



Challenges of Sustainable Fashion

For Prelims: Challenges of Sustainable Fashion, [Biodegradable](#), [United Nations](#), [Khadi and Village Industries Commission \(KVIC\)](#).

For Mains: Challenges of Sustainable Fashion, Need of sustainable fashion for a healthy and inclusive environment, Environmental Pollution & Degradation.

[Source: TH](#)

Why in News?

An overwhelming majority of clothes and fashion items now claim to be made from "**recycled materials.**" However, concerns are rising about the **effectiveness and sustainability of this approach.**

What is Sustainable Fashion?

- Sustainable fashion refers to the concept of **creating fashion items in a way that reduces the environmental impact** and promotes social responsibility throughout the entire production process. It aims to create fashion items that are **environmentally friendly, socially responsible, and economically viable.**
- One of the primary focuses of eco-fashion is on the materials used in production. Sustainable fashion emphasises using natural and organic materials, such as wool, linen, and cotton, grown and harvested without harmful pesticides and chemicals.
- These materials are [biodegradable](#) and do not contribute to the buildup of waste in landfills.

What is the Significance of Sustainable Fashion?

- **Environmental Impact:**
 - The fashion industry is a major contributor to global carbon emissions, water consumption, and waste production.
 - Sustainable fashion aims to **minimise these impacts by using renewable materials**, reducing resource consumption, and implementing eco-friendly production processes.
- **Waste Reduction:**
 - Traditional fashion often leads to vast amounts of clothing ending up in landfills or being incinerated. Sustainable fashion **promotes circularity, where materials are reused, recycled, or biodegraded**, reducing waste and conserving resources.
- **Health and Safety:**
 - The use of harsh chemicals in conventional textile production can lead to health issues for both workers and consumers.
 - Sustainable fashion avoids or minimises the use of toxic chemicals, promoting safer and healthier products for all.
- **Consumer Awareness:**
 - Sustainable fashion encourages consumers to consider the environmental and social

- impact of their clothing choices.
- By raising awareness and promoting conscious consumption, it empowers individuals to make more informed and **ethical purchasing decisions**.

What are the Challenges to Sustainable Fashion?

- **Textile Recycling is More Complex:**
 - Textile recycling is more complex compared to recycling materials like glass or paper.
 - The vast majority (93%) of recycled textiles come from plastic bottles or PET bottles (polyethylene terephthalate), which are made from fossil fuels.
 - However, unlike plastic bottles that can be recycled multiple times, a **T-shirt made from recycled polyester cannot be recycled again**.
 - In Europe, most textile waste is either dumped or burned, with **only 22% being recycled**. However, the recycled textile is often repurposed into insulation, mattress stuffing, or cleaning cloths, rather than being reused in clothing production.
 - **Less than 1% of fabric used in clothing production is recycled** into new clothing.
- **Expensive and Labor-Intensive:**
 - Clothes containing more than two fibres are considered unrecyclable.
 - Recyclable clothes must undergo colour sorting and removal of zips, buttons, studs, and other materials. This process is usually **expensive and labour-intensive**.
- **Decline in Quality:**
 - When **materials are recycled**, especially in the case of textiles like cotton, the **quality often diminishes**.
 - This reduced quality can **limit the applications of the recycled material** and may necessitate blending with virgin materials, defeating the purpose of recycling.
- **Contamination:**
 - Materials intended for recycling can become **contaminated with other substances**, such as food residue in plastic containers or dyes in textiles.
 - Contamination can **degrade the quality of the recycled material** and complicate the recycling process.
- **Technological Limitations:**
 - Recycling technologies are still developing, particularly for certain materials like mixed-fibre textiles or impure plastics. As a result, the effectiveness and efficiency of recycling processes may be limited.
- **Carbon Footprint:**
 - After Western consumers deposit their unrecyclable polyester and mixed fabrics into recycling bins, a significant portion of this waste finds its way to African second hand markets, particularly in Ghana, or is dumped into open landfills.
 - Approximately **41% of the textile waste collected in Europe is shipped to Asia**, mainly to designated economic zones where it undergoes sorting and processing.
 - Europe's textile waste sent to Asia ends up in Export Processing Zones, notorious for lax labour standards and environmental regulations.
 - Exporting clothes to countries with low labour costs for sorting also raises concerns about the **carbon footprint** associated with transportation.

