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Sustainable Businesses: Understanding the
Plight of Women Workers in Domestic and
Informal Sectors

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Abstract

The concept of need-centric sustainability has now been around for three decades. The holistic approach towards sustainability as a means of combining environmental protection, economic growth, and social justice, especially gender equality, is relatively unexplored. This paper acknowledges the role women can play in establishing a comprehensive and inclusive sustainability model, especially in order to bring meaningful change at the grass-root level. Further, an attempt to understand the existing trends surrounding the apparel industry and its far-reaching effects on the people living in South Asian countries has also been made. The paper analyses the potential sustainable businesses like online thrift stores hold in reforming and transforming our relatively distressed planet. Real development and progress will not happen solely on the basis of economic gains. Young, innovative and informed entrepreneurs and leaders must work with vulnerable communities in carving the way towards a truly sustainable planet- a thought which reverberates throughout the paper.

Key Words: *Sustainability, sustainable business model, sustainable fashion, apparel industry, pillars of sustainable development, consumer behaviour, thrift stores, working conditions*

1.0 Introduction

The world has reached the brim of saturation. It should be acknowledged that humankind is at a crossroads of either descending into stark, painful destruction or to reconstruct and restructure around principles of solidarity and multipolarity, contributing to an equal, just world. Faced with the urgency of impending doom, manifesting steadily as the climate crisis and human rights violations, the need to herald sustainable systems and lifestyles that uphold human rights is unparalleled. After the dawn of the industrial revolution in the 18th century, the face of the world had been transformed by unprecedented and unparalleled growth. This fundamentally changed the way people lived their lives. Economically, politically, and socially, the world got accustomed to a paced life, the needs of which were fulfilled by the expanding markets. Within this context, the concept of sustainability was essential, yet unheard of.

According to the United Nations report, 'Our Common Future', development becomes sustainable when the needs of the present do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development aims to strike a balance between environmental determinism and possibilism, where humans must create opportunities and possibilities within the limitations of nature.

This paper recognizes that one of the major cornerstones of sustainability that is often overlooked is social justice. The intent is to recognize the particularly exploitative nature of the apparel industry that benefits from the toil and labour of women working in largely underdeveloped or developing countries. The three pillars of sustainable development construct their groundwork on the basis of a multiplex of cultural, geographical, political, and historical factors, with gender equality and women empowerment serving as a prerequisite to the path of utmost sustainability.

Exploring this further, the paper aims at understanding:

- How the world of fast fashion is based around a maladaptive structure of excessive consumerism and its many environmental consequences.
- How centrally exploitative manufacturing supply chains are leading to human rights violations, making women residing in the global south more vulnerable to disproportionately bear the burden.

- How businesses can adopt socially responsible models aimed not only at profitability, but also the protection of their workers and employees thus, improving their quality of life.
- How young leaders and entrepreneurs can shape policies and decisions to establish sustainable practices that actively pursue environmental concerns and justice.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the particularly frenzied, frenetic nature of the apparel industry and how it has shaped consumer attitudes that are unfit for the current state of our planet. Its intent is to focus on how sustainability is fundamentally an active choice, currently relying on strong and informed leadership. The paper also attempts to build upon and study various companies and brands to propose a sustainable business model that will have the potential to address not only profitability but also environmental and climatic concerns, and social justice. The resolve is to absolve the world of the gender inequality that exists in essentially exploitative economic systems and equip women with the ability to discern and become self-reliant.

2.0 The World of Fast Fashion

2.1 What is Fast Fashion?

Fast fashion is typically driven by the idea that more is true, more. Initially, in its original form, the fashion industry was divided into seasons, wherein various couture and atelier houses would exercise their artistic license to design and morph trends meant to last across generations. Rightly so, much of the trends and design aesthetics that we see today are an assiduously tweaked version of what has already been created and admired. It should be realized that the present model on which the apparel industry sits has long been laced and dusted with not only a minimal effort at innovation but also ideals that inextricably evade values of accountability and transparency.

Fast fashion brands cater to an increasingly impetuous consumer appetite. They function in a high-street setup and are driven by high profits with negligible production cost. These brands shift their focus and resources from investing in quality design and materials to extensive marketing strategies and ploys so as to garner the attention of the consumers. The replication and portrayal of trends that have trickled down from the runway coupled with the modern,

influencer-marketing strategies and regular launches or “drops” have indeed suffocated the consumer into believing and buying pieces that they can comfortably function without.

By creating new, desirable styles weekly, these brands are able to create massive amounts of clothing and make sure that the customer never tires of their store’s inventory. The environmental damage, which the fashion industry continues to create, is in large part due to fast fashion. Several brands use toxic chemicals, dangerous dyes, and synthetic fabrics that seep into water supplies in foreign countries where the clothing is made and at home where the clothing is washed. (Stanton, n.d.)

The issue of sustainability becomes even more complex when fundamentally sustainable brands such as Reformation were invalidated and blamed for fostering an environment that is racist, discriminatory, and exclusive of people of colour (Parisi, 2020). Moreover, buying sustainable fashion is a result of privilege. Sustainable fashion is inherently expensive as it operates within a limited scale, launching capsule collections manufactured domestically, with a stronghold over design and quality. The idea is not to coerce people into giving up fast fashion entirely but to educate them into buying less of it. This is indeed a difficult task as it involves making people aware of the resolute difference that exists between clothes in vogue as opposed to pieces that are timeless. A shift in the cultural perception of what is considered stylish, a breakdown of conventional beauty standards, and deviating attention from what people wear all the time are aspects integral to the improvement of these fast fashion companies.

Sartorial choices are often an outlet to express distinct personalities. These choices not only bear a projection of ourselves but also actively affect our self-esteem. Dressing according to societal norms and conventions of what is considered stylish inevitably contributes to a positive self-concept. Thus, it has become increasingly difficult to decipher and unravel the problematic disposition of these brands and establish a sense of style that is truly sustainable.

2.2 Understanding Fast Fashion Supply Chains

Fast fashion supply chains are typically rooted in the convenient availability of factors that allow manufacturing industries to flourish. These are; abundant labour working at minimal wages, resources such as land, energy, power, and water to set up infrastructure, capital to procure machinery and other productional inputs needed to drive the infrastructure, a hinterland

rich with resources and ability to regularly supply raw materials, an extensive network of transport, and communication connecting supply units to markets.

Lastly, fast fashion brands strive to commence business in developing countries with relatively flexible and expedient labour laws and readily available raw material sources. The apparel industry which produced 10 per cent of all global carbon emissions is a prominent part of the economic landscape of countries that predominate South and South-East Asia. These countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam are supposed to benefit from the economic boost that the fast fashion brands deceptively promise to provide.

In order to understand how the apparel industry lopsidedly affects these countries, it is essential that we navigate our way through the supply chains that have sustained and popularised these brands. Fast fashion retailers adopt a supply chain model called vertical integration. By leveraging vertical integration, companies take control of more than one phase in their supply chain, enabling their ability to turn raw material into a product and get it to the consumers (Kucukcay, 2018). Vertical integration endows fast fashion companies with an added advantage as it eliminates the need for middle-men and related wholesale suppliers. By controlling every stage of the production process, from manufacturing to marketing, vertical integration has allowed fast fashion companies to significantly expand the scale at which they operate, sanction bulk consignments, and provide employment opportunities to a large number of people. This inevitably allows fast fashion companies to minimise production costs, control the terms at which employees can approach them and express grievances, which consequently provides the space to increase profits.

