



CHILD RIGHTS AND INFORMAL TEXTILE WASTE RECYCLING IN BANGLADESH

About this Report

UNICEF engaged The Centre for Child Rights and Business in 2023 to carry out research to gain a deeper understanding of textile waste and its implications for recycling value chains concerning children's rights. The report findings inform UNICEF's evolving evidence base on child rights and business including in relation to child rights in global supply chains and related topics on the ready-made-garment industry, the informal sector, waste recycling and the just transition agenda.

This report is a publication by The Centre for Child Rights and Business and does not articulate, nor does it represent, any position of UNICEF.

Date published: December 10, 2024

Textile production is the world's second most polluting industry.^{1,2} This fact alone means the fashion industry must rethink its operating and business model to meet objectives of sustainable development. Despite a growing emphasis on developing recycled textiles as part of a more circular economy, protecting the climate and ensuring a just transition, the reality is still far from ideal.

Global statistics on textile production and waste

100 billion new garments are produced annually around the world³

92 million tonnes of textile (post-consumer and industrial) waste is produced every year⁵

5% of landfill space is taken up by textile waste⁷

Global textile fibre production doubled from **58 million** to **116 million** tonnes from 2000 to 2022. And approximately **12%** of fibres are lost in the process between the manufacturing of fibres and finished clothes⁴

< 1 % of clothing fibres are recycled back into clothing production⁶

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY.....	4	4. CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	16
2. TEXTILE RECYCLING ECOSYSTEM.....	5	5. RECOMENDATIONS.....	17
3. SPOTLIGHT ON BANGLADESH'S POST-INDUSTRIAL TEXTILE WASTE RECYCLING.....	6		

ISSUE 1: POOR WORKING CONDITIONS

ISSUE 2: UNSUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS OF WASTE MARKETS WORKERS

ISSUE 3: FREQUENT OCCASIONS OF CHILD LABOUR DRIVEN BY HARDSHIP,
LOW CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION AND NEED FOR LOW-SKILLED LABOUR

ISSUE 4: LIMITED JOB PROSPECTS LEADING TO LONG-TERM PRECARIETY

ISSUE 5: SUSTAINABILITY IS A LOW PRIORITY

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

UNICEF commissioned The Centre for Child Rights and Business to carry out research to gain a deeper understanding of textile waste and its implications for recycling value chains concerning children's rights.

The textile waste and recycling sector needs more attention amid the rapid growth of the ready-made-garment (RMG) industry. In developing countries, the ecosystem of this sector involves a large volume of informal workforce which plays a critical role in the ready-made-garment (RMG) operations.

This report focuses on the **5 key issues** related to children's rights in post-industrial textile waste management in Bangladesh. It also examines the sector's role in the broader **just transition agenda and circular economy**. The aim is to raise awareness among all stakeholders and advocate for their actions to prevent and mitigate the risks to children.



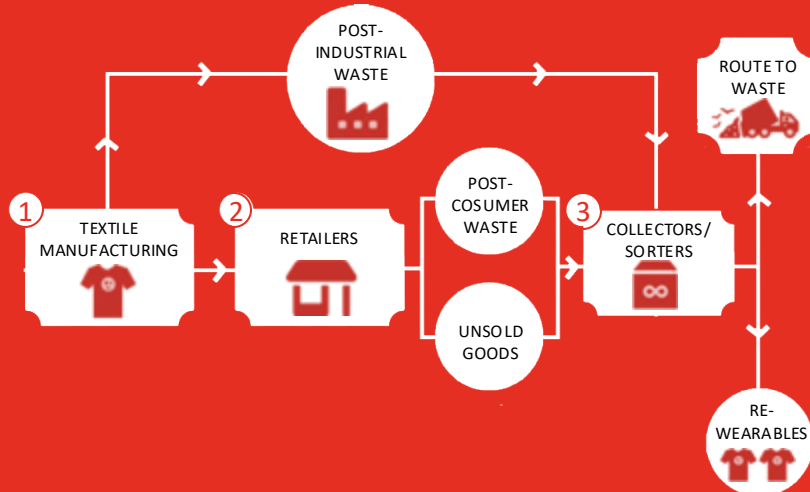
Shredding facility at Konbari

© The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024

TEXTILE RECYCLING ECOSYSTEM

Textile waste is broadly split into post-industrial waste and post-consumer waste:

