

Textile Waste in Emerging Economies: Exploring Circular Economy Characteristics as a Potential Solution with Special Focus on India

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Textile waste is one of the most prominent outcomes of ever-changing clothing trends. It primarily refers to cast-off fabrics, discarded clothing, and other textile materials, resulted either during the production (pre-consumer) or after the consumption (post-consumer) of all kinds of textile products. It has been estimated that the world currently produces an astounding 92 million tonnes of textile waste every year. Of the total textile waste generated worldwide today, the majority is post-consumer waste – caused constantly by the consumer citizens. It has been forecast that the current volume of textile waste will reach an overwhelming 134 million tonnes by 2030 globally. Most of the discarded textiles are landfilled (approximately 85%) with only a trivial proportion finding its way towards reuse, repair, or recycling. This is alarming and it calls for urgent textile waste policy actions – globally, nationally, and at the local levels. Textile waste crisis in the emerging economies such as India, China, South Africa, Brazil etc. is escalating rapidly with potential for intensifying further in the coming years. Although India has a rich history and innovative ways of reusing/upcycling/downcycling the country's used textile products, these old-style practices are gradually diminishing. In our cities and towns, people are increasingly adopting a trend where they prefer to purchase new clothing and footwear items instead of repairing or mending products through stitching, sewing, darning, or patching. The accessibility to cheaper textile products discourages them to opt for these traditional practices which are not only environmentally sustainable but also economically viable. With the rise of fast fashion and increased consumption, we see a further decline in such efforts. This is disturbing considering the fact that India is the most populous country in the world today and even if our per capita textile waste generation is lower than many Global North countries, the absolute volume produced is still tremendously high. Along with the conventional markets in the country, today, the increasing proliferation of e-commerce acts as a major driver towards pushing the textile waste crisis forward.

The textile waste associated challenges are amplified by 'fast fashion' and associated activities. Fast fashion denotes the rapid production and subsequent consumption of inexpensive clothing and footwear at short intervals, often in response to the newest popular trend. This model encourages or allures consumers to constantly buy new products to keep up with the latest fashion. On the one hand, this model enables the manufacturers and retailers to introduce new collections in the market in just a few weeks' or months' time. Today, many well-known global fashion brands exemplify this approach by offering the latest styles at affordable costs. One example of it is the recurrent and massive sales in the shopping malls of the urban hubs of emerging economies and e-commerce sites with major appeals to the consumers. On the other hand, fast fashion motivates consumers against prolonged use of their clothing or footwear and thus, is responsible for significantly decreasing a product's life. Fast fashion products are often low-quality, thereby encouraging a throwaway culture. Consequently, consumers are engaged in incessant purchases and regular stockpiling/discarding. At a time when people are habitually glued to their smartphones, social media acts as a further catalyst to inspire fast fashion tendencies and replicate the recent trend. This is worrisome considering the environmental circumstances globally in general and in the emerging economies in particular.

This paper will provide an overview of the textile waste scenarios in the emerging economies. The current management practices and policy implications will be studied in selected representatives from the emerging economies. The paper will particularly consider circular economy characteristics present in the practices of textile waste management in India. It is important to document such practices which may show directions towards closing the loop. At a time when fast fashion actions are surging in these countries, taking India as an example, the paper will address queries such as: Are the consumers engaging in fast fashion practices without even realizing or acknowledging it? What is the environmental cost of fast fashion actions – from manufacturing to consumption to discarding? Are the consumers mindful of the fact that textile waste is one of the biggest environmental challenges faced by the world today? In order to get answers to these questions, a structured questionnaire survey was conducted in India with over 500 respondents. The result shows that with an attractive market including in the form of numerous e-commerce sites in our smartphones, the tendency to buy new products at frequent intervals has been witnessing an unprecedented increase in recent years. Such as, since the advent of e-commerce, there has been an unparalleled decline in the lifespan of consumer textile products of all kinds globally and India is no exception to this trend. As a result, stockpiling of

apparel and footwear products in our households along with the concerns associated with textile waste emerges as a major environmental sustainability issue, especially in urban centers of the country. The study concludes that it is essential to engage in meaningful efforts to curtail the textile waste crisis by responsible pro-environmental actions instead of fueling it further by adding new varieties of materials. A fundamental change in our purchase and disposal behaviour of textile products (especially apparel and footwear) could be a significant first step in this regard. Further, it is imperative to attain a circular textile economy, and create an association among clothing brands, consumers, governments, and recycling industries to achieve the same. Policy provisions (such as extended producers' responsibility initiatives) and major advancements in textile recycling technologies are instrumental in ensuring sustainable textile production and consumption at pre-consumer and post-consumer levels respectively.