Thus, by strengthening and exercising their control at every stage of production, fast fashion retailers are able to reinvent existing trends and curate new ones, delivering them to the consumer, sometimes within a week. Moreover, the way these retailers approach marketing strategies inserts their product within the realm of affordability. With a minimal effort at design innovation and quality materials, fast fashion retailers are able to replicate runway styles and deliver them, thus embedding a sense of style and luxury in the consumer. With the cutthroat competition existing between these retailers coupled with their ability to campaign collections aesthetically, they are able to captivate the customer and lull them into believing that they will be

missing out on a necessity if they don't indulge into their narratives. The stringent control that exists over the entire manufacturing process, allows them to reduce production costs, push margins, and increase the markup, thus delivering said affordability.

Those in the fashion business that has a formidable supply chain – taking their products from a nascent trend to a clickable online purchase with a deliverable garment at a lightning-fast pace – are the ones that are winning. This involves superior digitalization, great analytics, and a backend process that is second-to-none. (Jacobs, n.d.)

2.3 Analyzing the relation between consumer behaviour and fast fashion

Prior to launching a product in today's competitive and cut-throat market, behaviour analysts and marketing researchers toil away relentlessly with the objective of predicting and comprehending impending market trends. Ergo, consumer or buyer psychology - the behavioural study of the factors influencing a consumer's buying patterns - is vital for an organization's operations; However, analyzing patterns of consumerism can prove to be tremendously arduous, considering each individual has different attitudes and preferences towards consumption and disposal of products. Moreover, organizations need to be wary of the incessant shift in fashion trends and fads, living standards, and technological advancements in addition to a consumer's constantly varying attitude towards products in the market. Several factors that influence a consumer's behaviour are characterized as follows through the given flowchart:

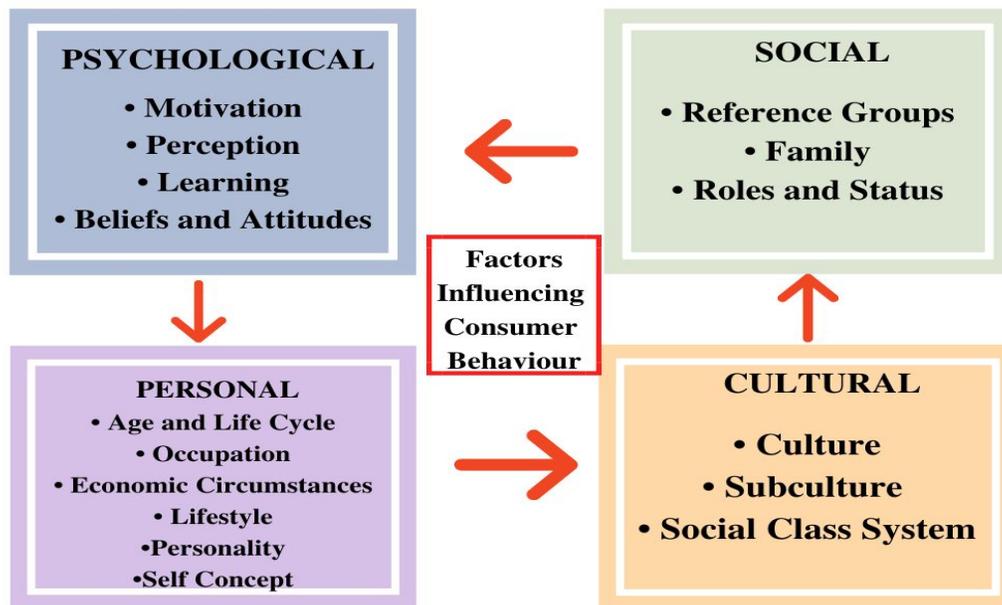


Figure No. 1

Source: Kotler and Armstrong, 2008

The conventional consumer decision processes model given by Engel, Blackwell & Miniard encompasses the following seven processes:

- **Need Recognition:** Identify the problem (Usually the state of desire to acquire the particular product) that must have a solution or a determination made.
- **Search for Information:** Good decisions require good intelligence, thus good quality and reliable information, usually through research, is required.
- **Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives:** Construct an appropriate decision heuristic or shortcut layout mindful of the courses of action the alternative option offers.
- **Purchase:** Be aware of what needs to be executed to make the determination.
- **Consumption:** Execute the decision/judgment.
- **Post-Consumption:** Assess if the desired outcome was achieved from the decision.
- **Divestment:** Maximize the results of the decision (which may lead to further decision making) (Dickins, 2008, p. 1)

For the purpose of perpetuating the domains of the fast-fashion purchasing cycle, empirical findings attest that the fast fashion consumer decision process varies, and happens in the following three patterns:

- (1) Purchasing in accordance with certain expectations.
- (2) Purchasing some unexpected items during shopping with certain expectations.
- (3) Go shopping without any expectations.

There only exists two different processes composing the above three fast fashion consumer decision process patterns (See Figure No. 2). One is in accordance with the pre-purchase section in the conventional model of the consumer decision process, and hence it takes turns in need recognition, search, and pre-purchase alternative evaluation before purchase. The other process does not go through the steps, the purchase happens only because some particular items are discovered.

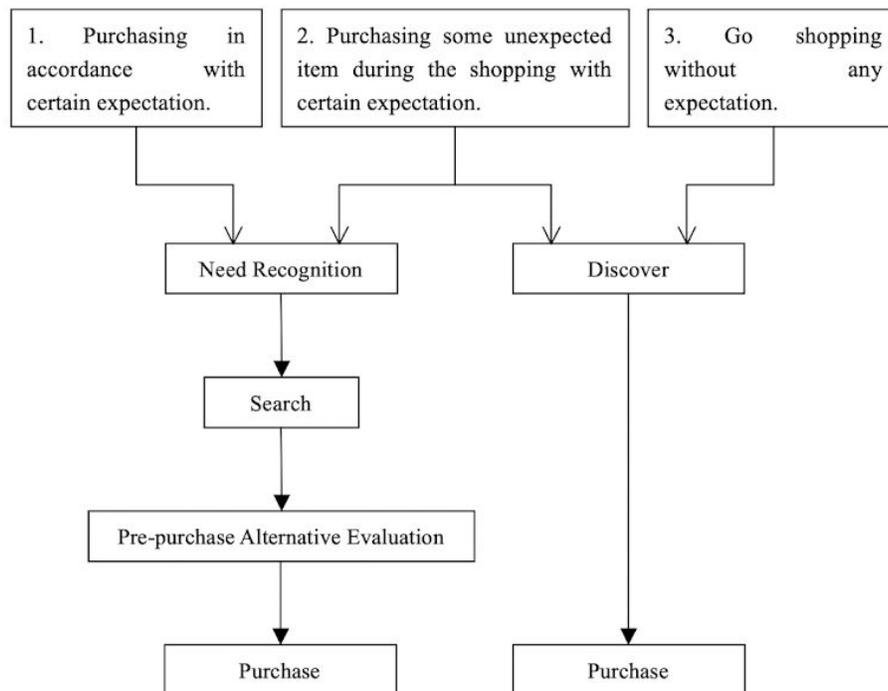


Figure No. 2

Some special categories such as Impulse Purchase, an unplanned spur-of-the-moment action triggered by product display or point-of-sale promotion (Defined by Piron in 1991) do not fall under the pre-purchasing behaviours of the model; however, its inclusion is particularly relevant in terms of analyzing fast fashion consumer behaviour. Additionally, it is worth noting that consumers may also fall prey to a feeling of “ensuing regret” as a consequence of deciding not to buy a certain item from a limited collection of the week. (Wang, 2010, p. 1)

