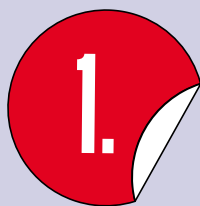


WHAT SECONDHAND FASHION CAN ACHIEVE—AND WHAT IT CANNOT

A fact sheet for fashion enthusiasts and those interested in social justice

BY JISKA GOJOWCZYK AND ALINA MATT





WHAT WE ASK OURSELVES ABOUT THE SECONDHAND BOOM

Secondhand is trendy: More and more people in Germany are buying and selling used clothing—online on platforms such as Vinted or Momox, at flea markets, or in secondhand stores. The global secondhand market is estimated to be worth around 220 billion euros in 2025 and is growing almost three times faster than the entire clothing market (*ThredUp 2025*). In addition, there is a trend, especially among young people, to swap clothes.

This sounds like a success story for sustainability. Reuse, like repair or rental systems, can contribute to a more circular economy. How should this trend be assessed from a global justice perspective?

The fashion industry has been criticized for decades for exploitation, environmental destruction, and overproduction. Secondhand fashion alone cannot solve these problems. This fact sheet shows what secondhand fashion can achieve and where its limits are. We conclude that we must also advocate politically for better working conditions and global justice. Only then will a just transition be possible (see box).



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SECONDHAND TODAY

Young people (those under 40, and particularly women) are the main users of online platforms such as Vinted and Momox (*Momox Fashion 2020, 2024; Vinted 2023*). Their motives include lower prices and the perception that it is a sustainable purchasing decision. Some users actually buy more clothes than before through secondhand shopping (*E-commerce Germany n.d.; Vinted 2023*). In addition, secondhand clothes are worn less often than newly purchased items. Overall, there is therefore a risk of a “rebound effect,” which may result in the opposite of the desired ecological or financial goal (*Ciechelska et al. 2024; Laitala/Klepp 2021*). Further growth is not just predicted for resale, but also for the market for new goods (*Statista 2024*) – hence so far, it is not assumed that the secondhand trend will lead to fewer new purchases.

Secondhand is therefore not automatically sustainable. It depends on how it is used: a secondhand slipover that is only worn once is a worse



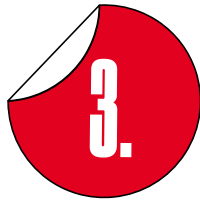
The term “**just transition**” was first used in the trade union movement in the United States in the 1980s. Stricter environmental laws threatened particularly polluting industries.

Trade unions campaigned to ensure that ecological restructuring would not be carried out at the expense of employees, that jobs would be secured, and that workers would have a greater say in the transformation.

Further information on the topic of just transition can be found in the blog posts and Instagram series by SÜDWIND-Institute under the hashtags [#LassAndersMachen](#) and [#JustFashion](#).

ecological choice than a new slipover that is worn often and for a long time (*Klooster et al. 2024*). Transport and logistics in the secondhand sector are not free either: the growing online secondhand market causes CO₂ emissions through the dispatches. At Vinted alone, the figure for 2021 is 282,000 tons of CO₂ (*Vaayu Tech GmbH 2021*). That is roughly equivalent to 128,000 round-trip flights for one person from Frankfurt to New York.

Furthermore, the secondhand trade is not free from exploitation, social and economic injustice, and labor law violations: secondhand clothing may be made from cotton that was harvested under forced labor conditions (*Ferenschild 2018; 2021*) and woven, cut, and sewn in sweltering factories in India or Bangladesh (*Clean Clothes Campaign 2025*). Precarious working conditions also exist in the delivery sector in Germany, and Momox employees at the Leipzig site recently protested against racism and high-performance pressure (*Ferenschild 2023; Mdr 2025*). Masses of old goods that appeared unsellable in Germany ended up in Ghana, Uganda, or Pakistan, for example. These exports flooded local markets, creating dependencies and seemingly unsolvable waste problems (*Gojowczyk/Hütz-Adams 2021*).