- Post-industrial textile waste (also known as pre-consumer waste) is textile waste created during the manufacturing process.
- Post-consumer textile waste is created and discarded by consumers. Unsold goods, despite not being created by consumers, are often treated as part of post-consumer waste.



Recycling and the Just Transition

The goal behind the just transition agenda is to support workers and communities whose source of livelihood is likely to be affected as the traditional industry evolves toward a low-emissions, more sustainable, and circular economy. The effort involves a range of policies, funding and support (e.g. skills training) to ensure the well-being and livelihood of the people involved.

Waste processing and recycling play an important role in fulfilling the just transition agenda. However, the existing gap in recycling infrastructure and capacity means that garment factories often rely on informal labour to process their production waste. The role of waste pickers and sorters, who remain among the poorest and most vulnerable, is presently not recognised.

SPOTLIGHT ON POST-INDUSTRIAL TEXTILE WASTE RECYCLING IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is vital to the global ready-made-garment (RMG) industry. The country has rapidly expanded its textile industry over the last 40 years to become the second-largest global garment producer after China.⁸ While it is one of the largest producers of textile scraps, currently only 5% its waste is recycled locally.

The limited recycling capacity means strong reliance on informal waste processing, with urgent action required to understand and address a range of child and human rights risks involved.

Bangladesh's Textile Sector

Bangladesh is the **No. 2** textile producer globally



Largest producer of textile waste – produce **400,000 to 577,000** tonnes

The textile sector employs **four million** people in more than **3,500** factories



Only **5%** is recycled locally into garment manufacturing

Source: Circular Fashion Partnership, 2019; The Business Standard 2023



Waste sorters at Julkuri

© The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024

The Informal Workforce in the 'Waste Markets' of the Upstream Supply Chain

Waste markets are where post-industrial textile waste is being sorted, cleaned, shredded, transported and sold. It is predominately supported by an informal workforce and many small business operations.

This means it is challenging to have full visibility of the textile waste recycling supply chain. Workers are often involved in manual labour work, earn low wages, and have limited protection in terms of worker rights.

ISSUE 1: POOR WORKING CONDITIONS

This study examined several textile waste markets in Bangladesh's key industry hubs*. It found that these waste markets employ a large workforce, mostly women, who manually sort and process cotton and polyester waste. This **informal workforce is at risk of being overlooked in the just transition agenda.**

The informal nature of employment in this sector means they are not protected by legal employment contracts, are subjected to poor working conditions, and receive little to no high-value skills training or awareness of their worker rights. This creates a domino-effect of risks for their children and families.

**The study (included 74 interviews and 4 focus group discussions) was conducted across 4 waste markets across Dhaka, Narayanganj and Gazipur.*



"There is no sitting arrangement [in the shop] so I lie down on the floor and work. There is no toilet either, so we go to Bihari camp to use the toilet, which is far from here."

– Female worker, 18 years old, Mirpur

Informal workforce and their working conditions in a typical waste market in Bangladesh



Workforce:

☑ 70% women / 30% men

Work arrangement:

☑ Verbal agreement is the common form of work arrangement



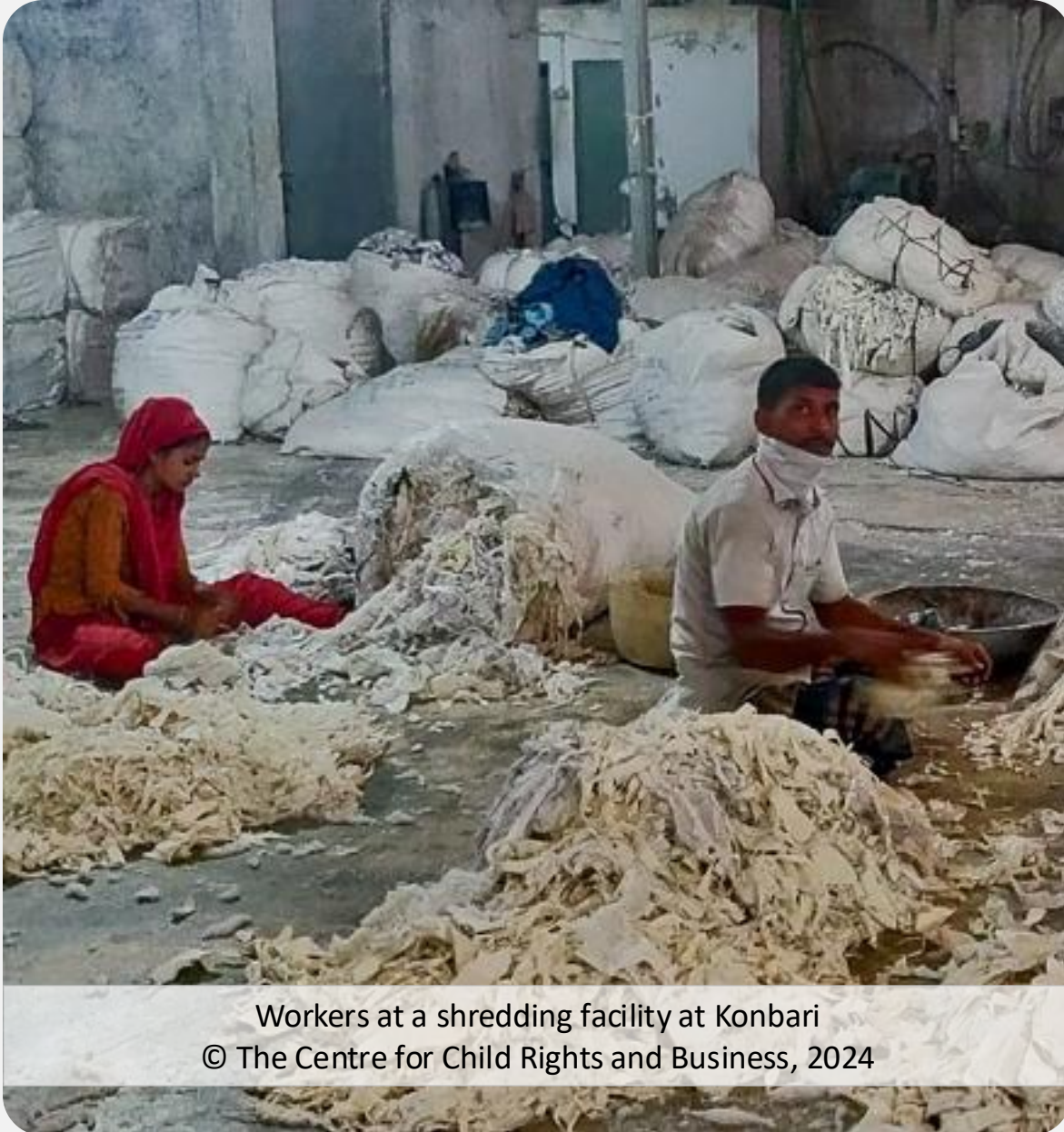
Conditions:

☑ 10-12-hour days, 6.5 days a week

Health issues**:

- ☑ Respiratory problems due to dust from waste sorting
- ☑ Severe back pain from working directly on the floor





Workers at a shredding facility at Konbari
© The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024

“

My job is to collect pieces from another shop here, segregate them, sell them, and load-unload. I'm the only worker in this shop. So, I need to do all types of work. I've been working here for 3 years.