Consumers of fast fashion items share several interlinked characteristics such as: Preference for a lower price of a good(s) compared to the quality of said good(s), usage of good(s) for a short period of time only, inclination towards frequently visiting popular fast-fashion brand stores, tendency to follow novel trends through social media or traditional tools, proclivity towards impulse buying and hedonic consumption. Enticed by “golden deals” on trending fashion wear with the added benefits of slashed prices, and a “once in a lifetime opportunity” to purchase replicas of a lower standard, fast fashion retailers are no doubt seizing the opportunity to appeal to the covetous side of consumers.

2.4 Examining The Environmental Repercussions of the Fast Fashion Industry

Behind the alluring costs of the clothes placed in orderly piles of the world’s most sought after brands lie the unvarnished reality of fast fashion: the staggering environmental injustice caused by the apparel industry. With inexpensive prices and rapid production speeds, the fast fashion industry is the second-biggest consumer of water and is responsible for 10 per cent of global carbon emissions - more than all international flights and maritime shipping combined. One of the biggest contributors to these carbon emissions is the dying, colouring, bleaching, and laundering of clothes using toxic and synthetic dyes such as Azo Dyes - often linked to being carcinogenic in nature. Residual chemicals from these dyes, such as arsenic and mercury are then discharged into the water streams and do not undergo chemical decomposition. The repercussions of this chemical discharge have devastated marine life by lowering the levels of dissolved oxygen in the world’s water bodies as well as local agrarian communities and watering livestock globally by making this water potent and unfit for domestic use. According to a 2017 report issued by the Global Fashion Agenda, the fashion industry consumed nearly 79 billion

cubic meters of water – the equivalent of 32 million Olympic-size swimming pools. In addition to the large amounts of wastewater generated, there is utterly no action being taken to treat this water, evidenced by the lack of stringent legislation regarding water contamination in lead manufacturing countries such as India, Bangladesh, and China. Greenpeace, an independent reported gross misconduct in Bahasa, Indonesia, with 68% of local factories on the banks of one of the main rivers, the Upper Citation, devoted to garment production; With the massive amounts of dumping of waste products without treatment into waterways, the river is now deemed as one of the dirtiest in the world. Considering that most clothes from fast fashion brands are made with synthetic fibres, such as Polyester, acrylic, and nylon, the environmental damage from microplastics that come from these fibres is drastic; According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, washing clothing made of these fibres can shred up to 738,000 fibres at a time.

In addition to this environmental unrighteousness, the growing of cotton requires tremendous amounts of pesticides and herbicides; Being one of the world's most chemically dependent crops, Cotton is responsible for 18% of global pesticide use and 25% of global insecticide use. Moreover, cotton is also one of the world's most water-intensive crops. Along with this prerequisite for growing the crop, the excessive demand from retailers results in rivers being diverted, via man-made practices of damming and riverbed dredging, in order to supply mass crop plantations with water. This often leaves areas of desert, barren land, and the upheaval of local communities that rely on these waterways. (*How Green Are Your Garments*, 2017)

With the fast fashion industry model urging consumers to view clothing as disposable, giant piles of textile waste collect in heaps once a fashion trend engulfs the world's attention. In December 2018, The War on Waste calculated that 6000 kilograms of clothing are dumped in landfills every 10 minutes. Clothes that aren't sold in markets are shipped and then dumped into landfills, which clog water bodies, parks, and greenways. As a result, more greenhouse gases are produced in the process of shipping. Clothes made from natural fibres itself do not decompose, and produce gases like methane, whereas synthetic fibres like nylon and acrylic, have similar impediments: Since these fibres are made from petroleum, they will take an indefinite amount of time to biodegrade. Combining these environmental concerns with air pollution from smoke and

fumes from industries and mistreatment and slaughter of animals for the sake of fashion wear, the apparel industry certainly plays a mammoth role in contributing towards the climate change crisis by leaving a global pollution footprint, rendering millions of lives vulnerable at the mercy of retailers and their exploitative practices.

2.5 Exploring the Way Fast Fashion Retailers Operate: an Attempt at Sustainability

In today's climate, fast-fashion retailers can not turn a blind eye to the cultural discourse and revolution surrounding sustainability. Instead of being portrayed as gigantic hegemony driven solely by capitalist goals and financial incentives, it is necessary for all high-street retailers to come together and devise a plan to tackle the growing impulsive consumerism.

An effort in the desired direction has been made with Inditex, H and M, Primark, Adidas, Gap, Burberry becoming signatories to the United Nations Fashion Charter for Climate in accordance with the Paris agreement that strives to keep global temperature increase below 2 degrees celsius. However, this is far from substantial and provides no gateway to an understanding of what terms these brands actually operate. One of the biggest fast-fashion retailers in the business, H and M, has made a conscious effort to become transparent, scoring 73 per cent out of the 250 points- an indicator of the brand giving out crucial information about raw material suppliers, manufacturing, processing facilities, etc. Zara, the dominant player within the apparel industry also regularly runs infomercials online around their commitment to supply organic cotton, recycled polyester, and supply its linen from sustainable sources. The brand also sheds light on their conviction to reduce the energy consumption in all their stores, and also its resolve to work for the betterment of women, providing basic maternal healthcare to women working in Bangladesh (under the Every Mother Counts program).

While all these efforts are appreciated, the question might also arise why these were needed in the first place. Basic healthcare, sustainable procurement of raw materials involving special attention to those working in the primary sector, and safe working conditions should be prerequisites for the establishment of any industry. This criterion must be seen as unnegotiable and intrinsic to a company and not as a means towards capturing the customer under the facade of surface-level sustainability. This is where it is very important to understand the concepts of greenwashing and transparency.

‘Greenwashing’ is a term that was coined in the 1980s by environmentalist Jay Westerveld. It refers to the promotion of green-based environmental initiatives or images without the implementation of business practices that actually minimize environmental impact. It is also defined as the dissemination of misinformation by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image. Fast fashion retailers are tactical enough to use sustainability as a marketing strategy. For instance, H and M is known in the world to be the largest user of organic cotton but in actuality, only 13.7 per cent of the cotton H and M uses is organic. (*Greenwashing*, n.d.)

