaining-a-growing-industry/>

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