[In terms of working conditions] when I segregate cut pieces, I inhale dust, but I'm not comfortable using a mask. [Also] there is no sitting arrangement, [so] I lie down on the floor. I have severe back pain and the doctor told me that my backbone is partly displaced. Sometimes I buy medicine from the pharmacy. [But] with my existing income, I can't have good food and decent housing. I can't visit a good doctor when necessary.”

Taslima, 52 years old

Monthly income: BDT 6,000

Monthly personal income: BDT 6,000/USD 55

Personal expenses: BDT 6,000/USD 55

ISSUE 2: UNSUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS OF WASTE MARKETS WORKERS

On average, a **female worker in the waste markets makes BDT 6,000-9,000 or about half of a formal factory worker's salary.** Most often, they are living with little means and resources to provide for their families, beyond their basic needs. The constant sense of precarity and deprivation also means families are at great risk of struggling with debt in the events of emergencies or steep increases in the cost of living.



“Every day I bring my youngest son to the factory as I do not have any caregiver at home. Maybe the place is unsafe for this boy but I don't have any alternative. My [shop] owner allows me to bring my son here.”

– Nasima, 35 years old

Married with 3 children

Monthly household income: BDT 16,000/USD 145

Household expenses: BDT 14,500/USD 132



Male workers earn between **BDT 9,000-12,000**



Female workers earn between **BDT 6,000-9,000**



Wage



No legal provisions on annual leave and public holidays

ISSUE 3: FREQUENT OCCASIONS OF CHILD LABOUR DRIVEN BY HARDSHIP, LOW CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION AND NEED FOR LOW-SKILLED LABOUR

The informal setting provides no oversight of labour conditions, child protection laws and regulations do not reach this segment of society, and enforcement is non-existent. Some of the **pulling forces** of this sector in attracting children to the workforce is the **ease of entry** due to the no prior skills required, and the **acceptance of having children around the workplace**.

Case 2: Children accompanying mother workers

Kohinoor, a co-owner of a waste shop, worked in waste markets for 20 years. Her son dropped out of school in Grade 9 due to financial reasons. She said many female workers bring their children to work. Despite education being free, there is no one at home to take care of them. She also shared that many of the child labourers are between the ages of 12 and 17.

Case 1: Workers enter the workforce as a children due to low-skilled work

Zahid (23 years old) started working in a range of low-skilled jobs at the age of 13. He entered the garment industry when he was 16.5 years old and is currently working as a polyester collector. He earns BDT 9,000 with an attendance bonus of BDT 500 per month. The working conditions are sub-standard: it's dirty and dusty, there are no seating arrangements and no on-site toilets. He sees children working here and one of his child colleagues joined this workplace because his parents died.

Unskilled work and financial incentive:

A child engaged in child labour can make a monthly income close to an adult (BDT 4,000-6,000/USD285-428)

Tasks commonly carried out by children:

Textile/waste collector, sorter, shop assistant, sewing machine operator, and loading and unloading goods

ISSUE 3: FREQUENT OCCASIONS OF CHILD LABOUR DRIVEN BY HARDSHIP, LOW CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION AND NEED FOR LOW-SKILLED LABOUR

The **push factors of children** entering this sector are **family hardship** and **lack of confidence in higher education**.

Family hardship plays a key role in interrupting schooling. Due to low household income, children become part of the solution for families striving to overcome hardship. However, the lack of confidence in the benefits of returning to education is also a driving factor.

Case 3: Child enters workforce due to family hardship

Musfiqur (13 years old) is the family's sole breadwinner with a Grade 5 education. His father died from a snakebite and his mother is ill, so one year ago a job was arranged for him at a cousin's polyester shop. He earns BDT 6,000 helping the owner to collect polyester from the warehouse and assisting with sales at the shop.