According to the Fashion Transparency Index 2020, transparency is all about disclosing information. More often than not brands only disclose information to limited stakeholders in a way that does not disturb their profit-making capacity. Very little is said about how the policies planned to be implemented or what the brands strive to do in order to protect their workers. Transparency enables others to scrutinize what companies say they are doing in terms of human rights and environmental protection. It allows the consumers, lawmakers, NGOs, and all other relevant stakeholders to hold the brand accountable with regard to its policies. However, it is a measure that discloses that is often comparative with very little information about the way a brand works towards ensuring safe working conditions. (*Fashion Transparency Index*, n.d.)

In the end, a large part of the onus lies on the consumers’ shoulders and their ability to read between policies and marketing gimmicks. Disclosing information to the public is extremely integral to a brand’s long-term stability, otherwise, it is susceptible to a breakdown and eventual shutdown initiated by the very people it employs. It is a hard notion to navigate, especially when the clothes we wear are a visceral part of our lifestyles. However, it is increasingly essential to question brands that benefit from vulnerabilities of certain groups and lull consumers by creating unnecessary needs. Ignorance is a direct product of privilege that our planet can no longer afford.

3.0 Working Women-The Facade of Empowerment

3.1 The Link between Women and Sustainability in South Asian Countries

The three pillars of sustainable development construct their groundwork on the basis of a multiplex of cultural, geographical, political, and historical factors, with gender equality and women empowerment serving as a prerequisite to the path of utmost sustainability. As for the first pillar, social development, it is vital to underscore the mammoth weightage of gender role expectations that stem from long-term processes of socialization which ultimately shape a society's expectation of women, particularly in traditional and conservative societies, such as India. These gendered practices gravely disadvantage women in terms of gaining literacy, as evidenced by the 2001 Census' data showcasing India's national female literacy rate at 53.7 per cent nationally, juxtaposed by the 21.6 per cent difference against the male literacy rate - A harrowing gap that further narrows down in rural areas. Additionally, these norms further compel women to retreat to their domestic spheres with the sole objective of managing their households and tending to their domestic duties, an activity that is not captured under GDP calculations, despite the fact that more than 90 per cent of Indian women participated in unpaid domestic work at home in 2019, according to a report by the Hindu.

Financial disadvantage and dependency prevent women, especially in rural areas, from beginning business ventures and obtaining monetary services, in addition to a tendency to "save" than borrow common in agricultural sectors, inadequate access to financial resources in social and informal work sectors, and lack of access to collaterals which hampers their borrowing capacity (Rajiv Kumar & Pankhuri Dutt, 2020). According to a UN report, a staggering 49 per cent of women from the 1.3 billion-strong nation contribute to its GDP; However women's contributions in subsistence work and labour market are fundamentally unaccounted for, disguised and seasoned, which in turn expiates the female labour force participation rate - the share of working-age women who report either being employed or being available for work - which stands at a historic low of 23.3 per cent in 2017-18. While women constitute an integral portion of the workforce, Indian Labour Organization has estimated that the global wage gap discrepancy rises from 16 to 19 per cent in 2018-2019. Whereas in other South Asian countries such as China, Bangladesh, and Cambodia, women constitute 70 per cent, 85 per cent and 90 per cent of the garment industry labour force. Whilst being employed for some of the most profitable

companies in the world, they work under decrepit conditions with minimum wages; In case of Bangladesh - the minimum wage for garment workers is 5,300 taka (£45/€62) per month which is far from the 8,900 takas (£75/€104) that are needed to cover a worker's basic needs, and even further away from a living wage. (Fashion Revolution, 2014)

Concomitantly, this global and widespread exploitation makes women financially vulnerable, placing them at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, at the foot of the second pillar: Economic growth.

As for the pillar of environmental sustainability, environmental disruptions and climate change render women vulnerable to a number of diseases such as malnutrition, higher risk of poverty and displacement, and lack of awareness and insufficient decision-making skills at times of adversity due to inadequate schooling. A study from Uganda highlights the factors between climate change and women's risk for abuse: Financial stresses due to loss of income during natural disasters can lead to marital stress, spousal violence, and economic exploitation of women. Natural disasters as a consequence of climate change also create a greater risk for women. In the 2004 Tsunami in Thailand, more women than men died because they had stayed back to look for children and relatives as per their gender roles and because they did not know how to swim and climb trees as the men and boys did. Subsequent to the 2016 hurricane in Haiti, cases of sex trafficking of girls increased, as economic deprivation rapidly rose in the region. Following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, early marriage of girls increased, due to concerns regarding the vulnerability of orphaned girls. Evidenced by studies, women face a vast number of physical concerns, such as lack of sanitation and privacy whilst menstruating, to psychological issues such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, in addition to social, cultural and economic factors. (Rao & Anita Raj, 2019)

Realizing the underlying structural barriers, the sixtieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women provided a road map for the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that highlights the significance for women's economic empowerment of decent work, full and productive employment, and equal pay for work of equal value. These commitments are also reflected in recent normative milestones, including the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework on Climate Change. They perform around 75

per cent of the world's unpaid care and domestic work, valued at 13 per cent of Global Gross Domestic Product. If included in national accounts, the unpaid care economy would represent between 15 to over 50 per cent of gross domestic product, according to a United Nations report. For the achievement of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is vital to heed Sustainable Development Goals(SDG) 5 and 8 which aims at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, as well as Goal 1 on ending poverty, Goal 2 on food security, Goal 3 on ensuring the health, Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities for advancing towards women's economic empowerment and the realization of women's rights to and at work. (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2016)

3.2 Working Conditions-Delving into the Human Rights Aspect and their Access to Resources

In most developing countries which are involved in the apparel industry, women form a large labour force. According to the estimates given by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the labour participation rate (per cent of the female population aged above 15) is 33.04 per cent in Bangladesh. This number is 80.94 per cent in Cambodia, 61.49 per cent in China, 35.05 per cent in Sri Lanka, 51.27 per cent in Myanmar, and 49.58 per cent in the Philippines. These statistics are an indicator of how women are not a passive group in the developing countries of the global south. However, these numbers are not a criterion to understand their health, education, working atmosphere or the kind of financial and social security they enjoy.

As per the Indian Labour Organization's analysis of the gender gap in employment, in most developing and emerging countries, women are less likely to be in the labour force if they do not have access to transportation, affordable childcare, and are not given enough freedom from their partners and families. These parameters can perhaps significantly help fast-fashion retailers and other relevant stakeholders in formulating policies with a strong focus on human development, thus improving the brands' credibility.

For the purpose of evenness and understanding, this paper will take the example of Bangladesh to understand the various areas in which gender inequality manifests itself within the garment industry.

1. Working and earning in factories

The ready-made-garment industry created employment opportunities especially for female workers and now this sector is considered as one of the main sources of employment for female workers of Bangladesh. This industry has provided the largest employment opportunities for women in the industrial sector where more than 85 per cent of the production workers are women. These women have a great role in strengthening the garment industry by the fact that the poor unskilled women have few alternatives or/and no better employment opportunities. Employers prefer female workers not only because they are cheaper and abundantly available, but also because they are more vulnerable, docile and manageable than male workers. Most of them are young girls aged less than 30 as employers do not prefer experienced workers who would inevitably want high remuneration. Most women commute to work on foot. Almost 93 per cent of female workers usually walk to their workplace and also back home (Sikdar et al., 2014, p. 174).

