

WEBINAR 1 - REPORT

CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN FASHION

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A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY IN FASHION



**FRIEDRICH
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BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a time of global and national reckoning. On one hand, there is greater awareness about the importance of environmental issues. On the other, livelihoods have been severely disrupted and millions of people have been pushed into poverty. The world's only viable option is sustainable growth and development, which necessitates a break from the linear economic model that makes economic growth and environmental protection a zero-sum game.

Shifting to a circular economy helps reconcile both these priorities by changing how materials are created, circulated and consumed in the economy. As we have mentioned before, the post-COVID-19 path must be both equitable and green -

this path has been envisioned by Chintan and supported by FES for a long time.

This was the first webinar of the six-webinar series on building and scaling a circular economy in India. The focus of this webinar was the fashion industry, which is often overlooked as an elite issue but is incredibly important economically and a significant polluter of the environment. It is also extremely inequitable in how it treats its workers. To answer these problems, we need to build awareness about the importance of building a circular fashion industry and lay out the path to action.

SPEAKERS



SHRUTI SINGH

Shruti Singh is Head of Policy at Fashion Revolution India and the co-founder of School of Active Citizenship, nurturing the next generation of policy leaders and social changemakers. She has over a decade's experience working at the intersections of education, sustainability and public policy. She is a design graduate from NIFT Delhi and holds a Masters in Fashion Entrepreneurship from London College of Fashion, University of Arts London and a Masters in Public Administration (MPA) from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

DR. VARSHA GUPTA

Dr. Varsha Gupta is a Professor at the Masters of Design program at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Delhi with nearly 30 years of experience in industry and academia. A circular economy expert, her PhD focuses on the recycling of post-consumer textiles to frame a model for sustainable development using system dynamics. She has presented papers at International Conferences in London, Leeds and Brussels and a video based on her PhD work was screened at the PhD festival in Milan, Italy.



KRITI TULA



Kriti Tula is the co-founder and creative brain of Doodlage. A trained apparel designer and design manager, Kriti has worked in the global apparel industry for more than 10 years. Her journey in sustainable fashion started very early on and has won her many awards and accolades for upcycled, recycled and ethically made fashion. With Doodlage her aim is to create India's first global sustainable and affordable fashion brand; focusing on reselling, repairing and upcycling while including ethically made recycled fabrics. Her work focuses on creating awareness around the need for alternate fashion economies.

KEY THEMES OF DISCUSSION

1. Growing demand for more sustainably produced fashion

India is experiencing a fast-fashion boom. With a growing middle class that has disposable income, fast fashion brands are becoming more and more popular. This in turn is making India a more attractive consumer market for global fast fashion brands. But the linear take-make-waste model that fast fashion is built on is immensely wasteful. Shruti Singh highlighted the wasteful nature of the fast fashion industry:

- It takes 2700 liters of water to make a simple cotton T-shirt.
- Every second, a truck's worth of clothes ends up in the landfill.
- 12% of fibers and 60 billion square meters of fabric are wasted on the factory floor.
- Less than 1% of garments are recycled

But despite the growth of fast fashion, there is emerging consumer demand for slow and sustainably produced fashion.

Ms. Singh highlighted the role of advocacy in building awareness and demand. She pointed out that producers are unconcerned with sustainability unless there's either consumer demand or a policy mandate. Consumer demand through advocacy is pushing producers to be more sustainable. Integration of sustainability into formal education also creates demand for circular fashion.

2. Barriers to creating a circular fashion supply chain

Speakers highlighted four key barriers to creating a circular supply chain in fashion:

1. Fast fashion mindset leading to clothes being designed for disposability, not durability
2. Processes and systems not being oriented to what happens to a garment in the post-consumer stage;
3. Prevalence of unsustainable materials
4. Lack of funding infrastructure for circular fashion brands in India.

Speakers discussed the growing popularity of fast fashion in a society that is starting to value disposability over durability. This leads to overproduction by brands and immense wastage. Kriti Tula and Dr. Varsha Gupta highlighted that Indian consumption practices have historically been inherently sustainable and circular. However, with fast fashion trends taking over globally, consumption patterns are changing.

Ms. Tula and Ms. Singh also stressed the aspirational nature of fast fashion, which fuels its demand. Global fast fashion brands aren't just cheap, they're also aspirational to India's growing middle class. There is a need to make more sustainable fashion desirable and aspirational. Ms. Tula suggests that the way to do so is through creating a desirable experience rather than advocating for sustainability alone.

While large fashion retailers are slowly being pushed by advocacy towards more sustainable fashion, there are a number of homegrown small businesses that are trying to operate sustainably and move towards circular practices. From a business perspective, one of the biggest challenges they face is the availability of capital and a broken circular supply chain.

Ms. Tula discussed the gaps in the circular supply chain for fashion brands. She highlighted the difficulty small sustainable and circular brands face in raising venture capital. She also mentioned that small-scale players are unable to access waste-management and recycling infrastructure due to small quantities.

