This activity series has been devised by Self Help Africa, an Irish international development organisation focused on supporting and empowering farming communities across Africa. SHA’s vision is for sustainable livelihoods and healthy lives for all in a changing climate.

How much do we know about the clothes and shoes we wear? The supply chain is complex and features environmental and human rights abuses throughout – from growing and producing textiles, manufacture of garments, transportation, purchase decision, wearing and cleaning clothes, all the way through to how they are passed on and disposed of.

The fashion industry is the third leading contributor to climate change after fossil fuels and agriculture. Recent movements in the sector have brought about greater consumer awareness and brand accountability, but to realise a sustainable and moral fashion industry there is still a long way to go. Learn about the impact of the fashion industry in this resource and understand how to get involved and influence real change.
Imagine you are purchasing a white t-shirt. Considering the options above, which would you choose and why?

How much of the cost do you think supports the wage of the garment worker?
Check the label on an item of clothing you are currently wearing. You may learn the country it was made in, material, and washing instructions, but what about where the fabric was produced, how much water and energy was required, or the hourly pay of the garment worker who made it?

Let’s take a cotton t-shirt as an example. Cotton is a water-intensive crop that typically requires a lot of pesticides to grow. Raw cotton must be spun then dyed to produce the desired textile which releases chemicals into the water, contaminating water sources of communities living in the region of these factories.

20% of industrial water pollution globally comes from the treatment and dyeing of textiles.

GoodOnYou.eco, 2022

Learn more from this TED-Ed video on the supply chain of the cotton t-shirt

EXERCISE

Read this article to learn how to distinguish between fast fashion and slow fashion. [https://440industries.com/slow-fashion-vs-fast-fashion-the-differences-impact/](https://440industries.com/slow-fashion-vs-fast-fashion-the-differences-impact/)

Can you categorise each of the t-shirts on the previous page as either fast or slow fashion?

ARE WE WEARING PLASTIC?

The majority of clothing purchased from shops on the high street will contain POLYESTER - a synthetic fabric that is usually derived from PETROLEUM.

Learn how and where polyester is manufactured at SewPort.com

In considering the images on the next page, how do you feel about wearing synthetic vs natural fabrics?
WHAT’S IN THE FABRIC?

Our clothes can be made from a range of different materials, natural or man-made. The manufacturing process requires three basic steps:

1. Producing the yarn
2. Weaving or ‘knitting’ the yarn together
3. Processing

Learn how some of these fabrics are made at HowStuffWorks.com

For a guide on which fabrics are sustainable or not and why, visit Eco-Stylist.com

From hide to leather - rather than the 3-step process above, leather is created through a process of tanning animal rawhide to preserve it and make it pliable when dry.

The Problem with Viscose - Although viscose is derived from wood pulp, a natural material, the process of making it uses a large amount of chemicals affecting the environment as well as the health of people who work in and live near factories in which it is made.

WHAT’S IN THE FABRIC?

1. Producing the yarn
2. Weaving or ‘knitting’ the yarn together
3. Processing

Learn how some of these fabrics are made at HowStuffWorks.com

For a guide on which fabrics are sustainable or not and why, visit Eco-Stylist.com

From hide to leather - rather than the 3-step process above, leather is created through a process of tanning animal rawhide to preserve it and make it pliable when dry.

The Problem with Viscose - Although viscose is derived from wood pulp, a natural material, the process of making it uses a large amount of chemicals affecting the environment as well as the health of people who work in and live near factories in which it is made.

EXERCISE

Rate these eight fabrics in order from least sustainable to most sustainable. Share your rated list with a partner and see how they compare, and if you change your opinion on a particular fabric.
COTTAGE INDUSTRIES

A cottage industry is a small-scale industry which uses simple equipment to produce handmade goods such as crafts, the name “cottage” due to the businesses often being run from people’s homes and labour carried out by family members.

In Ireland, linen, wool and cotton were commonly produced in this manner in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the production of fine linen being particularly successful in the north-east of the country.

These types of operations mostly went into decline as a result of the Industrial Revolution. With a greater availability of cotton and more advanced technology, labour moved away from spinning wheels and hand looms to more efficient inventions such as John Kay’s flying shuttle (1733) and Richard Arkwright’s spinning frame (1769).

DISCUSS

• Can you think of any “cottage industries” existing in Ireland today? (consider handmade items, family businesses, small-scale producers…)

• Considering the revival of the cotton industry in Kenya, do you think linen production in Ireland nowadays could be financially sustainable?