Based on the International Labor Organization's Working Conditions Laws Report, the working conditions are, including and not limited to, working hours, annual leave, maternity protection, minimum wage, amenities, physical environment, the degree of safety or danger, and the like that exist in the workplace. (Satrya et al., 2017, p. 338)

The reality for most garment workers in the Global South is far from here. Although producing for some of the most profitable companies in the world, they are working for poverty wages, under dreadful conditions, and they have to undertake an excessive amount of overtime. In Bangladesh (the world's second-largest exporter of clothes) the minimum wage for garment workers is 5,300 taka per month which is far from the 8,900 takas that are needed to cover a worker's basic needs, and even further away from a living wage. Many garment workers are working between 60 and 140 hours of overtime per week and it is common to be cheated of the overtime pay. (*Exploitation or Emancipation?* n.d.)

2. Access to healthcare and education

Working in the garment industry is physically demanding with continuous exposure to loud noise, improper lighting and stress. In addition, the working environment in the factories is often considered unhygienic and not worker-friendly, which has an adverse effect on the workers' health. Therefore, the majority of the participants reported suffering from chronic headache. In addition to physical labour, women workers are compelled to work for long hours every day and frequently go without proper food, rest and recreation, leaving them often fatigued. Due to exposure to toxic fumes and dust, three major respiratory difficulties were identified: first, inhalation problems, as the workers were consistently exposed to the cotton dust without proper protection. In some severe cases, workers were found suffering from shortness of breathing and in fewer cases, asthma. The absence of work-life balance has made these women more susceptible to psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, mood swings, phobia, thus making it even more difficult for them to navigate their professional and personal lives (Mahmud et al., 2018, p. 186).

Moreover, the average medical cost per month of the female worker was 497.5 taka but they are getting only 200 takas as medical allowances according to the wage structure of the RMG (Ready Made Garments) workers recommended by the wage boards, 2010. Keeping this in mind, the entire industry lacks a comprehensive and extensive healthcare system that goes beyond primary aids. In the case of the level of education, the average schooling of the workers is 6.84 years. Out of the women working, 35 per cent have acquired primary education, and 48 per cent of them have had access to secondary education. As their level of education is low, their working efficiency and working capacity are also low. For this, they have less bargaining power and get poor remuneration and facilities from employers. (Sikdar et al., 2014, p. 174) Education can have an immensely rewarding and advantageous result, not only for the women working but also for all the dominant brands operating from these developing countries. If done right, educated, liberal and efficient women can prove to be transformative at the managerial level and can bring abundant experience and suggestions to improve the manufacturing process. Not to mention they can be fundamental in improving the reputation and relevance of the brands involved.

Due to several factors including, occupational segregation, inherently patriarchal family structures, lack of basic and affordable childcare, minimal effort and spending on family planning and reproductive health, women are restricted by their social disadvantages. Thus, even if they are employed and financially productive, their freedom and ability to lead purposeful, individualistic lives where they can make their own decisions is insignificant.

3. The mistakes, blunders, and the way forward

The Rana Plaza factory collapse, burning of the Tazreen fashions factory, along with other countless such incidents, are not economically viable for Bangladesh as the second-largest manufacturing centre in the world, as well as the home of 3 per cent of the world's poor.

The Rana Plaza factory collapse killed 1,132 people, injured more than 2500 persons, most of the girls and women. Given the hazardous working conditions and the high risk of exposure to employment injury in this sector, the provision of adequate benefits is of critical importance in compensating injured workers for the loss of earnings they are likely to suffer and to ensure that they have access to the medical and associated care required by their condition. In the absence of a well-functioning labour inspection system and of appropriate enforcement mechanisms, decent work and life of dignity is still a far-fetched dream for the vast majority of workers in the garment industry and their families (*The Rana Plaza Accident and Its Aftermath*, n.d.). It is indeed hard to imagine the adversities and difficulties that an incident such as the Rana Plaza factory inflicted upon the factory workers. A large majority of the workers suffered irreversible injuries and were unable to continue with work.

Brands such as Inditex, H and M, Mango have signed the legally binding Accord on Fire and Building Safety of 2013. This, however, is no way a reflection of how this accord translates in reality. At a conference with Business of Fashion, Kalpona Akter, the executive director of Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), talked about the tussle between the Bangladeshi government and factory owners due to which the benefits of the accord were rarely implemented on the ground level. After reiterating the importance of the accord, citing how after it started working in 2016, the death toll of garment workers due to hazardous work environments came down to 0 after an average of 100 workers a year. Akter's perspective was indeed an eye-opener. Many such similar narratives can prove to be crucial assets for

understanding the workers' needs and grievances. Thus, brands should seek to involve and collaborate with such individuals. The accord was renewed in 2018 and signed by 190 brands, and currently covers 1600 factories, safeguarding 2 million workers.

While a legal measure in the desired direction is admirable, it should also be realised that while the number of brands which have signed the accord has been substantial, there are also many prominent brands which have refrained from doing so. As per the Industrial Global Union estimates, there are more than 50 brands which have not signed the legally binding accord. The situation is equally bleak in India as well across India, the vast majority of workers were women and girls from the most marginalised communities. None belonged to a trade union or had a written contract, leaving them with no way of seeking redress for unfair or abusive treatment. Payments were often late, with many workers reporting that they had been penalised for not completing hefty orders on time. (Ratcliffe, 2019) With this, the importance of involving women while formulating associated policies and coming up with safety precautions should be reiterated. In order to truly reverse and correct all the damage done, it is essential that brands and companies must act through the lens of humanity and actively involve their biggest contributor—the women.

3.3 Assessing the underlying framework protecting female domestic workers under India's Rule of Law

Albeit women formulate a massive portion of India's informal economy, they face risks such as detrimental working conditions, poor habitats with lack of water and sanitation resources due to social disadvantages. Additionally, women in informal sectors experience issues such as exploitation, trafficking, and sexual harassment in addition to a lower wage in comparison to men. With an abundance of prospective reforms surrounding worker rights reforms, such as Shashi Tharoor's Domestic Workers' Welfare Bill, 2016, and the Ministry of Labor and Employment's primary draft of the 2011 National Policy for Domestic Workers, no concrete steps have been taken towards this proposition. In 2011, India signed the "Domestic Workers Convention C-189" of the International Labor Organization, which stated that domestic employees could exercise certain fundamental rights, such as fair parity, fixed working hours, equal bargaining power, etc. However, The Indian Government stated that its public laws and

practices are not structurally aligned with the arrangements of the convention thereby deciding against ratifying the convention. In June 2019, yet another proposal was drafted by the Indian Government in favour of domestic workers, ensuring payment of minimum wages, social security, and sanitized working conditions. However, the proposal has not been discussed since. Correlated with the three pillars of sustainability, namely Social, Economic and Environment, the three following policies provide an insight into the present legal framework enforced to protect India's labour force as well as throw light on the gender-exclusive nature of these laws that ultimately lead to wrongful exploitation of female workers.