WHAT SECONDHAND CAN DO—AND WHAT IT CAN'T

Advantages of secondhand fashion

- + Conserving resources: Secondhand clothing extends the life of garments, can encourage more frequent use before disposal, and thus reduces resource consumption and waste.
- + Promoting the circular economy: Resale, like exchange or repair, can lead to more circular supply structures and fashion practices that have emancipated themselves from the conventional fashion market and the major players in the fashion industry.
- + Counteracting intersectional discrimination: Secondhand clothing can open up opportunities for people who are excluded from the linear fashion system for social or financial reasons.

Limitations of secondhand fashion

- No fair work and pay: Without further measures, working conditions in the textile industry will remain precarious (*Arisa/Sympany 2020; Eetti 2024*).
- No automatic environmental protection: Secondhand consumption can increase overall

consumption (“rebound effect”). The ecological advantage of secondhand goods is then weakened because more is consumed overall.

- No solution for overproduction: Without further measures, secondhand clothing will not replace the fast fashion industry but rather complement it and offer it a legitimate channel for wasteful and harmful excess.
- No automatic diversity and democratization of fashion: If market power for secondhand fashion is concentrated on a few (online) platforms, the range of products and design options will be severely limited in the future.



WHAT IS LACKING TODAY

Business models that are more just and political regulation are needed.

Secondhand clothing must not be a fig leaf. It must be part of a wide range of approaches and measures aimed at bringing about a just transition in the fashion industry. In the most important garment production countries, such as Bangladesh and India, people often work under exploitative conditions in the manufacture of new goods and in recycling (*Arisa/Sympany 2020; Arisa 2025; Fe-renschild 2018, 2021*). The sheer volume, especially of low-quality goods, means that the fashion industry is responsible for around 10% of global CO₂ emissions. It contributes to a waste crisis that is mainly shifted to economically disadvantaged countries. However, these countries are not the driving forces behind nor are they the beneficiaries of the fast fashion system.

Even if secondhand goods replace new purchases, this does not interfere with wasteful business models designed to sell cheap goods. Even if we consider this reason alone, it is enough to conclude that secondhand cannot lead to a more equitable fashion industry without further measures (*see, for example, Coscieme et al. 2022*).



EVEN IF SECONDHAND GOODS REPLACE NEW PURCHASES, THIS DOES NOT INTERFERE WITH WASTEFUL BUSINESS MODELS DESIGNED TO SELL CHEAP GOODS.

Overproduction must be stopped and the waste problem must be solved fairly. For years, too much garments have been produced—secondhand clothing has only extended the lifespan and circulating mass of clothing instead of reducing the overall quantity. Restrictions on advertising for fast fashion and extended producer responsibility, whereby manufacturing and exporting organizations must contribute financially to reducing dependencies and the mountains of waste and environmental pollution that have already been created, could prove successful. The design of extended producer responsibility must involve affected groups from used clothes importing countries.

Good working and living conditions worldwide must remain a priority. The EU must establish forums for international exchange on the global consequences of the transition, ensuring a just transition. The EU Ecodesign Regulation, for example, offers an opportunity to move closer to meaningful regulations on material efficiency. Advertising bans and well-designed extended producer responsibility can curb overproduction. The associated changes in the market (such as new technologies, materials, and processes, local value creation for repairs, and reduced production) have an impact on labor markets worldwide. The measures must therefore be examined for their consequences for employees in global value chains and accompanied by measures to mitigate negative consequences (such as severance payments, re-skilling, and structural measures).

Human rights due diligence laws (e.g., the EU Supply Chain Act and the German Supply Chain Act) must be enforced, not dismantled. We need to learn together how to achieve the greatest impact in supply chains. Other



approaches to protecting human rights worldwide, such as the EU Forced Labor Regulation, must also be consistently implemented.

Living wages and co-determination of workers are key. Workers in the textile industry need better pay and more opportunities to co-design their working context (Nurmi 2025). Transnational solidarity, for example through political action in Germany, helps to draw attention to abuses and perspectives in producing countries and to strengthen awareness of workers' demands.