Fast Fashion - clothes that are made and sold cheaply, so that people can buy new clothes often.

In the past there were only 2-4 fashion seasons per year. Brands now produce up to 52 new collections annually, encouraging consumption of clothes by releasing new items every week.
**Tartan** refers to interlocking stripes running in the warp and weft of cloth to form a pattern. It has an ancient history - any part of the world that has woven cloth, people have created tartan designs.

In Scotland, tartan has gained great cultural significance. Originally associated with the Highlands, tartan cloths were produced by local weavers from wool and using natural dyes. By the end of the 18th century as production became commercialised, large scale firms assigned names of Highland clans and towns to their standardised patterns.

In the 19th century, the clan names that had been assigned to tartan patterns by commercial weavers became affiliated and accepted as the traditional pattern of these clans, and though not traditional, every Scottish clan today has a tartan attributed to its name.

scottishtartanmuseum.org

**EXERCISE**

Choose your favourite clothing brand or select an option from the list below. Using information from your chosen brand’s website, third party websites FashionChecker.org and GoodOnYou.eco, and other resources you may find, research how SUSTAINABLE and TRANSPARENT the brand is.

**BRANDS**

- ASOS
- GAP
- LEVI STRAUSS & CO.
- LULULEMON
- NIKE
- RIVER ISLAND
- SHEIN
- INDITEX (ZARA, BERSHKA, PULL & BEAR)
- URBAN OUTFITTERS

Have your views changed as a result of your research? Did you find examples of greenwashing?

Greenwashing - deceptively using green marketing in order to persuade the public that an organisation’s products, aims and policies are environmentally friendly.
HUMAN RIGHTS OF GARMENT WORKERS

The intricacies of making clothes mean they must be made by hand. You likely found “Made in Bangladesh”, “China”, “Vietnam”, or another low-income country on the label of a garment you are wearing.

By hiring workers in these regions and paying them less, clothing brands can sell to customers at a cheaper price. But what is the cost to the workers, the majority of whom are women?

**DISCUSS**

Watch The True Cost documentary trailer and discuss the following. (The full documentary is available on YouTube.)

What challenges do they face? What changes do you believe are necessary to improve conditions?

Wages are not the only way costs can be cut. Low investment in buildings means the working conditions in the factories can be poor and present potential hazards for employees. As their families rely on their earnings for survival, striking is not an option.

THE RANA PLAZA DISASTER

On 24th April 2013, an 8-storey factory known as the Rana Plaza collapsed in Bangladesh. The accident tragically killed a reported 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500.

The previous day, workers employed on the upper floors expressed concerns over cracks in the walls, but were assured by the owner that the building was safe and had to return to work or risk losing their income.

As the fourth largest industrial disaster in history the controversial incident extended to international media, and brands who contracted work to this and similar factories came under scrutiny for their practices.

A decade on - what has changed?

...over 30,000 inspections by engineers have taken place, 2 million workers have received safety training, and 92% of the 130,000 safety hazards identified have been fixed.

The Irish Mirror

Read interviews with survivors and with family members of victims in The Irish Mirror

https://www.thesun.ie/fabulous/10592304/rana-plaza-disaster-decade-on/

**DISCUSS**

What changes have been made, and do you think there has been enough progress?
FASHION REVOLUTION

A movement emerging from this event has since become the world's largest fashion activism movement. They campaign for a clean, safe, fair, transparent and accountable fashion industry and their annual Fashion Revolution Week takes place each year around 24th of April.

HOW TO DONATE CLOTHING

If we no longer have use for certain clothing, how can we ensure we extend the life of an item, as far as possible?

Consider what you are donating - is it good quality, is someone likely to pick this up from the shop floor? If not, consider disposing of it in an appropriate apparel recycling bin, or cutting it up to use as dust cloths. Animal shelters welcome donations of old towels and blankets.

WHERE TO DONATE

Charity shops in Ireland rely on donations from the public for revenue to support their charity’s services. In order to determine if a shop is run by a registered charity, see if the CRI membership badge is displayed, or check with the Charities Regulator.

For women’s clothing you can post photos on apps and sell your items on depop or swap with others on Nuw.
What do you do with the clothes you no longer wear? Many people donate their unwanted clothes to local charity shops, in the expectation that the charity will make a profit from them, or if unsold, that they will be donated to someone in need. In fact, only 30% of donations make it to charity shop floors in Ireland. This profit is valuable, but what happens to the rest of the clothes?

Dead White Man’s Clothes - the translation of the Akan expression Obroni Wawu, a common term for secondhand clothes in Ghana, comes from the idea that someone would have to die to give up so much stuff.