1. Lack of Social Welfare Development: The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013

Sec 2(o) of the act defines its objective as providing protection against sexual harassment of women at workplace and for the prevention and redressal of complaints of sexual harassment and for matter connected therewith or incidental thereto. However, with the formation of Internal Complaints Committees (ICC) come to a plethora of challenges: Ambiguity between defining harassment and sexual harassment, lack of representation on the committee, and the quasi-judicial powers of the ICC. For domestic workers, the 2013 Act says that Local Committees have to refer the case to the police, leaving no civil remedy, and rendering victims subject to humiliation by revealing themselves to the public eye. "The result of low reporting in the informal sectors is due to the lack of funding from the central to state governments for ensuring implementation of the act", says Anagha Sarpotdar, chair of the Mumbai city district Local Committee since 2018 (Bajoria, 2020). Certain provisions such as the standard of proof and evidentiary requirements must be clearly defined. With India's registered workplace sexual harassment on the rise since #MeToo, an extension of anonymous complaints must be implemented to encourage women to take legal action against their sexual perpetrators especially amongst domestic workers thereby alleviating the silent crisis in the domestic labour force. Continuous efforts into awareness regarding provisions and rights exercised of the act supplemented with regular training sessions with ICC members must be made mandatory. (Pradeep & Ankita Ray, 2017)

2. Lack of Economic Provisions and Safeguarding: The Minimum Wages Act, 1948.

The Act's primary objective is to bridge the wage disparity between different work personals in employment as well as strive to ensure equal pay between male and female workers. Yet, the act does not contain any provisions for discrimination between men and women; All the provisions of the Act equally apply to both male and female workers. Consequently, this serves as a grey area as female workers working in any scheduled employment including the agriculture sector are entitled to the same wages as fixed by the appropriate Governments for their male counterparts. (Tax Guru, 2012). The act fails to consider the painstaking conditions women are coerced into such as toiling away in decrepit working surroundings and exposing themselves, and their families in the process, to toxic fumes and chemicals on an everyday basis. The Act, further, does not include provisions for self-employed workers. With about 50 per cent of the workforce engaged in self-employment and another 30 per cent engaged in casual employment, The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) survey of 2011-12 conveys 56.1 per cent of women were self-employed, 12.7 per cent were regular wage workers and 31.2 per cent casual labourers. Thus, the applicability of the Minimum Wages Act is essentially limited to less than 20 per cent of the workforce. To take the first leap towards financial independence, increased pressure on the central government to implement development training through National and Regional Vocational Training Institutes must be emphasised under the provisions of the Act. (Kingshuk Sarkar, 2020)

3. Lack of Environmental Protection: Disaster Management Act of 2005 and the Epidemic Diseases Act

The widespread impacts of the pandemic have shed light on the vital need to revise India's currently enforced epidemic law, which is a 123-year-old two-page law introduced initially to control the spread of the Bubonic plague. While the pandemic has been categorised as a "notified disaster", the outdated law fails to explicitly state the duties of the Government towards its citizens; With no concessions, benefits, or medical facilities offered to the marginalized workers, migrants, and rural communities; These shortcomings particularly endanger India's domestic workers, particularly domestic female workers. With the onset of the COVID-19 lockdown, a survey showed that a staggering 91% of domestic workers lost their salaries in April. Another telephonic survey conducted in New Delhi by the Institute of Social Studies Trust with 35

women workers between April 23 and 28 recorded that nearly 83% of women reported severe to moderate economic crises as well as anxiety over job security. As many as 51% of workers surveyed had unemployed spouses and 36% were divorced, separated or widowed women. With women being one of the most severely impacted by the pandemic, measures to combat harassment and exploitation by employers uncertainty over re-employment, lack of adequate healthcare and sanitation, and environmental safety are some guidelines that must be incorporated into India's disaster management legality. (Jagriti Chanda, 2020)

An imperative concern is to amend the existing definition of domestic workers and labourers due to the overlapping ambiguity of these definitions, failing to prove inclusive of domestic workers especially in the case of female domestic workers and female labourers. These amendments in definitions must extend to the following laws: The Minimum Wages Act, 1948; The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961; Workman's Compensation Act, 1923; Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979; Payment of Wages Act, 1936; Equal Remuneration Act, 1976; Employees State Insurance Act, 1948; Employees Provident Fund Act 1952; and the Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 (SEWA, 2014). Only an integrated central law can regulate the placement work and provide social security to them developed by trade unions. In support of this perspective promising avenue, it is fruitful to shed light upon the recent legal victory of the West Bengal Domestic Workers Society; The Paschimbanga Griha Paricharika Samit received a certificate declaring them a trade union from the state government. Such a move is extremely welcome, for it provides a much better legal footing to these collective action units, who can expect better bargaining power as trade unions, which are recognized under labour legislation. (Ganeriwal, 2018).

3.4 A Brief Highlight of the Impact of Covid-19 on Female Garment Workers in South Asia

Throughout history, it is patterned that women are bound to bear the brunt of all disasters immoderately. The pandemic proves to be no exception. It is ironic to note that online shopping for clothes has increased by 2 percentage points. (*COVID-19 Has Changed Online Shopping Forever, Survey Shows*, 2020) However, it is widely known that the garment industry based majorly in South-East Asia, has been severely hit by the pandemic. According to the International Labour Organisation's report, The supply Chain Ripple Effect, the garment sector

accounts for about 3.4 per cent of the total employment and, 21.1 per cent of manufacturing employment in the region. The majority of garment workers are women (35 million), and the garment sector employs 5.2 per cent of all working women in the region or 27.9 per cent of all women working in the manufacturing sector.

The same report explains three channels through which the pandemic has affected the garment workers:

- Factory Closures- Most governments of countries which house the garment factories ordered the closure of non-essential workplaces. In April of 2020, up to 20 countries or territories had such measures in place, where approximately 56 million workers reside.
- Failing Consumer Demand- A second channel through which the COVID-19 crisis has been impacting garment supply chains, is the sharp drop in global consumer demand. The sudden decline was largely driven by losses in purchasing power, increased uncertainty that pulls back consumption, and lockdown measures such as the closure of clothing stores or different types of travel restrictions.
- Supply Chain Bottlenecks- The pandemic has put a disruption on production as well as imported input supply, creating problems for countries whose input supplier base is very much concentrated on one or very few countries.

Not only have these disruptions to the garment supply chain significantly affected women workers, but the pandemic has also exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. Despite being the largest employer of women, the garment industry has yet to formalise effective strategies to protect its women. Paid maternity leaves, daycare facilities for working mothers, and regular check-ups on the nutritional status of the women, along with the necessary medical aid is vital.

It should be realised that by emphasising on the restricted definition of sustainability by solely focusing on the ability of future generations to meet their needs can prove to be counterproductive. In this context, it is important to view sustainability in accordance with the economic benefits, social justice, and environmental protection- areas which are crucial towards gender equality. There is a profound notion that education and empowerment of a woman are equivalent to that of a family- a thought that can very well apply towards resolving the abundant problems of our world.

4.0 The Relation between Sustainable Businesses and Upliftment of Women

4.1 Towards a Sustainable Economic Model

The current economic model of the world is entrenched in the capitalist structure which emerged as dominant in the post cold war era. The modus operandi of this structure caters to the many wants of the 21st century, the soul of which is growing consumerism and globalisation. In an interlinked world which feeds on instant information and free-market economies, a shift to centrally sustainable operations is urgent. Let us take the example of the apparel industry.

