



Subversive Catwalk: Women, Fast Fashion, and Climate Justice

What is fast fashion?

Fast fashion is the production of very cheap clothing, often in the Global South in countries such as India, China, and Indonesia. The clothing goes fast from international catwalks to shops globally and to online companies—and is fast to be thrown away.

The fast fashion industry produces 80 billion pieces of clothing each year, and women in the Global North buy twice as many clothes as they did just fifteen years ago. Clothes are being kept for an ever-decreasing amount of time. Fashion trends are becoming shorter-lived as fashion companies continually produce new designs and styles to keep people consuming.

The price of clothing has fallen dramatically in the Global North. In the 1950s, a ready-made dress sold in the United Kingdom for about £4 (\$5 USD), which is £140 (\$182 USD) in current money. Today a shopper can buy a simple dress for about £10 (\$13 USD).

A whole generation of shoppers in the Global North expects to be able to buy cheap clothing, but the low prices are possible only because of the slavery and exploitation that exists in the fashion industry supply chain. The price of the clothing does not reflect the true cost to the farmers, spinners and weavers, tailors, finishers, quality control teams, and packers.

Garment workers receive low pay and are brutally exploited, abused, and silenced when they try to speak up about unsafe working conditions. And we are witnessing a global “race to the bottom,” with countries in the Global South competing against each other to supply the cheapest labour in a bid to attract brands to their factories.

The profit motive fuels the fast fashion industry, which has an estimated value of three trillion dollars. The fashion industry is also the second-most-polluting industry in the world after oil. It produces more greenhouse emissions than international flights and shipping combined and

is one of the largest consumers of freshwater on the planet. It produces 92 million tons of waste annually. Cheap clothes are made from cheap materials that when washed are responsible for an estimated 35 percent of all microplastics found in the ocean.

Women are directly targeted by the fashion industry

Women in the Global South are likely to be the most “disproportionately affected by climate crisis”—for example, by being the majority of climate refugees or being primary caregivers whose jobs become impossible as resources like clean water become increasingly scarce. These same women are also vulnerable to the fashion industry and its exploitative methods of employment.

Women make up 80 percent of the world’s 75 million garment workers. Thus when disasters

happen in garment factories, women are disproportionately impacted. In the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh in April 2013—the worst structural failure in modern history and the deadliest fashion-related disaster—1134 people died and 2500 were injured, the majority of them women.

Female consumers in the Global North have always been the key market for the fashion industry. Sexism and objectification affect women’s self-esteem and body image, leaving them emotionally vulnerable to pressures from the fashion industry. They are made to feel bad about themselves and then sold items of clothing to “feel better.” Many women set goals for themselves to fit into a specific size or item of clothing; the arbitrary reasoning of the fashion industry around sizing becomes a matter of personal success or failure. Women are constantly asked to consume clothing (such as “slimming” and “flattering” designs) to



Sustaining All Life (SAL) is an international grassroots organization working to end the climate emergency within the context of ending all divisions among people. *United to End Racism (UER)* consists of a wide diversity of people in many different countries, who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world and supporting the efforts of all other groups with this goal. UER and SAL are projects of and use the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling. Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that helps people of all ages and backgrounds exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from emotional harm resulting from oppression and other hurts. By taking turns listening to each other and encouraging the release of painful emotions, people can heal old hurts and become better able to think, to speak out, and to organize and lead others in building a world in which human beings and other life forms are valued and the environment is restored and preserved. Re-evaluation Counseling currently exists in 95 countries.



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make their bodies look different, and the social punishments for not conforming to norms around size make these “solutions” feel very appealing. The historic exclusion of large women from the mainstream fashion industry has created a plus-size market, which sells this exclusion back to large women as empowerment.

The cycle of hope, that the next new thing will “work,” followed by disappointment makes most women very vulnerable to the fashion industry. What clothing would we buy if we were free from the effects of sexism on our choices? What would we wear to adorn ourselves, to be practically clothed, to play and have fun with our appearance?

Young women are the primary focus

All women are targets of the fast fashion industry, but young women are the primary focus. Social media plays an important role. The rise of influencer culture and marketing has opened up a niche for fast fashion brands, often sold by online retailers, to flourish in. Thanks to social media’s constantly changing, visually-driven nature, brands have developed a symbiotic relationship with popular celebrities and influencers. Through visual platforms like Instagram, clothing choices can be scrutinised, and wearing the same outfit twice can seem taboo.


Designer fashion uses very young models, so young women often see glamorous versions of themselves in high fashion campaigns. Young women are pushed to look more glamorous and “sexier” and to perform for social media. There is also the emotional challenge of comparing real bodies to the retouched photos of models. Influencers intensify this. They are generally young women, with large followings, who present their lives and bodies using edited photos.

Fast fashion is a fact of life for many young women. They do not have the information that fashion was not always fast or that the situation could be different.



We can unify in all our differences

As women in the Global North we are not to blame for our complicity in the damage done by fast fashion. However, we do have an opportunity, and a responsibility, to notice and heal from the deep hurts that prevent us from seeing our full worth and value on our own terms and outside of narrow societal expectations. And we have a huge opportunity to unify in all our differences to reject an industry that damages our planet and damages our perspectives about ourselves. We can do this not only to stop the climate emergency but also for our liberation from the oppression of women.

These issues are spelled out in a recent video of a subversive climate catwalk by a:dress, a UK-based activist project, that uses customised retro clothing, subversive catwalks, film, poetry and listening circles to explore issues of women, fast fashion and climate justice.  a.dress.fashion





The Work of *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism*

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment—if we make some very large changes in our economy, our energy systems, and our lives in the next five to ten years. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* believe the environmental crisis can be resolved only if we simultaneously address racism, genocide of Indigenous peoples, classism, sexism, and other oppressions. The impact of environmental destruction and climate change falls most heavily on the groups targeted by these oppressions, and on other vulnerable populations (including populations of people who are elderly, disabled, and very young). Making the changes needed will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background fighting the effects of climate change, racism, and exploitation.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we believe that the barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually caused by oppression, and especially racism and classism) between nations and between groups of people, (2) widespread feelings that it's too late and any actions will be ineffective, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the climate emergency, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of our economic system. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* work to address these and other issues.

The role of oppression

The economic and political forms of our societies demand growth and profit with little regard for people, other life forms, or the earth. This results in exploitation and oppression. Oppressions (such as racism, classism, sexism, and the oppression of young people) target everyone, inflicting tremendous injustices, limiting access to resources, and damaging the lives of billions of people. Once targeted by oppression, we tend to act toward others in ways that repeat the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the mental and emotional harm we experience is the result of this passing on of hurt. Our experience is that though people are vulnerable

to acting in oppressive ways, oppressive behavior is not inherent, but arises only when a person has been hurt emotionally. Oppressive societies manipulate this vulnerability to establish and maintain economic exploitation.

The importance of healing personal harm

The mental and emotional harm done to us by oppression and other hurtful experiences interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. This makes it difficult for us to think about and respond effectively to the climate emergency.

Healing from the hurts that help to hold oppression in place and lead to other harmful behavior is neither quick nor easy work. Many of us resist this personal healing work. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the harm done to us by oppression. Some of us assume that we will never be free of this harm. In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from these hurts and address barriers to effective organizing. We can heal from hurtful experiences if someone listens to us attentively and allows and encourages us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions. This happens by means of our natural healing processes—talking, crying, trembling, expressing anger, and laughing.

By releasing emotional pain in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This in turn strengthens us in building our movements to stop the effects of climate change and racism.



Sustaining All Life



For more information, see:

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