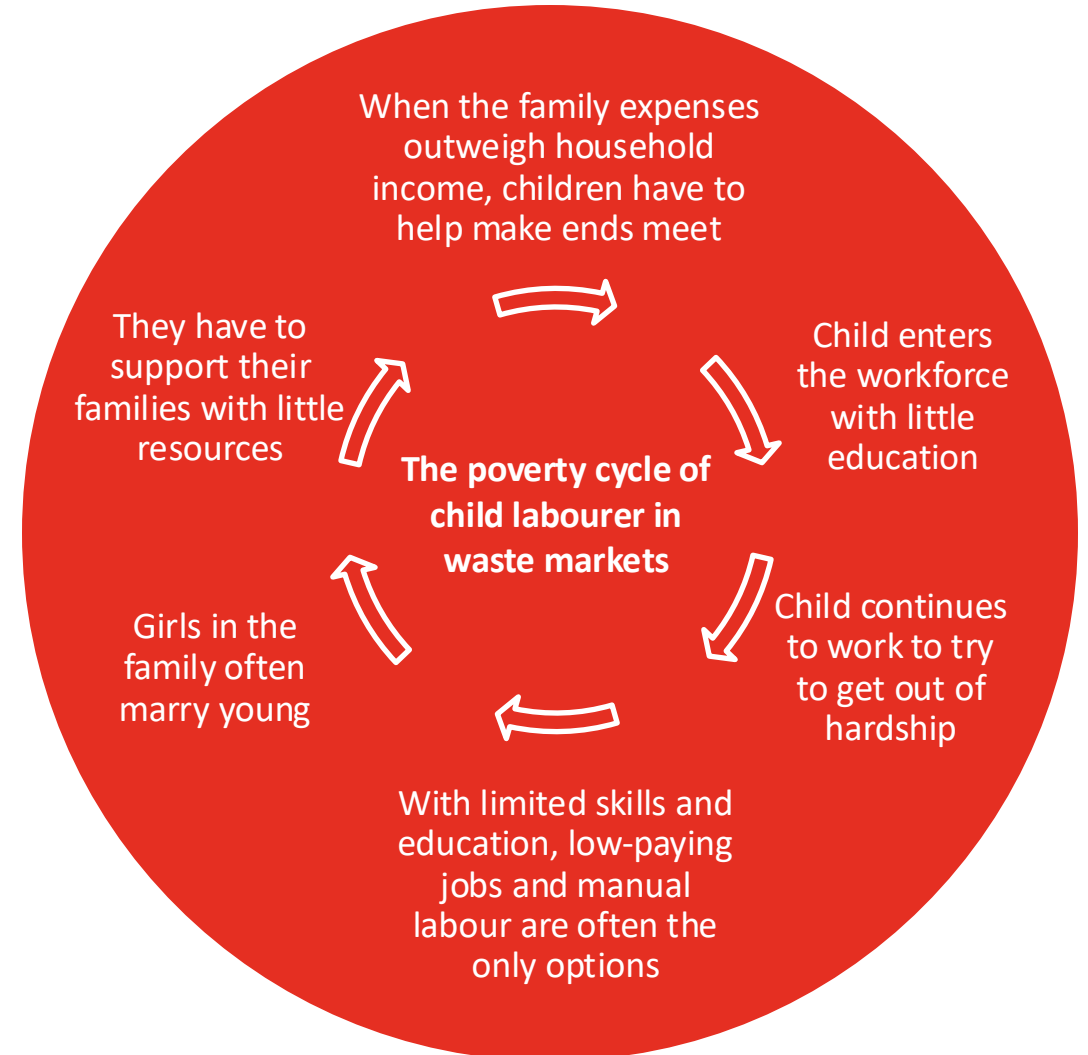
Case 4: Forced school drop out

Anisha (15 years old) works as an assistant in a small garments workshop, where she earns BDT 5,500 per month. Her job was arranged through one of her relatives, after her parents demanded her to drop out of school and move to the city to support them with additional income. She works 12-hour days but still hopes to return home to continue her schooling.

ISSUE 4: LIMITED JOB PROSPECTS LEADING TO LONG-TERM PRECARITY

Textile waste workers typically **start with their first job at 13 and progress through a series of unskilled jobs** – as sorters, shop assistants, cleaners, machine operators, porters – which **provide neither security nor prospects**. Workers in their 40s and 50s often struggle to survive on a salary comparable to that of a child in child labour.