A SMALL COLLECTION OF GOOD QUESTIONS:

- Which political requests would you have for the fashion industry?
- Are “your” political representatives in parliament fulfilling their responsibility to work towards a truly just transition?
- How can we use the secondhand trend to promote global justice?
- What happens to this season's summer tops when it rains all summer?
- Have you ever bought a secondhand item that you “might wear sometime”? (We have too...)
- Who profits from poor-quality garments?



SECONDHAND IS ONE STEP—BUT NOT THE ONLY SOLUTION

What you can do: Reflect on your own practices — but also on those who can change structures!

WHAT YOU CAN USE AS AN ORIENTATION:

- ▶ **Swap** clothes and buy secondhand, but only what you need—wear pieces as often as possible (best use of resources).
- ▶ **If you can:** Choose local secondhand stores and swap parties or flea markets over online platforms (lower CO₂ emissions).
- ▶ **Pay attention** to quality: natural fibers, single-fabric items, and repairable clothing are better than fast fashion.
- ▶ **Ask the same questions you would ask for new items:** secondhand items also had a supply chain. Buy secondhand clothing from brands that strive for living wages and decent working conditions.
- ▶ **Get involved** in social movements and civil society initiatives. Participate in protests, trade unions, or local groups such as those of the Clean Clothes Campaign.

WHAT YOU CAN REQUEST POLITICALLY:



Demand living wages and compliance with labor rights at all stages of the value chain—e.g., with the Clean Clothes Campaign, for example as part of Living Wage Action Day or in the context of the discussion on due diligence laws in Germany and the EU with the Initiative Lieferkettengesetz.

Support rules for greater transparency (for example, in connection with the introduction of digital product passports), less overproduction, and improved recycling in the fashion industry.

Learn about the consequences of exporting used garments and advocate for fair trade relations.

Find out how your municipality deals with worn-out textiles and whether it is working on improvements, for example with regard to the collection of damaged clothing.

Call for greater political commitment to just transition at all political levels. Advocate for greater involvement of affected groups from producing countries and secondhand importing countries, for example in the implementation of extended producer responsibility.



WHAT YOU CAN DEMAND FROM COMPANIES:

- ▶ **Check** whether companies strive for living wages, worker participation, and decent working conditions throughout the supply chain and if they fulfill their human rights due diligence obligations (e.g., via fashionchecker.org or wikirate.org).
- ▶ **Demand** that business models and supply relationships evolve for the better, overproduction is stopped, and durability and reparability are pursued.
- ▶ **Expect** materials and products to continuously improve in terms of recyclability and that the best possible material flows in ecological and social terms are used.
- ▶ **Demand** that companies create transparency: Where and how is production carried out? What happens to unsold and returned goods? Do companies also apply human rights due diligence to the reduced value-goods they send for recycling or resale?

SECONDHAND IS GOOD – BUT NOT ENOUGH

Secondhand fashion is an important step toward a better, more sustainable fashion industry. But as long as this industry relies on exploitation, overproduction, and environmental destruction, secondhand alone is not enough. We need political pressure for more responsible business models, better working conditions and production methods, water and soil treatment measures, new approaches in long-standing import countries of used clothing, waste processing for recycling in Germany, new and improved repair services, and a rethink of consumption. New approaches, such as extended producer responsibility, must be discussed together with representatives of the affected civil society groups and trade unions from the countries involved, not

just within the German stakeholder landscape. Only in this way can fashion become more just and more sustainable. ♦

Sources: Arisa/Sympany (2020); Arisa (2025); Ciechelska et al. (2024); Clean Clothes Campaign (2025); Coscieme et al. (2022); Eetti (2024); Feren-schild (2018, 2021, 2023); Gojowczyk/Hütz-Adams (2021); Klooster et al. (2024); Laitala/Klepp (2021); Momox Fashion (2020, 2024); Mdr (2025); Nurmi (2025); ThredUp (2025); Vaayu Tech GmbH (2021); Vinted (2023)

You can read more in our discussion paper on the topic.

Here we present many aspects in even greater detail!



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