

The Long Shadow of Injustice Over the Clothes We Wear

Article by Patrizia Heidegger

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For centuries, the textile industry has been one of Europe's most powerful industries, having been cultivated through imperialism, slavery and racialised capitalism. The plundering of natural resources and profit-making from cheap labour of mostly women and children in the Global South have endured to which civil society are calling an end to. Patrizia Heidegger of the European Environmental Bureau explains the history of the textile industry and its enduring model of exploitation. She asks what the EU can do to reset the system that supplies the clothes we wear.

The cotton-based textile empire was built on the slave trade and indentured labour on cotton plantations, the expropriation of indigenous lands in America, and the coercion of weavers in India into work for European trading companies. This brutal production model meant that "[...] the life of a weaver in India was linked to that of a slave in the US, that of a trader in England to that of a Native American family."

Close to 2 million slaves working on more than 74,000 plantations in the US ensured the production of cotton for European markets. By 1860, 88 per cent of the cotton supply to the Lancaster mills were sourced from slave plantations.

The mechanisation of the textile industry in the 18th century did not only undermine the livelihoods of cottage industries across Europe, but it also forced the deindustrialisation of colonial India. Before the industrial revolution, Mughal India had been the world's largest textile manufacturer. This industry was systematically destroyed by the colonial rulers.

Starting in the 1780s, Britain pushed exports of its machine-made and low-cost cloth while introducing tariffs on the import of Indian products. By the mid-19th century, Britain produced half of the world's clothes, causing mass unemployment for India's spinners and weavers (and those in continental Europe). The alignment of the colonies' productive sources to serve the empire went hand in hand with the exploitation of the lower classes in the metropole. Majority of workers in British mills were underpaid young women and children.

Out of sight, out of mind

Fast forward to the 21st century: Europe is still one of the largest markets for textiles in the world and home to some of the world's most powerful fashion brands and textile retailers. Clothes are one of the drivers of our fast-turning consumer society. Each year, the average European buys 26 kilos of textiles resulting in 5.8 million tonnes of textile waste per year.

Manufacturing hubs are now mostly located in the Global South, many in former European colonies in south and southeast Asia. In 2019, EU countries imported clothes worth 154

billion euros with more than half produced outside the EU. In just one decade, the imports of clothes to the EU increased in value by 62 per cent.

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In Bangladesh – the second-largest manufacturer of clothes for the European market – 80 per cent of workers are women from impoverished or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of them are regularly subjected to involuntary and excessive overtime while not receiving a living wage. They face harassment and ill-treatment in factories, many of which do not comply with basic safety standards. The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in 2013 was the deadliest of a long series of accidents, killing more than 1100 factory workers, mostly women. At various stages of the textile supply chain – but particularly during “wet processes” like washing, treating, dyeing, printing, and fabric finishing – female workers come into contact with a range of chemical substances, many of which are hazardous to human health.

The textile industry’s business model is also deeply dependent on cheap fossil-fuel derived synthetic fibres. Although polyester overtook cotton as the dominant fibre on the market in 2000, cotton remains a key resource of the global textile industry and is mainly sourced from China and India.

75 per cent of cotton farmers do not earn enough to feed their families.[1] The price for cotton on the global market has dropped to an all-time low in recent years. Farmers in India, encouraged by global seed and pesticides manufacturers, borrow money to buy genetically modified seeds with the promise of better yields. Caught in a trap of expensive production materials from multinationals and debt they cannot repay, more than 300,000 cotton farmers in India have committed suicide since 1995.[2]

Diversion of water for irrigation, excessive use of pesticides, and the conversion of habitat into cotton farms have had severe impacts on the environment such as around the Aral Sea and the Indus Delta in Pakistan. In India, 50 per cent of all pesticides used are applied to only 5 per cent of farming land – the cotton fields – where child labour and the exploitation of women workers are widespread.

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The need for a paradigm shift

Despite the awareness of conditions in the textile industry, the EU and its member states have, for decades, given a free ride to European fashion brands and retailers, arguing in favour of voluntary self-regulation. The fact that high profits for fashion brands and retailers as well as the availability of fast fashion in markets such as the EU is only possible through an unjust global trade system remains unaccounted for.

Policy measures incentivising a shift from a system of profit-making and the exploitation of natural resources and female labour mostly in the Global South are limited and scattered. What governments have failed to do is what [Arunaditya Sahay](#) sums up as the “historical work of making visible the scale and spread of racialised capitalisms, shaping economies that to this day remain white-dominated hierarchies of inequality.”

The argument that the textile industry is offering work to millions of cotton farmers and garment workers, and has contributed to women’s emancipation has been misused to mask the deeper, underlying injustices and power imbalances of racialised capitalism. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck in spring 2020, workers were laid off without any social security. The Clean Clothes Campaign has calculated that in the first three months of the pandemic only between 3.2 billion dollars and 5.8 billion dollars of wages were not paid, exposing the reality that women in sweatshops become irrelevant the day they stop making profits for those dominating the trade.

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Initiating a system reset

In early 2022, the European Commission will present an EU Strategy for Sustainable Textiles as well as its Sustainable Corporate Governance initiative. The strategy is meant to help the EU shift to a climate-neutral, circular economy where products are designed to be more durable, reusable, repairable, recyclable and energy-efficient.

To ensure environmental and gender justice in the textile industry, the strategy must be based on a robust gender analysis of the environmental and social crises in global textile supply chains. It must reckon with the racialised separation of those holding the power and making the highest profits from the global labour force, putting an end to a system where multinationals and consumers in some parts of the world benefit from exploiting labour and natural resources in the Global South.

The strategy should also present a coherent overarching framework that ties together the many different policies that are needed to set Europe on a transformative path to sustainable and globally just textile production and consumption. It should bring the sector into a “safe operating space” to preserve life-sustaining ecological functions. This can be achieved by taxing virgin resource use, introducing caps on raw material use and making producers responsible for their products from cradle to grave. The strategy should ensure

producers license to operate is conditional on respecting the human rights of their workers and providing them with a decent living standard along the supply chains. Finally, it should make sure that the EU textile industry can be held accountable and liable for its role in the world through a trade reset and strong human rights and environmental due diligence rules.

The EU sustainable textile strategy must be a turning point in Europe's approach to sourcing cheap raw material and cheap labour at the cost of women and the environment in poor regions of the world. Europe should look to internalise all costs of production and move towards textile production and consumption that is based on global justice and the respect of ecological limits. It must put an end to the neocolonial and paternalistic idea that providing poor workers, in particular women, with substandard jobs is legitimate or even desired. If markets cannot ensure decent work and living wages for workers, Western consumers have no right to benefit from their labour.

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[1] According to the German Ministry for Development Cooperation, quoted in Pörnbacher (2020)

[2] Pörnbacher (2020).



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