This vulnerability can drive a **cycle of poverty**, as working mothers have no childcare support or education. The families struggle with little resources for their children. Their children are at risk of falling into the poverty trap as they are forced to work in low-skilled jobs to provide for their families.



ISSUE 4: LIMITED JOB PROSPECTS LEADING TO LONG-TERM PRECARITY

Case 5: Child brides entering the informal workforce

Shikha is 17 years old and has never been to school. She works in a small garment workshop to provide for her 1.5-year-old son. Her boy stays with her mother-in-law in the home village. She entered the informal workforce without showing any identity documents or undergoing an age check.

Shikha's husband manages her monthly income of BDT 8,500 (USD 78). He sends BDT 5,000 to his mother to pay for childcare expenses and keeps the rest. With no spending money of her own, Shikha often skips meals at work and has very limited opportunities to engage in activities outside her duties. She often misses her son, yet is rarely able to talk to him, because she does not own a phone.

"On Friday afternoons I get free time to talk to my child, have a rest, and talk to my parents and siblings. I feel very sad when I can't talk to my child frequently as I don't have a phone."

Child brides in the informal textile recycling sector

There are 38 million women in Bangladesh who were married in their childhood, including 13 million who were married before the age of 15. Among the interviewed female workers, many of them married early (typically at the age of 14 to 15). After having children, they enter the waste markets to support their families.

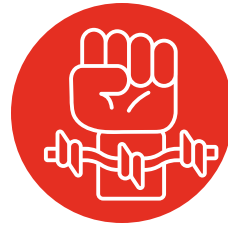
Many of these mothers face the dilemma of bringing their children to work or leaving them behind in the village with a grandparent. This leaves them in vulnerable positions and dependent on their husbands.

ISSUE 5: SUSTAINABILITY IS A LOW PRIORITY

Many of the practices observed at the waste markets show that **recycling currently has more to do with market growth and profits**, rather than with sustainability and circular economy.



Numerous waste shops specialising in recycling polyester, often import virgin plastic (from the Middle East) to produce packaging for local and international buyers.



The access to waste markets is often controlled by powerful interest groups, or “waste syndicates” connected to local authorities and politicians. Many shops are forced to pay bribes in the form of “protection money” to operate, and prices are dictated by the waste syndicates.



In Bangladesh, some international textile manufacturers are importing recycled materials, such as recycled cotton and polyester from abroad. One of the reasons is a desire to avoid any ethical/reputational problems related child labour and challenges inherent in Bangladesh’s lack of capacity and infrastructure in waste management.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Urgent action is needed by business and government stakeholders. While Bangladesh's garment industry is credited with lifting people out of poverty, large segments of the workforce remain trapped in precarity, particularly among the informal workers. What's more, the goods produced from recycled materials often fall short of the goals of a circular economy (reducing waste, recycling, and reusing materials), as the main emphasis remains on quick profit.

The informal recycling workforce, which plays a key role in the textile sector, is especially vulnerable and its challenges are not acknowledged. It is currently an example of a lack of accountability and progress on the core aspects of just transition – despite contributing to recycled products officially labeled as sustainable.

The conditions of the informal workforce discussed underscore the responsibility of the garment industry for its entire value chain, including the upstream and downstream supply-chain actors. Some international brands operating in Bangladesh are prone to importing their recycled waste and/or yarn rather than sourcing it locally due to concerns over ethical compliance issues. However, some studies have shown that waste imported from abroad – can be just as problematic. In light of a growing emphasis on corporate due diligence, the current industry focus on reputation and risk management is likely to be insufficient for ensuring a sustainable operation. However, a significant scope exists for constructive engagement and support of the informal recycling sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following actions are recommended for key stakeholders in textile waste and textile recycling for a more sustainable ready-made garment industry:

COMPANIES

Identify **companies' contributions and linkages to the informal sector's child and human rights risks** as part of the due diligence process:

- ❑ Develop a strategy to engage the full value chain, including the informal recycling services. This includes a detailed policy commitment and mapping of the informal economy ties to understand the relevant challenges and support measures
- ❑ Promote more responsible business conduct by having a clear sustainable commitment to recycling local post-industrial waste and investing in necessary technology and infrastructure to build stronger capacity in textile recycling
- ❑ Work with community support organisations to address the root causes of child rights risks and systemic issues in waste markets

GOVERNMENT

Strengthen the policies and enforcement capacity **to regulate and formalise** the textile recycling sector, in particular through:

- ❑ Developing guidelines to regulate the collection, sorting, and processing of factory waste
- ❑ Incentivising the sector to use local textile waste
- ❑ Committing resources to child labour prevention and remediation in waste markets
- ❑ Monitoring and improving occupational health and safety measures in the textile waste markets
- ❑ Reducing corruption and stronger governance, preventing waste syndicates from exploiting business owners
- ❑ Providing support, resources and financing for informal businesses to improve and upscale their operations

RECOMMENDATIONS

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- Provide stronger support to facilitate information sharing and education on worker rights for parent and child workers in the waste sector
- Support access to education for young workers trapped in the poverty cycle
- Raise awareness of the unsustainable operations of the current textile recycling market
- Encourage both private and public sectors to collaborate in addressing human rights and children's rights issues in the waste markets
- Raise awareness of the pitfalls of childhood marriage and the risks of poverty trap for women and their families

CONSUMERS

Every individual has the power to encourage RMG companies to put sustainability above profits.

- Have a greater awareness of the working conditions behind “recycled fashion”
- Embrace a more sustainable lifestyle and consumption habits, even when purchasing recycled products
- Advocate for companies to enhance transparency and visibility regarding their supply chain and recycled materials
- Encourage children to be part of the solution by educating them about the issue of textile waste and making informed consumer choices

END NOTES

1. Niinimäki, K., Peters, G., Dahlbo, H., Perry, P., Rissanen, T., & Gwilt, A. (2020). The environmental price of fast fashion. *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment*, 1(4), 189-200. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43017-020-0039-9>
2. International Labour Organization. (2023). Reducing Waste Towards a Just Transition. ILO Office for Turkiye. ISBN: 9789220395134. Accessed at: https://webapps.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---gjp/documents/publication/wcms_905814.pdf
3. Lam, C. (2023). 10 Concerning Fast Fashion Waste Statistics. *Earth.Org*. Accessed at: <https://earth.org/statistics-about-fast-fashion-waste/>
4. Ellen McArthur Foundation. (2017). A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future. Accessed at: <https://archive.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/A-New-Textiles-Economy.pdf>
5. Ellen McArthur Foundation. (2017). A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future. Accessed at: <https://archive.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/A-New-Textiles-Economy.pdf>, p. 3
6. Business Waste. (2023). Fashion Waste: Facts and Statistics. Accessed at: <https://www.businesswaste.co.uk/your-waste/textile-recycling/fashion-waste-facts-and-statistics/>
7. Ellen McArthur Foundation. (2017). A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion's Future. Accessed at: <https://archive.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/A-New-Textiles-Economy.pdf>, p. 6.
8. United Nations Industrial Development Organization. (2023). Circular Textile Value Chains Through a Comprehensive Policy Approach. Accessed at: <https://bangladesh.un.org/en/254808-circular-textile-value-chains-through-comprehensive-policy-approach-under-unido-led-project>
9. Textile Today. (2023). Bangladesh can earn US \$6.0bn by textile garment waste. <https://www.textiletoday.com.bd/bangladesh-can-earn-us-6-0bn-by-textile-garment-waste>



THANK YOU

THE CENTRE
FOR CHILD RIGHTS AND BUSINESS



info@childrights-business.org



childrights-business.org



The Centre for Child
Rights and Business