3. Need to scale existing circular practices in India for environment and livelihoods

Many Indian crafts and local artisan occupations are inherently sustainable and circular, often as a result of innovations by the poor and marginalized to make resources last as long as possible. Dr. Varsha Gupta gave one such example of kantha embroidery, where women take scrap sarees and stitch them together to make new clothes. She showcased how the recycling systems that already exist in rural India are similar to those in place at big brands like H&M, but they are at a smaller scale and have many health and safety hazards due to a lack of safety equipment. She emphasized the need to make these systems safer and scale them up to simultaneously cater to environment, human health, and rural livelihoods.

4. Need for Government and Industry policies to incentivize circular fashion

From a systemic perspective, speakers were able to bring in key insights on the policy and industry-level changes that need to happen to facilitate a circular fashion supply chain.

Ms. Singh highlighted the role of policy at the industry and government level in incentivizing circular fashion. When industry bodies like fashion weeks set sustainability requirements, brands are forced to follow. She also highlighted the need for a National Policy on Waste and suggested that governments can gradually legislate initiatives such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) in fashion to move towards Sustainable Development Goal 12 - responsible production and consumption and tax incentives such as differentiated GST for circular businesses.

Dr. Gupta suggested that creating rural-urban connections for textile waste recycling is a way to both provide livelihoods to indigenous artisans and create a more circular economy in fashion. Textile waste from urban hubs should be transported to nearby rural centers and safely recycled by rural workers into new fabrics, which can then be brought back to urban hubs, converted into garments, and sold.

Ms. Gupta underlined the gaps in the circular supply chain for businesses - mainly lack of capital and inability to access recycling units without bulk quantities. These are intervention areas that the industry can explore.

QUESTIONS

1. The EPR has not seemed to work very well in the electronic industry in India, so why would you suggest adding it to the fashion industry?

Ms. Shruti Singh: No change comes easy, and this change should definitely not take place overnight. If the government has an extended period laid out, and EPR is introduced as a policy it has more chances of being inculcated in the fashion industry. When we don't have much data it becomes hard to form an evidence based policy, so the point here is not if EPR should be inculcated in the fashion industry, it has to be done, but the way it will be done might be challenging. With more pressure on brands to become transparent, it is serving to be a great nudge towards them adopting EPR as a policy in the future.

2. Is there any sort of index or indicator for understanding more about brands' supply chains except for Transparency Index? More like a sustainability index?

Ms. Shruti Singh: Transparency can be said to be taken as a yard stick for building the sustainability index in the future. In the absence of data it is very difficult to build an index of any sort because there is no body that is building matrix on the brands out there, therefore transparency seems like the only way to in the future build any sort of sustainability index. When brands publicly disclose their practices it will be easier to compare their sustainable practices, more openness does not guarantee more sustainability on their behalf but it definitely means they are more open to scrutiny and being accountable for their practices.

3. How would you advise people to educate friends and family who don't belong to the fashion industries about sustainability or to shift away from fast fashion?

Ms. Kriti Tula: You cannot impart knowledge but create experiences. How you live yourself can also encourage others to add those changes to their lifestyle. For example. When you go out to meet with some friends and wear the sustainable garment that you recently bought and styled, people around you will learn that these are great options that can be incorporated into their life as well. Another interesting activity to help your friends experience the sustainable lifestyle is by suggesting an exchange of a garment, letting your friends experience this change is more helpful than trying to educate them by preaching alone.

Ms. Shruti Singh: Sharing information with friends and family in your personal networks can also really help. A lot of times, people are unaware of the statistics about fashion, but when they find out, they want to buy more sustainable fashion.

4. Is a natural fabric garment that lasts only about 5 years better than a synthetic fabric garment that is durable enough to last 50 years?

Ms. Kriti Tula: Anything that you can take care of for a long time is always better. Choose the fabric that you know the end of life of. A fabric that you can wear, repair, and flaunt for a longer while is the best option. Hence we advocate for natural resources.

5. The fashion industry's linkage to our political economy is very deep. The fashion industry is the window dressing of consumption capitalism. How can we expect it to turn its role around?

Ms. Kriti Tula: The concept of fast fashion started with creating consumption, it is a need that the industry created. But this stands on certain cross roads. There are so many people working behind the scenes of this industry, therefore what we have to look for is an alternative that provides livelihood to these people and at the same time make sustainable fashion more available to people so that our conversation patterns concerning "trending styles" change as well, both from the consumer as well as on the end of the producers.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS



FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is a non-profit German foundation committed to the values of democracy and social justice



www.india.fes.de/



CHINTAN ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH AND ACTION GROUP

Chintan is a non-profit that works on sustainability through the lens of solid and hazardous waste, and air pollution.



www.chintan-india.org/



TAMARIND CHUTNEY

Tamarind Chutney is a sustainable and ethical fashion brand that aims to improve artisan livelihoods and reduce textile waste in India.



www.tamarindchutney.in/