The apparel industry has once again brought to light the importance of global cooperation. The countries of the world need to realise that in order to truly achieve sustainability and restructure our planet, the disparity between the global north and south needs to be urgently eliminated. It is highly contradictory to see investments being made to search for a planet B when in reality minimal effort on the part of certain companies and brands can save the planet and its most threatened communities. Moreover, in a predominantly neoliberal, deregulated economic setup, governments of South and Sout-East Asian countries must be willing to provide comprehensive, expansive social safety nets.

1. The basis of a sustainable economic model:

At the most basic level, a sustainable economic model establishes a concrete intent to consistently pursue goals of environmental quality, profitability with special emphasis on protecting and uplifting the quality of life and the human rights of all its employees.

- Essentially, businesses must promote the idea of the triple bottom line so as to achieve profitability, environmental quality, and social justice. (Badulescu et al., 2015, p. 1102) A significant step towards achieving sustainability is embedded in implementing corporate social responsibility. Brands and conglomerates can largely benefit from investing in human capital by centring a significant part of their operations around the welfare of their workers. A business that is also a desirable workplace will always be able to operate into the future since there will be a workforce striving to be part of the business. Essentially, corporate interests and labour interests are seen as interdependent. (Chamberlain, n.d.)
- A paradigm shift in the way young entrepreneurs and leaders perceive and approach economic growth i.e through the lens of long-term stability as opposed to momentary expansion.

- An understanding of the way technology can be harnessed to upcycle and recycle materials, especially in manufacturing units located in areas without financial resources to invest in clean technologies.
- Creative and innovative young world leaders must weave and map systems that support local businesses that emphasise consumer needs and operate on limited, sustainable, and safe scales.
- A sustainable economic model would also pay equal attention to the organisation and management of all operations, in addition to monetary profit, It is deeply crucial to involve more women and people of colour and indigenous communities who have lived sustainably for years. Their perspectives and solutions can prove to be instrumental in achieving true sustainability.

4.2 A Conscious Choice Towards Sustainability- House of Anita Dongre

Anita Dongre started her brand's journey with two sewing machines nestled in her balcony. Today she has a business worth almost 725 crores, and caters to all kinds of consumers- from the everyday Indian suits wearer to the Indian living abroad in search for a bespoke, timeless wedding lehenga, to the working woman in want of modest western wear.

Anita Dongre is possibly one of the most transparent and accountable designers in the apparel and fashion industry. Her website boasts of all her sustainability centred endeavours and is an attempt to educate the consumers and make them informed buyers. At the Copenhagen Fashion Summit held in May 2019, she talks about her brands' design and curates collections in order to provide employment to the artisans. Building on this thought, the designer specifically started another label- Anita Dongre Grassroot which is entirely centred around the artisans' skills. It is the demand for the craft that determines the collection's release dates. Each garment is created around the unique motifs and stitches that the crafter's traditional embroidery styles offer. Largely incorporating *aari*, *soi* and *bharat kaam* embroidery styles, she works with around 600 artisans through Ahmedabad-based Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), one of the numerous NGOs she collaborates with. (Panicker, 2018)

As per a survey done at the brand's Charoti unit, 96 per cent of the women reported increased self-confidence, 88 per cent of them reported improvement in respect by family, 63 per cent reported an increase in respect by community or society, 62 per cent reported enhanced decision-making power in family matters, and 42 per cent of the women reported regular monthly savings, thus exemplifying how holistic sustainable development can directly benefit the bottom line. Anita Dongre has assured that all her garments and accessories are made from cruelty-free materials and has abstained from any usage of leather or cashmere. Her headquarters in Navi Mumbai are also centred around principles of environmental protection and reduction of carbon footprint with features such as biogas plants, organic terrace gardens built of reclaimed wood, segregation of dry and wet waste, and recycling of wastewater and its deployment for toilet flushing and lawn irrigation.

The brand is driven by the core values of sustainability, stability, feminism, and social justice. The house of Anita Dongre also puts forth a refreshing perspective on sustainability by encouraging consumers to never forget their roots and contribute to the longevity and survival of indigenous handicrafts. Her ventures are a lesson to brands driven solely by financial and monetary profits. This community-oriented business model is indeed the linchpin of how sustainability can be used as an active tool to change our society.

5.0 Proposing Recommendations From a Holistic Perspective

Imbuing and establishing sustainability in the ready-made-garment industry is immensely complex and dichotomous. Brands are often torn between becoming transparent, and thus unravelling various aspects of their supply chains, some of which have potential to jeopardize their reputation and subsequently their profits; or leave the responsibility to the governments of countries housing these factories to provide minimum wage and safe working conditions. Here, one needs to acknowledge the insurmountable pressure factory managers are under to fulfil orders and meet supply targets. In the end, most often, the ones most affected by major decisions are the women working at the bottom of the supply chain.

Keeping in mind the principles of sustainability and gender equality, this paper suggests a four-way approach towards encouraging and instilling sustainability in the apparel industry.

1. Social Justice: First, addressing the problems created as a consequence of the vertically integrated supply chain and easing the terms on which most garment workers operate at the grass-root level. This can be done at two levels. At one level, fast-fashion brands, retailers and governments of countries where the industry is widely prominent must make institutional efforts to provide social safety nets consisting of transfers, minimum wage, childcare, paid maternity leave, education and healthcare, as well as unemployment insurance in the case of unforeseen circumstances like a pandemic. They must pay heed to the grievances and needs of the workers and associated organisations and unions. At the second level, workers, especially women must be involved at all the crucial stages of the brands' operations. From manufacturing and the managerial level to the brands' marketing endeavours, women from these countries and those with knowledge about sustainable practices must be consulted.
2. Environment: Second, the innovation of environmentally sound technologies and sourcing of sustainable raw materials that can be recycled, regenerated, disassembled, and reincorporated within the production cycle. Special attention should be laid on the processes involved in procuring these raw materials and on the elimination of microplastics. For instance, in the case of organic cotton, it is integral that brands ensure the monetary safeguard of the farmers involved, providing them with the necessary credit, inputs and the training required. Moreover, brands need to work on improving their packaging, especially with regards to e-commerce. An innovative way could perhaps be used by using and reinventing clothes from old inventory and stocks to make sustainable, protective packaging. Usage of plant-based, compostable cardboard, bags, foam etc, should be introduced. Brands must appoint sustainability officers and consult scientific experts consistently on how they can make their supply chains more environment centric.
3. Economy: Sustainability does not aim to compromise on economic gains. However, fast fashion companies must acknowledge the long-term benefits of a sustainable economic model and the kind of resilience it provides. Brands can work towards building a circular economy which according to the Ellen McArthur foundation is based on three principles:

design out waste and pollution; keep products and materials in use; regenerate natural systems. Big fast fashion brands can also initiate rental portals, and refurbishing services as a part of their sustainability programmes.

