

Slow Fashion in the Bangladeshi Context

As one of the pioneer slow fashion brand in Bangladesh, Friendship Colours of the Char, are promoting a lifestyle with responsibility towards the sustainability of our culture, heritage, and earth. Using the centuries-old techniques of handloom, hand-dyeing, and hand curving, which confirms the preservation of the naturality of mother earth with zero carbon footprint and adapting the 'zero waste' policy in fabric usage to ensure zero waste— Slow Fashion is the "luxury pillar" of this sustainability movement. For those who prefer to buy less, but of higher quality, and of designs that are timeless classics and earthy, slow fashion is a good fit. We are offering responsible pieces which are traditional and unique.

On the contrary, 'Fast Fashion' brands are now producing twice as much as in year 2000 due to increase in global garment consumption, which is estimated to reach 102 million tonnes by 2030, up from 62 million tonnes per year. This waste contribution of Bangladesh's textile industry is said to generate about 577,000 tonnes which are quite concerning for the inhabitants of the country.

One study estimates that 15 percent of fabric used in garment manufacture is wasted due to cut outs. According to the United Nations Environment Programme statistics, 60 percent of the 150 million clothes manufactured globally in 2012 were wasted. Despite increasing rates of textile waste, textile recycling remains too low, with 57 percent of all discarded clothes ending up in landfills causing many public health and environmental hazards as harmful compounds, including methane, are emitted when landfills are burned.

Bangladesh alone creates nearly two lakh tonnes of recyclable cotton waste, which is worth about \$100 million. Polyester, a synthetic material that emits more carbon than cotton, is used to make most cheap apparel. Moreover, synthetic materials account for 35 percent of all microplastics entering the oceans, usually through washing machine water effluent, which degrades slowly in the oceans and form

"Currently, the global practice is to try to bring the wastage rate down to zero. In this situation, it is not logical to increase it. The commerce ministry should look for ways to reduce the existing 16% wastage rate."

Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem,
Research Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

a poisonous chemical that harms marine life and ecosystems. The microplastics end up entering the human food chain, creating complicating health problems.

Currently, 44 trillion litres of water are used annually for irrigation, 95 percent of which is used for cotton production. Furthermore, the textiles and fashion industry has caused a 7 percent decrease in local groundwater and drinking water globally, especially in water-stressed manufacturing countries such as Bangladesh, India, and China.

According to the most recent study in the Bangladesh textile industry, spinning waste accounts for 24 percent, weaving waste for 35 percent, cutting loss accounts for 10-15 percent. Also, dye loss accounts for up to 2,00,000 tonnes, and post-consumer waste accounts for 1,000 tonnes. Bangladesh needs to act as soon as possible because the sums are alarmingly large and pose a serious threat to long-term sustainability.

In 2021, the Bangladesh commerce industry took a self-destructive step by enacting a policy that allows readymade garment exporters to increase their wastage rate from 16 percent to 28 percent, allowing them to sell raw materials in the domestic market. This single policy has had a multifaceted

effect, including environmental degradation, incompetence among local producers due to easy entry and lax rules for production, and contributing to today's crisis of foreign currency reserves due to increased imports.

The RMG industry calculated 16 percent wastage in various stages of production in 1998; the industry now demands 40 percent, implying that their wastage has increased by 150 percent over the last two decades. Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), disagreed with the commerce ministry's decision to increase the wastage rate, stating that the global practice is to reduce wastage to zero by using cutting-edge technology.

As a 'Third Sector' organisation, Friendship Colours of the Char find it easier to follow the 'Slow Fashion' path because they prioritise environmental and social wellbeing over profit maximisation.

"Slow fashion is the recognition that, there are human beings behind the clothes we wear. As consumers, we have the power to change the world by just being careful in what we buy"

- Nazra Mahjabeen Sabet,
Director of Operations, Friendship Colours of the Char.

As a social enterprise, they are leveraging their social capital by gaining access to rural artisans who make eco-friendly products that define the social enterprise model. Their mission is to empower the chars' marginalised women by developing an alternative and regenerative rural economy centred

on women weavers. Their natural abilities are being honed and improved through training in centuries-old traditional handlooms, natural dyeing, and handcraft, and their skills are being used in production centres located in the remote chars of Kurigram and Gaibandha, creating unique pieces of clothing and homeware. Their ability to earn a living gives them control over their lives and discourages early marriage, resulting in conscious family planning and lower divorce rates.

Control over income also provides these women with more domestic decision-making power, a social voice, and self-esteem. That is how Friendship Colours of the Char model recognises rural women's communal problems and generates socio-economic changes from the micro to macro level while promoting environmental sustainability through responsible consumerism. Slow fashion, as opposed to fast fashion, establishes foundations that benefit both communities and the environment, whereas fast fashion does not.

By Nazra Mahjabeen Sabet
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Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed/ Friendship Colours of the Char

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