



CLIMATE INDUSTRY SPOTLIGHT

Africa's Fashion Industry and Climate Change in the COVID-19 Era

Prepared by
Angela Owusu-Ansah, William Ohene Annoh, & Tamisha Segbefia.
Ashesi University



COVID-19 has irrevocably altered the fashion industry and changed the way we dress. It has catapulted slow fashion to overtake fast fashion as the default and preferred culture or, at a minimum, caused slow fashion to become at par in value and consideration with fast fashion. Slow fashion purports quality and sustainability of clothes enabling consumers to buy fewer but more expensive classic-styled clothes less frequently.

Counter to slow is fast fashion which promotes stylish, inexpensively produced clothes that have a short life span and are quickly discarded. COVID-19 has further blurred the lines between slow and fast fashion. Clothes, stylish or classic, expensive or inexpensive, durable or not, are viewed similarly through the COVID-era lens.

COVID has us working remotely and often from home, which has caused fast inexpensive clothes and fashion to last longer because of reduced wear and tear. Style, which is significant when one is among others, is somehow irrelevant in the confines of your home. According to Balchandani and Berg (2021), people have had time to look in and think about their wardrobes, and the consensus is they need far less fashion in this era of fewer occasions.

Nonetheless, fashion contributes to climate change challenges.

Traditionally, Europe is the spiritual center of fashion, with North America a close second. The textile and fashion industry, in particular fast fashion production, accounts for 10% of all Carbon gas emissions and 20% of wastewater, making fashion a key contributor to global warming.

The industry is the second-largest industrial polluter after the oil and gas industry (African Development Bank, 2019). Fast fashion is notorious for clothes that are barely worn, rarely recycled, and "used only for a short time, after which they are mostly sent to landfills or incinerated" (African Development Bank, 2019).

Overall, it contributes to \$100 billion in material loss annually due to underutilization. Additionally, 215 trillion liters each year are consumed by the industry, and textiles account for approximately 9% of annual microplastic losses to the ocean (United Nations Fashion Alliance, 2021).

Fashion production practices today are not sustainable; however, according to the United Nations Fashion Alliance (2021), the clothing and textile industry contributes \$2.4 trillion to global manufacturing and employs 300 million people worldwide across the value chain (many of them women).

Several African designers ought to leverage their skills in the industry to counter unemployment on the continent. Additionally, Africa contributes less than 4% to climate change, meaning it is highly likely that its textile industry contribution is close to negligible.

Data on the indigenous African textile and fashion industry's impact on climate change, as well as the global textile and clothing industry activities in Africa are limited. The textile activity on the continent mainly consists of cotton farming, fiber manufacturing, dyeing, printing, and bleaching.

Emerging globally-recognized African fashion designers can take advantage of positioning themselves in the space differently and more sustainably. Tongoro, a Senegalese fashion design house founded by Sara Diouf, has successfully used materials from Africa and touts eco-conscious fashion.

Globally acclaimed singer Beyonce is a client of Diouf's, whose work has also been featured in internationally renowned publications, including Forbes, Vogue, and Elle. African designers have an array of eco-friendly natural resources such as mohair, shells, naturally woven fabrics, etc. to use in addition to silks and linens.

Diouf exemplifies how Africa's fashion designers can seek out talented local artisans in their communities and train them in the art of tailoring to foster the fashion industry in Africa as a lever to create jobs.



According to Rao (2019), the fashion industry is showing signs of transitioning. In 2018, fashion industry players and others launched the Fashion Industry Charter for Climate Action, aligned with the goals of the Paris climate change agreement, with a vision of how the industry can achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Signatories include global brands such as Adidas and H&M Group, along with companies such as global logistics giant Maersk. (para 15)

Some luxury fashion brands such as Gucci and Gabriela Hearst plan to make their operations and supply chain carbon neutral. Existing reuse business models, namely Gwynnie Bee and Rent the Runway, are slow fashion industries supporting longevity by offering consumers the option to lease clothes (Rao, 2019).



Internationally, the United Nations Alliance for Sustainable Fashion, an initiative of United Nations agencies and allied organisations such as the African Development Bank, is "designed to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals through coordinated action in the fashion sector" (UN, 2019).

The alliance defines sustainability in fashion as causing the least environmental harm throughout the supply chain, decent work conditions, accessibility to all, and economic viability for producers. The fashion revolution theory of change purports a fashion industry that conserves and restores the environment and values people over profit and growth.

Fashion sustainability refers to being responsible and adopting a long-term plan for climate action. "Through the Alliance, the UN commits to changing the path of fashion, reducing its negative environmental and social impacts; and turning fashion into a driver of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals" (UN, 2019).

As an individual, one may proffer sustainable fashion by following the "UN's Act Now climate change campaign," which touts recycling, donating unwanted clothes, refashioning, or upcycling clothes into blankets or other garments. Shopping in vintage clothing shops to slow down fast fashion (Rao, 2019) may also help reduce climate change impact.

Apart from the UN frameworks for sustainable fashion, carbon-neutral, and reduction of water-waste transitions, which are already in motion, all fashion designers can leverage the COVID-19 induced shift in fashion mindsets of all who wear clothes to engage more with slow fashion. Additionally, African designers have the authentic and credible advantage of using natural materials to create a unique and eco-conscious fashion. The niche will further distinguish Africa's fashion style for value-add while concurrently mitigating and adapting to the challenges of climate change.

African designers have another advantage that pertains to slow fashion, which is Africa's entrenchment in culture. Culture, by definition, resists change, which is evident in the original African traditional wear and many other life experiences. Slow fashion is inherent in Africa's culture.

Consequently, African fashion designers would benefit if cultural stability and motion could also underpin their fashion designs: concurrently, there would be added benefits for climate action.



References

Balchandani, A. & Berg, A. (2021). Post Pandemic State of Fashion. McKinsey & Company.

Contemporary African Clothing.

Rao, P. (2019) Battling the damaging effects of "fast fashion". UN Africa Renewal.

Towards a sustainable textile and fashion industry in Africa. (2019) African Development Bank.

United Nations Fashion Alliance. Sustainable Fashion hard talk at the UN-high level Political forum.



Find out more about the GCIC at

www.ghanacic.org