4. Consumers: The consumers must educate themselves on the way most fashion brands operate. A start can be made by reading the labels of clothes bought to look for a place of manufacture and raw materials or skimming through the brands' websites. The brands too can use their expansive consumer data to analyse buying patterns and launch campaigns in collaboration with content creators in the digital space, showing customers how they can style and upcycle old pieces bought from them. In the end, it is deeply critical to realise that the cornerstone of sustainability lies in consuming less and buying smartly. When it comes to clothes, buying what complements the rest of your wardrobe as well as your personal style instead of following trends and investing in pieces bound to last you a lifetime is key.

6.0 The Rise of Online Thrift Stores in India

The rise of online thrift stores, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic provides us with a glimpse of an alternative world where consumption and waste generation are in sustainable harmony. While the phenomenon of thrift stores is already explored and succeeded in the western world, its rise in a traditionally sustainable country like India, especially as a business model deeply loved by the youngsters, gives enormous hope to further the cause for supporting local businesses and building regional capabilities. Moreover, in a highly capitalised and mechanised world, online thrift stores and their use of the digital space to provide services with a human touch is immensely inspiring. In the end, sustainability can never be achieved unless we perceive it as a consistent choice to strike a balance between what we need and what we want. Thrift stores are indeed an initial stepping stone towards perfecting that balance.

Strengths +8	Weaknesses -3
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thrift stores present themselves as a strong alternative to fast fashion and a subsequent positive impact on the environment. 2. Thrift stores revolve around the management of clothes that have become redundant or unused, thus significantly reducing the pressure on already overflowing landfills. 3. Thrifting is an attractive outlet for people who have to regularly buy clothes such as those working in corporate settings or sales. 4. Thrifting inculcates a sense of uniqueness as the consumer buys a piece which is different and not mass-produced- an idea which is very well portrayed in the way thrift stores market their garments. 5. Thrift stores appeal to the consumers' conscience by educating them about sustainability and slow fashion. 6. Online thrift stores are highly personalised and intricately curated. Not only do they operate at a limited scale, thus reducing the cost of operations, they also pay equal attention to details such as sustainable packaging. 7. The cost of most items sold is extremely affordable. 8. Most pieces that are thrifted are vintage from the 1990s and 1980s. This forges a feeling of being rooted in one's past, providing consumers with new, one of a kind ways to reinvent their wardrobes and contribute to keeping numerous legacies alive. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Whilst the culture of thrifting is certainly environmentally friendly, the variety of clothing options and garments offered from thrift stores is extremely limited. With diversity serving as a critical element in terms of publicity and reputation, modern brands are striving towards adopting more size-inclusive clothing; Additionally, more up and coming fashion brands and labels are also designing clothes wear for the disabled community. However, as modern brands advance towards adopting body and size-inclusive clothing, thrift stores however are restricted in the aspect of inclusive fashion. 2. While the fast fashion industry disposes of millions of wearable garments, thrift stores organize the donated unworkable, foul-smelling, and torn clothes that are non-salable into piles, which are then further sent to landfills. For example, Goodwill, one of America's most popular thrifting stores, estimates that only 5 per cent of their inventory is sorted into a landfill, however, this still constitutes a large portion of the millions of tons of textile waste that collects at landfills annually. 3. Unlike the collection changes presented by fast fashion brands every week, it can be difficult to find weather-appropriate garments suitable as inventory solely depends on the kind of apparel donated: This concern is more prevalent amongst low-income groups who may need to compromise on essential items during desperate times of need.

Opportunities +5	Threats -3
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Online thrift stores have proved to be a highly profitable basis for young entrepreneurs to start their businesses. 2. Thrift stores can collaborate with various non-profit organisations into supplying and providing clothes to slums and other underprivileged areas. 3. Thrift stores can exclusively collaborate with local artists, illustrators, and design students for upcycling, renovating, and reinventing used clothes. This in turn can further provide employment to tailors, especially women from marginalised communities living in backward areas. 4. Thrift stores provide great opportunities for local, indigenous, home-grown brands, and even for bigger fast fashion companies to collaborate with thrift stores led by young entrepreneurs to create carefully crafted collections. These collections can be focused around sustainably sourced raw materials and must involve a diverse set of content creators to champion and spread their central values. 5. Thrift stores can also coalesce with a rental system, where people can hire pieces for special occasions such as wedding attire. This can prove to be super helpful to those in search of affordable options and extremely sustainable in the long run, considering the fact that clothes worn on special occasions are rarely repeated. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The gravest threat to thrifting is gentrification. As an increasing number of wealthy consumers are choosing to thrift as an alternative to buying items from fast fashion brands, they are simultaneously limiting the already restrictive options available to low-income communities in terms of clothing. 2. Whilst the domain of thrifting has grown popular around mainstream media and has harnessed a significant amount of attention, the practice of purchasing thrift items at an inexpensive price and reselling these items at a much higher price has witnessed an increment. This poses a major ethical concern as thrift stores have now begun hiking the prices of the originally low-cost items which makes the intended thrifting market, low-income communities, particularly vulnerable and places them at a financial disadvantage. For example, Depop, a virtual thrift store based in North America, has received harsh criticism for practising price gouging. 3. With thrift stores raising their prices, experiences by social media users have revealed that shoppers from low-income groups are now turning to fast fashion brands such as Primark in a bid to purchase whatever is most affordable. This can create a reverse trend as wealthy consumers opt for slow fashion practises and low-income groups opt for fast fashion brands thereby defeating the environmentally sustainable purpose of thrifting

The Pulse of the fashion industry report projects that, by 2030, fashion brands would see a decline in earnings before interest and tax (EBIT) margins of more than three percentage points, if they were to continue business as usual. This would translate into a profit reduction of approximately EUR 45 billion (USD 52 billion) for the industry. With unprecedented change taking place globally across all domains of humanity, could we dare to fathom that the rising culture of thrifting could be the new centrefold for the future of fashion? Considering the hefty investments cashed into futuristic technology and considerable attempts being made to extract the cloaked potential of the virtual world, consumers can observe online thrifting stores setting up shop across various social media platforms.

As Generation Z and millennials shop with a watchful environmentally friendly eye, the apparel industry may be witnessing a complete three-sixty degree as re-innovation and re-design claims the world's attention.

7.0 Conclusion

In advancing towards an era of transparency amongst consumers, organizations, and labourers, it is vital to examine the two sides of the coin: Widespread human rights violations of female apparel industry labourers working their fingers to the bone versus the glimmering and alluring side of the fashion industry showcased by mainstream media.

Considering the fast fashion industry's catastrophic and colossal level contributions to environmental damage and worker exploitation annually, it is vital to establish the link between women empowerment and sustainability while underscoring numerous instances of environmental exploitation and worker ill-treatment. Delving into a socio-legal perspective, the urgency to revamp presently enforced legal framework, aimed at worker rights protection, is significant particularly in South-Asian countries - particularly during the unprecedented epoch of the Coronavirus pandemic. Realising and defining the importance and characteristics of sustainable business models, examples of sustainable corporations and environmentally friendly labels can serve to provide a blueprint for prospective sustainable model recommendations. Taking into account the rapid rising culture and trend of thrifting, this shift in the consumer behaviour can provide an optimistic window of opportunity for the future of the apparel industry - Possibly by redefining the forefront of the industry by progressing towards environmentally conscious consumerism.

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