Mitumba are used clothes imported for sale in African countries (such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi) from more developed western countries. It is a Swahili term, literally meaning “bundles”, used to refer to plastic-wrapped packages of used clothing.

Due to the rise of fast fashion in wealthier countries, the quality of garments in the second-hand markets has declined dramatically. The value and condition of the clothes inside bales cannot be checked by merchants before they have bought the stock, and on average 40% of the contents are not fit for sale.

What is the result of exporting poor quality garments?
- Merchants can’t make the same income
- Clothes are dumped polluting rivers and oceans
- Clothes are burnt in landfill affecting the health of local communities

In East Africa…

Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi were to phase out the second-hand clothes trade by 2019, but only Rwanda has implemented the plan, introducing high taxes on mitumba imports to deter trade.

The East African, June 2022


DEBATE

Carry out more research on the advantages and disadvantages of second-hand imports in African countries and come up with arguments for and against banning imports.
THE EPIC JOURNEY OF A POLYESTER T-SHIRT

Using the information you have learned so far, create an image, map or flowchart to represent the typical journey a t-shirt will make. Consider showing the steps below and their locations.

- Oil Extraction
- Polyester Production
- T-Shirt made
- Shipped to Retailer
- Purchased by Consumer
- Worn and Washed
- Donated to Charity Shop
- UNSOLD
- Baled and Shipped to Global South
- Bought by Merchant
- UNSOLD
- Dumped
- Washes up on Shore
- Burnt in Landfill

Can you illustrate other elements such as microplastics in the ocean, paid and unpaid labour, carbon emitted and water used?

THE EPIC JOURNEY OF A POLYESTER T-SHIRT

WEAVING A WAY OUT

Buy less. Choose well. Make it last. Quality, not quantity. Everybody’s buying far too many clothes.”

Vivienne Westwood

DISCUSS

Considering the full supply chain of our clothes from production to disposal, who do you believe is responsible for environmental and human rights abuses of the fashion industry?

EXERCISE

Style a sustainable look for an upcoming event such as one below. Choose your items from:

Thriftify - https://www.thriftify.ie/
(online platform of charity shops in Ireland and the UK)


1. School graduation
2. Family barbeque
3. Internship interview

For an added challenge, try limiting your spend with a budget of €50 or €100.

SARAH LAZAROVIC’S BUYERARCHY OF NEEDS

Due to the complexity, interconnectedness and non-transparency of the fashion industry, it can be confusing for consumers are trying to adopt more ethical and sustainable habits.

Buying clothes supports people’s income, BUT which companies should we support?

Donating unwanted clothes can cause problems, SO what do we do with items we don’t have a use for?

Sarah Lazarovic’s Buyerarchy of Needs is a simple guide to what to do about our wardrobes from least sustainable (buying new items) to most sustainable (wearing what we already have in our wardrobes).

BRAINSTORM

Come up with ideas for a sustainable fashion event in your school based on one or more of Lazarovic’s suggestions. Consider including an educational campaign as part of your event.

- What skills would be required to manage this event?
- Which departments/teachers could be involved?
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Good On You article - Fashion’s Water Impacts: 
https://goodonyou.eco/fashions-water-impacts/


Self Help Africa article - Reviving the Kenyan Cotton Industry: 
https://selfhelpafrica.org/ie/reviving-the-kenyan-cotton-industry/

The True Cost of Fast Fashion full documentary: 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-02HqYGnIo&t=255s

The Rana Plaza Collapse - A Short Documentary: 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcAAW6WBg9I

Brightly.eco - ‘The Most Popular Fast Fashion Brands, Ranked for Conscious Consumers’: 
https://brightly.eco/blog/fast-fashion-brands-sustainability

TheJournal.ie article - ‘We can’t export our way out of our fast fashion addiction’: 
https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/opinion-fast-fashion-export-5591019-Nov2021/

Green News - ‘What really happens to our unwanted clothes?’: 
https://greennews.ie/unwanted-clothes-feature/

Fashionomics Africa - Investing in Africa’s Creative Industries: 
https://fashionomicsafrica.org/

Ellen MacArthur Foundation: 
https://ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/topics/fashion/overview

UN Alliance for Sustainable Fashion: 
https://unfashionalliance.org/

Ethical Fashion Initiative: 
https://ethicalfashioninitiative.org/

Contact us with queries or to arrange workshops

www.selfhelpafrica.org/ie/education

schools@selfhelpafrica.org

01 6778880