

A Have you heard about the scandal in Turkey, involving the Zara clothing brand?

B Yes, I did hear about it. It's shameful. Zara has had shops on the UK high-streets since 1998 and it's opening more and more of them. Millions of us have brought the brand into our homes so millions of people in Britain should be shocked at the reports that factory workers in Istanbul have been hiding notes in the clothes they've been making for one of Zara's suppliers, pleading for help.

A One note apparently read: "I made this item you're going to buy, but I didn't get paid for it." It's reported that the workers were left unpaid after their factory shut down overnight.

B Was anything done about it?

A Zara's parent company, Inditex, has promised to reimburse its sub-contractor's workers as soon as possible. But the rise in rampant consumerism does remain a worry.

B It's clear enough what the cause of that is. Consumer debt levels are reaching an all-time high, but retailers are still offering credit options to their young customers, so it's easy to spend the money they don't have on clothes.

A And our appetite for new shoes and accessories seems to be growing more quickly than our appetite for food, though we should all be aware that our love of fast fashion is terrible for the environment too. It's estimated that in the spring two hundred and thirty-five million pieces of clothing were sent to landfill in Britain.

B Why don't we address the fast fashion problem? Because it's thought to affect more women than men? Fashion and clothes are routinely dismissed as trivial feminine interests, though in fact it's been shown that British men spend more on their clothes than women.

A It's true that women are disproportionately targeted by advertisers and then accused of being frivolous for spending their hard-earned money on a shopping trip.

B And that's just at the consumer end. Between sixty and seventy-five million garment workers are employed to make our clothes, and eighty per cent of them are women, working in dangerous conditions and not being paid a living wage, if they're being paid at all. Globally, poverty affects women first. More than seventy per cent of the world's poorest people are women.

A Do you remember the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013? A building in Bangladesh housing five garment factories collapsed, killing over a thousand people, most of them women workers. It was thought at the time that the tragedy would be a wake-up call and permanently change the way that the goods we buy are produced. Yet very little progress has been made since then.

B It's too easy to dismiss the complaints of underpaid workers as a women's problem. We should acknowledge that every one of us is part of the solution, regardless of gender. Many men and women I know are horrified by the way so many of our clothes are produced, and are doing their best to consume more carefully. They adopt no-spend months or make sure that they only ever buy second-hand clothes. But a much more effective solution is required, something that can be implemented at a higher level.

A Every little effort helps. The 2015 ethical consumer report shows that the ethical market in the UK has grown to thirty-eight billion pounds. The evidence suggests we care about where our clothes come from, and we don't necessarily want them to be produced as cheaply as possible, especially when lives are at stake.

B Yes, because it isn't evident that the best way to support workers in the clothing industry is to stop shopping altogether. The fashion industry could be a positive space for women, and provide opportunities for them as skilled workers and consumers.

A Quite, it's vital that we recognise the industry's wider value. Paying the predominantly female workers properly might force us to pay more for our jeans or cut into profit margins, but it would enable workers to live in better material conditions, educate their children, and live safer and happier lives.

B Analysts predict that global demand for menswear will outstrip women's wear by 2020, and that's a clear indicator that this isn't a concern for just one half of the population. It's time for every one of us to start taking the provenance of fashion seriously.

#### Outline

There has been little progress with the fast fashion problem since the 2013 Rana Plaza tragedy brought about the deaths of over a thousand people. Between sixty and seventy-five million workers make our clothes, eighty per cent of them women, working in dangerous conditions and not receiving a living wage. Some western consumers try to consume more carefully, only buying second-hand clothes or observing no-spend months, but to stop shopping altogether is hardly the best way to support clothing industry workers. Paying garment workers properly would enable them to live safer and happier lives and educate their children, even if it meant an increase in the price of our jeans or reduced profit margins. Fast fashion is terrible for the environment, and rampant consumerism is taking consumer debt to a worrying all-time high.

#### Questions

1. How would you define fast fashion?
2. Are young people concerned about where their clothes come from and the workers who make them?
3. Why is fast fashion so popular?
4. Are consumers responsible for the goods and services they buy?