What can be the Solution for Sustainable Fashion?

- **Reducing Dependence on Polyester:**
 - Experts advocate for reducing reliance on polyester altogether, due to its detrimental environmental impact from production to recycling.
- **Embracing Alternative Fibres:**
 - Some fashion brands are exploring alternative fibres, such as **Pinatex made from pineapple leaves**, as a more sustainable option. However, caution is advised, as these fibres may still require thermoplastic materials for cohesion, limiting recyclability.
- **Addressing Overconsumption:**
 - Ultimately, **tackling overconsumption is deemed essential** for achieving sustainability

in the fashion industry. Calls for consumers to buy fewer clothes and prioritise repair, reuse, and **upcycling** are echoed by environmental advocates.

What are the Initiatives for Sustainable Fashion?

- **At Global level:**
 - **United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion:**
 - It is an initiative of [United Nations](#) agencies and allied organizations designed to contribute to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) through coordinated action in the fashion sector.
 - **Traceability for Sustainable Garment and Footwear:** As part of this initiative, **UNECE (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe)** has launched "**The Sustainability Pledge**" inviting governments, garment and footwear manufacturers and industry stakeholders to pledge to apply toolkit of measures and take a **positive step towards improving the environmental and ethical credentials of the sector.**
 - **World Cotton Day (7th October):** It creates awareness of the **need for market access for cotton and cotton-related products** from [least-developed countries](#), fosters sustainable trade policies and enables developing countries to benefit more from every step of the cotton value chain.
- **At National Level:**
 - **Project SU.RE:** SU.RE stands for '**Sustainable Resolution**'. It is the first-ever holistic effort towards gradually introducing a broader framework for establishing critical sustainability goals for the Indian textile industry. It was **launched in 2020.**
 - Objective: The project aims to **move towards sustainable fashion** that contributes to a clean environment.
 - **Khadi Promotion:** [Khadi and Village Industries Commission \(KVIC\)](#) promotes Khadi products. They have tied up with leading brands to promote Khadi products.
 - **Brown Cotton:** Brown Cotton, is a **local (to Karnataka) indigenous variety of desi cotton** that is recognised for its natural brown colour. This effort is a larger encompassing exercise that involves the environment, the economy as well as local communities.

Way Forward

- People all around the world should be made aware that climate change is a reality and not a hoax, so they should understand their responsibility for protecting and conserving the environment.
- There should be public campaigns by the environmentalists against the companies that do not adhere to environmental standards and should refrain from purchasing any product manufactured by them.
- **Governments around the world should increase [CSR \(Corporate Social Responsibility\)](#)** which companies need to pay for causing harm to the environment. This will prompt them to adopt sustainable practices.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q. The term 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' is sometimes seen in the news in the context of (2016)

- (a) pledges made by the European countries to rehabilitate refugees from the war-affected Middle East
- (b) plan of action outlined by the countries of the world to combat climate change
- (c) capital contributed by the member countries in the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
- (d) plan of action outlined by the countries of the world regarding Sustainable Development Goals

Ans: (b)

Exp:

- Intended Nationally Determined Contributions is the term used under the UNFCCC for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in all countries that signed the Paris Agreement.
- At COP 21 countries across the globe publicly outlined the actions they intended to take under the international agreement. The contributions are in the direction to achieve the long-term goal of the Paris Agreement; “to hold the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5°C, and to achieve net zero emissions in the second half of this century.” Therefore, option (b) is the correct answer.

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